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Sites of Solidarity: Ethnic Belonging in Northern Ireland, the Netherlands, and a World of Difference

Eleni Zimiles

I. Introduction

Arriving on European soil in August 2007, my perception of globalization was largely comprised of the extensive and intangible tides of contemporary macro-institutional forces, such as that of the global economy or international governing bodies. Over the course of the year, another face of globalization was revealed, one that was a “much wider and deeper rendez-vous.”1 I began to more fully comprehend globalization as a historically deep conglomeration of overlapping global and local processes that affect individuals on an intimate level. However, while definitions are indispensably parsimonious, they are not sufficient. It is the anthropology student’s role to open these compressed understandings and expose the full details of globalization’s universalities and particularities, in effect creating a global “ethnography of the particular.”2

This essay is the culmination and product of my participation in Macalester College’s Globalization in Comparative Perspective program. My intellectual engagement with the particularities of globalization focused on the production of ethnic identity and belonging among working-class Protestants in Northern Ireland and Somalis in the Netherlands. These communities are situated within the current European Union context where, on the one hand, there is the erosion of national identity while transforming into an expanded continental “European- hood,” and, on the other hand, there is the rising of regional nationalism, exemplified by the Catalonians and the Jurassians.3 The two
ethnographic groups chosen for this study are located somewhere in-between, reflecting the complexities of membership in Europe. There is a constant fluctuation as to whether the Protestants in Northern Ireland identify as Northern Irish, British, Ulstermen, Ulster Scots, or European. The Somalis living in the Netherlands similarly represent a hybrid of affiliations, simultaneously a part of Dutch, Somali, Islamic, European, and African society. Intertwined in globalization’s web of “overlapping communities of fate,” the individuals in these communities have intersecting and at times conflicting identities.

Adding to the list of categories, the Protestants and Somalis belong to regions within Europe that are currently enmeshed in varying degrees of ethnic and sectarian turmoil. After years of cross-cultural violence, the dominant Ulster Protestant community suffers from deep political, cultural, and economic fragmentation, leaving working-class Protestants isolated and marginalized. The Somalis, who came to the Netherlands as refugees, find themselves victimized again, by an environment with prolific anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric. This essay analyzes how these two groups, in the face of cultural, socio-economic, and/or political exclusion, foster in-group social solidarity through local organizations. Specifically, I examine two youth social groups: working-class Protestant flute bands in Belfast and a Somali youth organization in The Hague. While often portrayed as passive recipients of at-large systemic movements, this study illustrates young adults as actively reconstructing cultural structures. The local groups the youth participate in are particularly important in that they help youth build a positive ethnic identity as well as navigate cross-cultural tensions and discrimination, personal community issues, and economic hardships. Ultimately, the goal of this article is to understand how ethnic cohesion is actively developed in two localized settings, and to draw lessons from these particularities regarding the development of global solidarity through cosmopolitanism.

The first section of the essay outlines the overarching concepts. The second section analyzes research collected during my fall semester in Northern Ireland using two components. First, I historicize the band phenomenon within the wider conflict between the Irish Catholics and British Protestants, and second, I examine how the bands address the needs of young males in their post-conflict, working-class environment. The third section is also divided into two parts: a summary of the historical and contemporary context of Dutch multiculturalism and an analysis of how a Somali youth organization builds cohesion in
the face of discrimination and identity confusion. The fourth section investigates the wider significance of ethnically defined organizations in the encouragement of civic engagement. In light of these cases, the essay concludes with a question: Is the expansion of local solidarity a plausible path to cosmopolitanism?

II. Delineating a Theoretical Focus

A. Solidarity

Solidarity is not an innate cultural phenomenon, but one that is actively constructed. At the heart of my research is the formulation and significance of solidarity in upholding a conceptualization of identity. Solidarity or cohesion (terms I use interchangeably) is a concept used promiscuously throughout anthropology, sociology, and political science. My definition relies on Gidden’s characterization of the term, which he divides into three dimensions. The first is the psychological, understood as a “generalized attitude of care towards others.”5 The second, the behavioral dimension, describes a level of “civility” or respect individuals within the same environment show one another.6 Third is the structural dimension (an elaboration of Durkheim’s “organic solidarity”), in which different groups and levels of the community are integrated and interdependent.7 Thus, solidarity may be defined as the crystallization of care, civility, community integration, and intense emotional investment in a group. Understanding solidarity on a localized level, as is the case in these ethnographic studies, is extremely relevant in today’s discussions of globalization. As we continue to witness countless episodes of sectarian violence and ethnic conflict on a European and global scale, it is crucial to examine how forms of inclusion are being built within them. At the conclusion of this analysis, I will propose some lessons learned from these particularities in regard to fostering a global solidarity and a cosmopolitan framework.

B. Prevailing Theories of Global Belonging

Within globalization studies, two theories have predominated in discussions of globalization’s influence on culture. The “polarization thesis” and the “homogenization thesis” are dichotomous reflections on globalization and identity politics, providing distinct notions of identity and its relationship to cultural “otherness.”
The first theoretical perspective is the polarization thesis, also known as differentialism or heterogenization. This viewpoint argues that individuals are increasingly clinging to singular identity categories, and that this provokes greater division and discrimination against those with cultural differences. The thesis is grounded in an understanding of identity as having an essential nature, made up of fundamental and immutable features. Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory is a prominent example of this position in its classification of individuals as falling under a civilizational umbrella, characterized according to “common objective elements, such as language, history, [and] religion.” Globalization’s increasing instances of cross-cultural interactions “intensif[ies] civilization consciousness and awareness of differences between civilizations and commonalities within [them].” While the “civilizational” terminology is not widely used, the crux of Huntington’s argument is crucial to the polarization camp. In other words, as dissimilar cultural groups are increasingly in contact with one another, differentiation becomes critical, and absolute identities become more important to individuals and societies.

The second theoretical perspective regarding cultural reactions to globalization is the homogenization thesis, or a “convergence toward a common set of cultural traits and practices.” While the previous thesis conceptualized cultural characteristics as indisputable identity fixtures, homogenization theorists regard localized cultural differences as tenuous, at the beck-and-call of macro-institutional influences. Within this camp is Ritzer, who popularized the “McDonaldization Thesis,” arguing that local ethnic differences are overwritten by Western, especially American, culture through the economic and media influences of transnational corporations. A variant of the homogenization theory has been argued by Appadurai, who shows how cultural “cores” (including non-Western powers) eradicate the local character of their “peripheries.” International standardization is at the crux of the homogenization perspective.

Outlining these theories is not meant to be an endorsement of either, but as points of reference for further analysis of the ethnographic portion of this essay pertaining to conceptions of identity and cultural relationships. While the polarization and homogenization theses are engaging reflections on the adaptation of cultural identity when confronted by difference, they are ultimately unsatisfying in illuminating the dynamics of belonging and communal empathy in imagined cultural communities. These perspectives concentrate on discerning a
“unifying conception of society and transformation,” but do not provide a “workable sense of cohesion.”

III. Research from the Fall Semester in Northern Ireland: “The bands, now that’s our religion”

On any given Saturday in the city of Belfast in Northern Ireland, drum blasts from the Ulster blood and thunder flute bands can be heard slapping sidewalks and bouncing off the graffiti covered “peace walls.” A cultural tradition for the working-class Ulster Protestant community, the bands stir particularly passionate responses from all the city’s citizens. Many in the Irish Catholic neighborhoods angrily denounce the bands as disrespecting private space, and middle to upper class Protestants see the bands as “perpetuating unwanted conflict.” However, within the working-class Protestant communities themselves the bands are seen as a fixture of their ethnic identity.

This section is the product of my attendance at numerous band practices, parades, and competitions; my conversations with both band directors and members; and interviews over tea and biscuits with community members and local organizers. My analysis discusses how the bands in the Shankill neighborhood of Belfast cultivate solidarity for young males, ages 15 to 25, and help them cope with their community’s social, political, and economic exclusion from the wider society. First, I will give a background to the historical context of the band phenomenon. Second, using the concept of an embodied ideology, I will show how the bands build community by addressing material and cultural identity needs. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the bands’ social impact, the wide-ranging cultural phenomenon of bands and parading must be examined in relation to the extensive marginalization of working-class Protestant youth.

A. Historical and Contemporary Context

1. The Bands and the Cultural Divide

The band phenomenon is a key thread within the Ulster Protestant historical and cultural fabric. Ulster Protestants are descendants of a group of settlers from England and Scotland sent by King Henry VIII in the early 1500s. Their assignment was to convert the Irish to Protestantism through the occupation of land in Ireland.
were connected to the ruling British culture and society, the Protestants remained a minority in a predominantly Catholic Ireland. In 1921, Ireland was divided. The Protestants were now the majority in Northern Ireland, but remained in the cultural periphery of Great Britain.

The origin of these bands can be attributed to the Orange Order’s tradition of parading. A Protestant organization loyal to the British sovereign, the Orange Order was established in 1795 in Ulster County with the purpose of protecting the civil and religious liberties of the Protestant people. Initially, the Order began to parade on the streets demonstrating for civil and religious rights, as well as for commemoration of past Protestant victories, most notably, “King Billy’s” defeat of King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. Musical accompaniment was gradually added to the parades, and by the 1870s bands of at least 20 musicians were marching with the Order. In the 1950s, several bands broke away from the Orange lodges and started to independently recruit members, handle finances, and eventually hold their own parades. Bryan and Jarmen note, “The bands offered an alternative, less official, social network [than the Orange Order], and their involvement in parades is in many senses more ‘active.’” To this day, the large majority of bands are independent, with only a few bands formed out of local Orange lodges.

With the onset of the Troubles in the late 1960s, when the Catholic civil rights movement began, bands evolved into vehicles for political demonstrations. Deprived working-class Protestants felt threatened by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) campaign, which had turned from peaceful protests to violent guerrilla warfare. In response, young men gathered to form loyalist paramilitary groups, such as the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). As an alternative outlet to the paramilitaries for expressing their grievances, working-class youth joined flute bands in droves. In the 1970s, “blood and thunder” flute bands emerged, separating from the classic melody flute band. They quickly became the most popular type of band. “We play the tunes the loudest and the best,” one band member explained; “we have thunder in the noise of the drum, and blood because when the bass drummer plays, he plays until his hands bleed.” The bands were linked to the paramilitaries during the Troubles, some acting as recruiting devices for the vigilante groups, others simply wearing paramilitary insignia during parades. However, now the two are clearly recognized as distinct organizations.
In the aftermath of the Troubles and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998, the bands have encountered greater amounts of negative press, but have also increased dramatically in membership, particularly in the working-class urban neighborhoods. In the 1990s, several controversies arose regarding certain Orange Order parades and their marching routes, which not only led to increased restrictions for general band parades, but also augmented a negative reputation for the bands as confrontational and sectarian. However, this has not stopped the bands’ growing popularity. Today there are an estimated 630 Protestant marching bands in Northern Ireland. This is noteworthy considering there are at least 20 members of each band (and sometimes almost 200), which calculates to about 13,000 to 32,000 band members in Northern Ireland out of a total population of 1.7 million. Bands practice year round, preparing for the marching season from April to September, when they march Friday and Saturday nights and generally the whole week of the 12th of July, called “the Twelfth.” The Twelfth is the climax of the season, when the entire community makes a united pilgrimage to the central field in Belfast for a loud, drunken, and boisterous celebration of Unionism and the victory of Protestantism at the Battle of the Boyne.

While the bands are intertwined in the historical division between the Irish Catholics and British Protestants, they are also a current expression of the fragmentation of the at-large Protestant community. The socioeconomic classes are entirely geographically isolated from one another. While “united in their broad aims—to retain the union and prevent its erosion”—the party politics of Protestant Northern Ireland largely reflects the class divisions. Culturally, there is no coherent ethnic narrative, as different levels of society identify with varying historical markers or affiliations, such as working-class Protestants identifying strongly with Great Britain, versus those from the upper class with Northern Ireland. The Protestants often fail to find appropriate avenues to express their needs. In contrast, the united Catholic population politicized its grievances and achieved the ability to articulate them to the government and to the wider international public. The working class often feels the brunt of their ethnicity’s expressive incapacity. Frequently attacked in the media, many working-class Protestants express feelings of resentment toward their seemingly constant adaptation to Catholic needs. Alienated from a middle class that might otherwise represent them, feelings of shame and aggression arise from these feelings of inarticulation and marginalization.
The Protestant “siege mentality,” or constant fearfulness of defeat by Catholicism, is evident in most conversations about cross-cultural relations. Undoubtedly, this attitude is attached to their insecurity in expressing a concrete, shared identity, or what McKay describes as the “gaping hole” in Protestant identity. When there is an opportunity to identify themselves, it is generally through the negation of the Catholic perspective, i.e., “I don’t know who I am, but I know I am not Catholic.” The bands are thus the working-class Protestant’s central medium of taking ownership of a “positive identity.” The bands provide the community with a means to represent a culture on its own—a culture with a distinctive history and array of symbols.

2. Situating the “Blood and Thunder” on the Shankill

My research was located in the Shankill neighborhood of working-class West Belfast, an area marked by its past and present poverty and violence. In the 19th century, the Shankill benefited from a wave of economic and technological globalization and was an industrial center with substantial textile and shipyard factories. After the World Wars a long movement of de-industrialization left many unemployed and impoverished. As the global economy shifted, both textiles and shipbuilding moved to other continents. The onset of the Troubles in the 1960s caused further erosion of the community. Sitting adjacent to the Catholic Falls neighborhood, but separated by a 25-foot tall “peace wall,” the Shankill was the focal point for violent attacks from the IRA, including open gunfire confrontations and bombings of local shops.

Today, it is a noticeably deprived area of Belfast. Walking down the Shankill Road, the central shopping strip and meeting place for neighborhood residents, one witnesses shops boarded up and covered with paramilitary graffiti, and empty lots filled with plastic bags, broken glass, and cigarette butts. Young women push baby strollers past the hovering murals of masked men with machine guns. Groups of young men, marked by their cut-up faces, gold chains, and gelled hair, gather around cars, smoking long cigarettes. Youth unemployment and anti-social behavior runs high. A youth worker at a local social justice agency explained to me that, “jobs used to be ensured at the shipyards, so education wasn’t a priority, and these values haven’t changed since.” The residential layout of the neighborhood has deteriorated in the last decade. During “The Feud” in the summer of 2000, the two rival paramilitary organizations, the UDA and UVF, went on a
killing rampage in the community. Many people were forced to move out of their homes and never returned. This displacement of Shankill residents has left large sections of the area deserted. The Shankill’s unique post-Troubles circumstances add to the deprivation. Gillespie describes how West Belfast’s previous involvement in the conflict led to the current “corrosion of the traditional working class neighborhood and all that went with it: a sense of belonging, capacity for common action, a high degree of face to face interaction, [and] shared goals and interdependence.”25 This context makes the community-building role of the bands particularly significant. Ultimately, the youth experience in the bands must be viewed in the context of these two intersecting spheres: the intercultural conflict between Ulster Protestants and Irish Catholics, and the deprivation in the working-class Shankill community.

B. Addressing Socio-Cultural and Identity Needs

In Acts of Union: Youth and Sectarian Culture in Northern Ireland, Desmond Bell raises the question: “To what extent [does] this ‘culture work’ [i.e., the bands and parading] represent an autonomous generational response to the material problems facing the young themselves?”26 Or, we can ask, is it that the “culture work” allows the youth to more actively address the socio-historical traditions of earlier generations? The fulfillment of both socio-cultural and affiliation needs is significant in understanding how the bands provide the young men with a vehicle for building a cohesive community structure in the face of financial and psychological marginalization.

1. The Bands and the Family

The bands are integral in assisting young Protestant males to tackle social deficiencies and problems associated with being part of a post-conflict, de-industrialized working-class community. They do this primarily in two different ways: constructing a multigenerational male network, and “keeping kids off the street” through the provision of leadership roles and responsibilities. In a society with crumbling family structures, the bands provide young men with membership in a multigenerational male network. Traditionally, a young boy would join the band of his father, and these long lines of paternal legacy are still apparent in many of the older bands. Today, young men still cite their
relations’ membership as a primary motivation for joining, although
it is no longer focused on the father’s affiliation, but often through an
older cousin, uncle, or maternal grandfather. “Families are now ripped
apart,” the minister at the Shankill’s Presbyterian Church explained at
a busy café; “a good example there, the fellow over there has kids with
about four different women.”

During the Shankill’s golden industrial age, families had many chil-
dren and lived in tight proximity to one other. After several redevelop-
ment projects and, more recently, the Shankill Feud, many houses are
uninhabited and families are increasingly isolated. The combination
of rising teen pregnancies and abandoned residences has left many
young men growing up without father figures. Each band has its own
small group of older males, in particular those who fill the roles of
band director, manager, and secretary. Joining reconnects many young
adults with older male relatives or role models. For many, the bands
become contemporary family replacements. “The band is family,” one
band director described passionately. At competitions, a band will rent
out a bar hall and invite other bands to compete. Seats will be filled by
local older men who come to cheer on the bands and share wisecracks
with the musicians during breaks. This is a valuable opportunity for
young men to connect with, and gain acceptance and approval from,
the senior generations of their community.

2. Community Engagement and Respect

Growing up on the Shankill, where future prospects eternally look
slim, young men who would otherwise be regarded as negligent and
reckless kids, when seen participating in a band are granted highly val-
ued respect from community members and simultaneously gain much
needed self-confidence. With job opportunities difficult to obtain, many
young people fall into anti-social behavior, often joining the paramili-
tary groups who after the Troubles took over the drug rings in the
area. Gillespie summarizes the conundrum facing many working-class
males: “The crucial problems concerning adults are those associated
with growing towards maturity in an environment where many of the
expectations (having money, freedom, power, etc.) and responsibilities
(steady job, house, etc.) of being mature will be denied.”27 Several older
community members described youth on the Shankill as “those drunk-
ard fellows.” However, when recognized as a band member, their
language and countenance immediately changes, and the males are
regarded as respectable neighbors. One Shankill band alumni recalled a lead drummer he had seen at a parade the previous weekend: “When I saw that fellow carrying that band’s flag, whew he was stiff as a rod. But let me tell you, I’d see him back then day in and day out slouching over a drink at the Royal [local pub].” The transformations of the band members are particularly powerful. In an area where the political and social structures have largely let the youth down, respect is the most many of the young men can ask for from their community, and they are granted this through their band membership. “The band gives you the opportunity to be someone,” a Shankill minister told me; “it gives you credibility and authority.”

To counteract the anti-social behavior that many young adults fall into in the Shankill, band directors assign leadership positions to younger members. One informant was given his position as vice-band captain over the flute section in his band at sixteen years old. He said that the responsibilities he had, which included giving music lessons to younger members, coordinating with the drum section, and maintaining high morale, kept him out of the drug circles that many of his friends who weren’t in bands fell into. Part of placing band members into a leadership hierarchy is an effort to foster an atmosphere of respect and trust between members and generations. “We need to show each other as band members that we appreciate each other,” one director said.

3. Boundary Maintenance

A primary mission of the bands is to identify who they are in relation to their space. As different areas are taken over by development projects or new immigrants, the Protestants use the parades to demarcate their history and a localized foundation for their identity. The band literally maps its territory by marching—“inscribing an identity into the physical geography and reconnecting the fragmented parts into an idealized whole.” A young ex-prisoner recently started a band at the farthest end of the upper Shankill, a place where many people had started to leave, when he realized that there was a need to represent that area and “remember that it’s Protestant.” At the interface area where the opening of the gate between the Shankill and the Falls road meet and where most acts of violence still occur, the band is the lifeline to the Protestant area. The band of this section is particularly important because with them, “it’s not just the band that won’t exist, it’s our whole
community,” one band member told me. The bands are seen by many to hold the last remnants of a unified Protestant identity. “This, it’s our culture,” a band secretary said at a competition as he watched his rivals, “this is grassroots loyalism moving up.” Many outsiders regard the bands as controversial entities, citing that their historical routes disregard new demographics (i.e., Catholic residences) and impose sectarianism. However, Bell notes that while the bands “function to sustain localistic loyalties rather than generate mere hostility to recognized outsiders...[the bands are] concerned with the collective desire to identify and celebrate the ‘same’ rather than purely ‘telling the difference.’” This is an important distinction to make. The bands do spend a majority of the time with each other in their own local areas, but their infrequent public marches gain the most media recognition, and thus produce controversy.

4. Creating a Protestant Network

Bands build an extensive community network between working-class Protestant neighborhoods around the city and throughout Northern Ireland. This is highly visible with the band competitions, which go on throughout the year, either on streets or in social clubs. These are social events in which the hosting band raises money by inviting other bands to their club or neighborhood. Visiting bands bring their girlfriends and buy drinks at the host club, all partaking in a larger movement of reciprocity. Though the bands are often only competing for small trophies rating their skills in marching, appearance, and musicianship, their participation helps build a reputation as well as encourage bands to go to others’ parades and competitions. Bands also make a point to travel outside of their own neighborhood, some making their way as far as Scotland and Liverpool. Another band member talked to me about how one of the best parts of being in the band was meeting new people and visiting new places, both opportunities that are not necessarily open to him and his peers on a normal basis. Young band members are revamping this tradition through the new capabilities of the Internet. Networking sites, such as Bebo and MySpace, have turned into a central strategic tactic for communicating with other bands and musicians in order to keep in touch, share parade videos, and invite others to band competitions and parades. Many bands also have websites where they can explain their histories and events. As bands intermingle and make their way through each other’s neighbor-
hoods, social cohesion among the working-class populations of Belfast is augmented, and an emotional sense of solidarity is fostered.

5. Marching Forward

Today on the Shankill, as the paramilitaries have lost popular support and legitimacy, the bands have become the primary means of Protestant cultural expression, shifting the emphasis from a culture that must show its loyalty to one another through defending against rival communities, to one that celebrates cultural identity and heritage. Several bands are attempting to “start anew” and become a serious musical activity with wider community support. One step is to completely disconnect from paramilitary affiliations. One drummer talked about his band’s new rules: “no one can talk about the UVF, UDA, UFF [Ulster Freedom Fighters], YCV [Young Citizen Volunteers], Red Hands. Once you step into that door you can’t say a word, none of that, and if you got a tattoo somewhere with one of ‘em, you cover that up as well.” Paramilitaries had symbolized the obligation Protestants had to defend their community (through violent means if necessary). De-emphasizing the connections the youth have to these vigilante groups has nurtured a new atmosphere for the bands. Many bands have also prohibited the tradition of drinking alcohol before the parades and competitions, providing the bands with a more respectable image. Furthermore, in a symbolic gesture to “break barriers,” one band “put out an official statement challenging any Nationalist band on the Falls to a band competition.” The focus of many bands has now turned to emphasizing pride in one’s culture and heritage. As an example, one group of band members mentioned learning about King Billy’s philosophy of spreading democracy, and took pride in this historical artifact. With these adjustments, the bands are working towards a revitalized image, one that celebrates ethnic identity instead of aggressively guarding it.

In 1995, Ian Paisley, during his time as the First Minister of Northern Ireland, said, “The Right of the Protestant People to march...lies at the very heart...and very foundation of the future of our families.” As they actively construct social cohesion in the Shankill community, the Northern Irish flute bands have become a symbol of Protestant unity. While the controversies during the 1990s, leading to the formation of the Parades Commission in 1997, revolved around accusations about their anti-Catholic nature and provocation of sectarianism, my analysis of the bands shows a different picture. The bands still contain some
divisive “us against them” elements, exemplified in the genre of “Kick-the-Pope” tunes. However, they now carry a much more significant social purpose, in many ways transcending the conflict and providing a response to the community’s inarticulacy, economic exclusion, and political fragmentation.

IV. The Netherlands: Research from the Spring Semester

“I’ll wear my orange underwear—you know, Dutch on the inside, Somali on the outside.”

Turning away from Northern Ireland, this section of the essay discusses how a Somali organization cultivates belonging among young Dutch citizens who are first- and second-generation refugees from Somalia. This analysis was developed from research collected during my second semester, studying in the antique city of Maastricht at the southern tip of the Netherlands. Due to issues of distance and accessibility, the research process did not include the level of participant-observation of the fall semester. My information was gathered from a combination of interviews with a handful of Somali university students and other Muslim students in various areas of the country, a wide literature review, and lectures held at the Universiteit Maastricht. This section is divided into two major parts. The first discusses the Dutch “multiculturalist” society and, more specifically, its relationship to Islamic migrant populations. The second analyzes a Somali youth organization and how it functions to build solidarity through addressing social anxieties and frustrations.

A. Historical and Contemporary Context

1. A Brief History of Dutch Multiculturalism

In contemporary Dutch society the presence of a growing Muslim population is raising numerous debates regarding the meaning of national identity, multiculturalism, and the integration of ethnic minorities. The Netherlands historically has the liberal reputation of holding religious tolerance and freedom as prioritized values. Beginning with the revolt against Spanish rule in the 16th century and confirmed again in the 17th century with the welcoming of Portuguese Jews and the Huguenots from France, the Dutch Republic was known as a safe haven for
those with differing religious beliefs. At the end of the 19th century, the “Pillarization” system was established giving “religious groups the right to establish their own infrastructures on the basis of their ideologies and to be subsidized by the government.” The implementation of political consociationalism institutionally divided civil society. One’s neighborhood, school, television channels, politicians, and services were all organized under the pillars. This stimulated the belief that multiculturalism was cultural compromise, a “separate but equal” diversity.

Problems with the Dutch pillarization system and multiculturalism arose in the 1960s, with the arrival of large numbers of gastarbeiders, or guest workers, from Morocco, Turkey, Italy, and Yugoslavia. The Dutch government assumed that this population influx was temporary. To support a liberal, multicultural agenda the Dutch promoted cultural preservation among these minorities, discouraging Dutch language education and advocating separate cultural organizations and education in order to maintain their indigenous identities and traditions. Even though the pillarization structure was beginning to receive criticism during this time, the attitude and actions taken toward these minorities was distinctly in line with the pillar framework. With an additional wave of asylum seekers, largely from Somalia and Iran, it gradually came to be seen that many of these minorities were not returning to their original countries, but were becoming a permanent appendage to Dutch society. Many within the Dutch population felt particularly unsettled by the new Muslim migrants, whose religious culture was foreign and seemingly incompatible with Dutch liberalism. In a series of legislation, including the Minorities Memorandum in 1983, the 1994 Equal Treatment Act, and the 1998 Act for Stimulation of Labour Market Participation, the Dutch government attempted to find an appropriate environment for immigrants and particularly Muslims. These actions elaborated on the belief that, “the government should not interfere with the identity expressions of these [minority] groups...and that minority groups had the same rights as other ‘identity groups’ in obtaining public subsidies for broadcasting, education and other welfare activities.” In effect, a fifth pillar was formed, giving Muslim immigrants their own religious communities. The assumption was that if Muslims were given their own space, free from any criticism, they would eventually integrate into the Dutch political system and society.
Contemporary discussions of multiculturalism shifted after September 11, 2001, as well as the murders of two major Dutch public figures, Pim Fortuyn (2002) and Theo Van Gogh (2004), which “laid bare the fissures in Dutch society.” Both were populist personalities and vociferously expressed their anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant views. They argued that Dutch liberalism was threatened by the growing “intolerant” and “backward” Islamic communities. Their murders caused deep-set public agitation, seen as prophecies of the close-to-home dangers of Islamic extremism (even though Fortuyn was murdered by a non-Muslim Dutch animal-rights activist). Today several right-wing politicians, most notably Geert Wilders and Rita Verdonk, have commenced with campaigns to “Stop the Islamization of the Netherlands,” hoping to move the Dutch away from their tendency to, “out of fear for Muslim indignation about certain things, succumb to expected demands of respect and willing[ly] put aside its own values.” These movements have encouraged the current climate of assimilationism, advocating a “forced integration” for Dutch Muslims into supposed Dutch “Enlightenment” standards.

2. Immigrant and Muslim Associationalism

While there is rising anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment in the Netherlands (as well as in wider Europe), at the same time more immigrants and “new Dutch” citizens are forming self-represented civic groups. The wave of Muslim and national associations was originally initiated due to local governments failing to provide appropriate integrative policies for immigrants when it was realized that they were no longer temporary guest workers and were officially “moving in.” Without any political intervention to create a landscape of respect and recognition for the new additions to local society, Muslims began to organize into civic groups, either by nationality or under a general Islamic banner, in order to establish unified representation, address large social concerns, and integrate into the local political and social life. This new trend of associationalism promotes “a shared narrative based upon secularized Islamic value systems,” providing a sense of cohesion for the diverse Muslim populations within the country. These organizations also address the social needs and integration issues of individual communities in a hostile environment. One sector of this large movement is the growing popularity of student groups and organizations devoted to representing and integrating Muslim
youth, particularly those who are the second- and third-generations of immigrant families. Alongside criticism of the pillar system, these groups have come under some negative scrutiny, seen as hindering full integration and appreciation for Dutch liberal values.

This study will focus on one anonymous Somali youth organization, an insightful example of a migrant organization that was established to facilitate the integration of young Somalis into Dutch culture. With a total population of 20,000, Somalis are one of the largest refugee groups in the Netherlands. Somalis first started coming into the Netherlands as refugees in the early 1990s, fleeing from civil war. The Somali revolution that led to the destruction of the Siad Barre regime in 1991 turned into a civil war that continues to this day. Thousands of individuals and families left for Northern Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. In the Netherlands, most of the Somali population is centered in The Hague and Rotterdam.

The Somali organization was founded in 1996 by a group of young Somali men who felt disillusioned by the lack of Somali organizational representation and by how the Dutch Somali diaspora was becoming increasingly segregated according to the traditional family clan structure. The organization is part of a larger Somali foundation, which includes a youth component, a Somali radio station, and a capacity building sector. Located in The Hague, home to several international governing bodies and a particularly multicultural population, the Somali organization has had to battle discrimination and integration difficulties.

The Somalis have a unique position in the Netherlands and thus have distinct experiences to confront. Most significantly, Somalis did not come to the Netherlands as guest workers, but as refugees. As East Africans, the Somalis have a racial and physical distinction from Moroccans or Turks, the two largest ethnic Muslim populations in the Netherlands. Many of the Somalis who came to the Netherlands early in the 1990s, compared to those who came later, were well educated and many came from privileged socioeconomic classes in Somalia. The youth members who I interviewed had arrived with their families as toddlers in the early 1990s. Their families are largely well educated and of higher socioeconomic status. All of them were currently enrolled in a university in The Hague, Rotterdam, or Utrecht. The following section will show how the organization builds solidarity by addressing three main sources of exclusion: the experiences of duality, discrimination, and misrepresentation. The analysis reveals that the
Somali organization does not support a Dutch “Clash of Civilizations” concept, but is working toward something much larger and more culturally significant.

B. Addressing Socio-Cultural and Identity Needs

1. Fostering Fluidity

The primary source of frustration and distress for many Somali youth is negotiating between their “dual-lives;” between their investment in Somalia and the Somali culture shown to them by their parents, and their identification with and personal experiences growing up in Dutch society. While many young first- and second-generation immigrants are often accused of having split loyalties between two countries, the Somali experience is more nuanced. While each individual assured me of their “Somali-ness,” frequently stating, “I am Somali,” many confessed that if they went to or returned to Somalia, they probably would not feel “at home.” This separates them, sometimes in unsettling ways, from their parents’ generation. One friend of the organization proudly described the Somali people as “the most nationalist people in Africa,” and said that the first generation that arrived in the Netherlands “didn’t come here to stay—they live here, but someday all have to go back.” Yet later, when referring to his own tentative plans to go to Somalia, he recalled an experience abroad: “I went to Italy for school, and while I was there, I missed Holland. I really missed it.” He continued to admit, “I’m not going to exclude the fact that I’m Dutch when I go back to Somalia.” These sentiments correspond to the perception that ethnic affiliation is not necessarily tied to territory. Anthropologist Ghorashi’s theoretical analysis of the diasporic experience describes this as a “territorial approach in which identity is directly related to ‘origin’ and thus to ‘roots’...an essentialist understanding of identity [that] does not hold.” Ghorashi’s point connects to the realization of many young Somalis that they have a tenuous connection to the physical reality of Somalia, but they do have a very strong idea of Somalia and a sense of belongingness to it.

Furthermore, the Somali youth expressed personal turmoil between their experiences in their homes and outside, negotiating Somali and Dutch cultural standards. One girl described the confusion that comes along with confrontations of two cultures: “It happens with everything, it’s the littlest things—like if I was to bring someone to my house, they
have to take their shoes off and they wouldn't know, or I'd have to explain the smells in my house.” Having to navigate between the daily realities within their homes and schools can become a schizophrenic-like existence. Buruma’s *Murder in Amsterdam* asserts that schizophrenia is a problem that second-generation European Muslims potentially face: “the problem lies in the adaptation of a strictly regulated society to a freer, more open one.” Many of the Somali youth did express differences in expectations between their parents and non-Somalis or non-Muslims, one example being who and when to marry. Most feel torn between these perspectives, having a comprehension of both, yet feeling unsure of how to define their own expectations. With everyday confrontations between their varying ethnic affiliations, these dilemmas can cause deep personal confusion. At times, if not dealt with, it can lead to a complete denunciation of one culture or the other.

The Somali organization confronts the difficulties that the Somali youth experience by encouraging a fluid cultural identity. This is achieved through the active creation of a safe space for dialogue and peer collaboration. The mission of the organization, as stated on its website, is: “to facilitate the integration of the Somali community in the Dutch society, while maintaining the Somali culture.” A central aspect of the youth project is to use discussion and debate to go over issues that are not easily negotiated between Dutch and Somali culture. The organization schedules a collection of meetings, which were described as having “a very comfortable environment, something we don’t often get.” “There are experiences we have and maybe don’t understand, which we don’t even think of discussing until we’re together,” one male student described. Topics generally involve concerns regarding cultural norms. Female circumcision is a subject often discussed and debated, primarily because it is one of the most contentious within Dutch society. This is a pertinent example, as it is something the students generally do not advocate or necessarily agree with, although many found the dialogue surrounding the organization’s debate enlightening because it involved taking a critical look at both sides. This is particularly significant in that the organization supports a level of self-criticism as well as critical adaptation through open discussion.

In the same vein, the organization endeavors to overcome the cultural duality felt by many of the youth through fostering more meaningful and deeper investments in both Dutch and Somali society. Ghorashi’s comments on immigrant communities’ relationship to the country of origin, noting that what matters is:
how [the immigrants’ background] is imagined and constructed to serve as a source of belonging that goes beyond the notion of a nation-state. In other words, a ‘place of origin’ here is not a taken for granted point of departure, but is merely a point of reference that is helpful in the process of the construction of multiple identifications.44

The organization puts a strong emphasis on learning about the situation in Somalia and encourages the active promotion of peace and reconciliation. At the same time, the young adults recognize that the more they learn about Somalia, the more they see the difference between their parents’ “homeland” and the Netherlands. This comparative process gradually complicates the youths’ attachment to Somalia as “home.” A group of students went with the organization on a trip to the Somaliland region and met with many Somalis of the same age. One female student spoke about the trip as a stark realization of the differences between Somali youth in Europe and those back in Africa. However, it was also apparent that the trip didn’t diminish her own identification with the culture, but allowed for a new sense of a shared cultural identity: being a Somali can take different forms. Many of the discussions and debates deal with this awareness of fluidity; between being from Somalia, living in the Netherlands, and feeling that “home” is somewhere in-between. One of the directors of the organization, when questioned about his own feelings of fluidity, said, “I’m Dutch, Somali, black, Muslim, and African; we need to start thinking like this.”

2. Transcending Discrimination

A second frustration expressed by the Somali youth and addressed by the organization is the discrimination directed towards them as “allochtoon.” Meaning “originating from another country,” Essed and Trieneken describe the beginning of the popular usage of allochtoon as dating back to the 1994 Equal Treatment Act, a definition used to “include residents born elsewhere, as well as their children, even when born in the Netherlands and even when one parent was born in the Netherlands as well.”45 This word, alongside its opposite, or “autochtoon,” defined as “originating from this country,” “captures the mix of racial thinking and cultural hierarchies.”46 This is significant because a more nuanced understanding of inclusion within the wider Somali culture and diaspora is successfully advocated by the organization, but
the same has not been achieved with the youth’s Dutch identity due to externally influenced sentiments of social exclusion. A majority of the Somalis informants were uncomfortable with positively identifying themselves as Dutch. “I don’t see myself as Dutch,” one girl told me, “when I think of Dutch, I think blonde, blue eyes.” However, an older member of the organization argued that this reaction was in response to the populist Dutch attitude, which separates those of a Dutch origin and those deemed foreigners (symbolized by the term *allochtoon*). Many of the students brought up this linguistic form of exclusion, a word they couldn’t seem to shake off. Several of the males linked this term with the discrimination they felt in regard to finding jobs. For example, one who said that they could tell by his last name that he was *allochtoon*, and for that he felt he was not given an equal opportunity.

In efforts to defeat feelings of social exclusion and racism, the Somali organization has promoted the inclusion of young adults within the wider European Somali diaspora in order to involve them in a greater network of social mobility. Instead of countering discrimination by creating greater engagement with Dutch identity, the organization promotes feeling a sense of opportunity as a Somali migrant. A female student talked about a trip with the organization to Sweden where, “we met with these very successful Somalis in Sweden, to see what Somalis are doing in Europe.” By exposing the students to fellow Somalis who have “made it,” they are inspiring them to work hard and take advantage of the opportunities that are available in Europe. All of the Somali students spoken to were of middle class status, and this is an important characteristic for the organization to address. Researchers have found that middle class immigrant minorities confront unique difficulties regarding social mobility and public support in that discrimination can be experienced from both the dominant culture and the low-income groups of their same ethnicity.47 Many talked about the Somali refugees who arrived later and who are currently trapped in the welfare system. Using Bourdieu’s conceptual framework, the organization is partially a reproduction of the Somali cultural habitus. Because the majority of the parents of students interviewed were educated and had higher status within the Somali hierarchy, the children have partially inherited certain cultural orientations from their upbringing, including socioeconomic mobility.48 The student informants, while having their reservations about employment discrimination, did have confidence that they would be able to find work in the Netherlands in the future. When speaking about the organization and civic opportunities.
for Somalis, one student said, “I just know we’re in this together.” By developing a network of middle- and upper-middle class Somalis throughout the Netherlands and the rest of Europe, the organization builds social solidarity to improve confidence and ultimately fight discrimination.

3. Reclaiming Islam

The Somali organization also works to assist the young adults in learning to battle misrepresentations of Muslims and to integrate Islam meaningfully into their daily lives. In current Dutch society, Islamic communities increasingly suffer from media and neo-conservative attacks, which emphasize the alleged incompatibility of Islam and the liberal Dutch lifestyle and Enlightenment values. Many public discussions are mirroring arguments within Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” theory, characterizing Islam as a threat to Western forms of democracy, particularly the separation of church and state. To support these claims, evidence is taken from sporadic acts of violence committed by Muslims, some of whom are Islamic extremists. When asked about their reactions to anti-Muslim propaganda, such as Geert Wilders’ new film *Fitna*, two Somalis commented that perhaps what is most offensive is that the attacks are always quite obviously referring to Moroccan incidents that are generalized to be “Islamic” acts of violence. Shadid remarks that, “statements made in this context [by right-wing politicians and leaders] are mainly of a generalizing and disparaging nature, ignoring social, economic, religious, political, and ethnic differentiations.”

In light of these generalizations, Somali youth are encouraged by the organization to reconstruct this sense of otherness through learning about the Islamic faith, in and of itself as well as in conjunction with their Somali culture. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the organization inspires the youth to integrate Islam into their lives in a manner that is relevant to their current realities. Somalis who grew up in the Netherlands generally struggle with both Dutch representations of Islam as well as their parents’ practice of their faith. The Somali organization helps the young adults tease apart false representations of Islam as well as uses discussions to foster a comprehension of Islam in a contemporary European context. Many gain a critical understanding of the public commentaries about Islam. One student said, “they [the Dutch public] are right about Islam if they’re looking
at certain interpretations, those interpretations are just not what we are practicing.” Through discussions, the students become deeply familiar with the Qur’an and effectively sculpt a personal understanding of Islamic faith that differs from their parents. “My Islam is not the Islam of my parents,” one said. “Theirs is out of habit, tradition—I know much more about actual Islam.” Reevaluating what it means to be a Muslim is part of a critical process of self-conceptualization, including the development of knowledge and the understanding of one’s environment. Muslim-wide student groups take this a step further, using Islam as a chance to understand the local environment and to globalize a commitment to Islam through encouraging “a global Ummah,” where belonging is fostered among the entire Islamic community—from the local to the global. While none of the Somalis say they are “true” practicing Muslims in that they do not pray four times a day, they all consider Islam an extremely important facet of their lives. Several girls mentioned that while they didn’t feel as though they have to marry a Somali male, it is necessary that they marry a Muslim. The organization fosters an environment in which the young adults collaboratively learn to appreciate Islam as part of their Somali culture, as well as to enliven the religious tradition in an individually appropriate manner.

V. Solidarity in a Global Age

Globalization is a conversation between universals and particulars. While the bulk of this essay is an analysis of two cultural particulars and their experiences of cultivating ethnic cohesion and belonging, it behooves the ethnographer to glean from the case studies implications for the wider society. In this section, I elucidate the lessons that this research has taught me.

At the core of every intellectual journey are life’s ontological questions. In Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason, he proposes three such questions: what can I know, what ought I to do, and what may I hope for? This section is divided into three components, each providing a response to the respective question.

A. What can I know?

These case studies illuminated to me that in areas plagued by ethnic tensions, the cultivation of solidarity is necessary for successful civic engagement. The flute bands and the Somali organization as vehicles
of social capital fulfill the needs of belonging and security, and provide channels to express ethnic history and identity. By doing so these organizations encourage youth to participate in their communities in more meaningful ways. Their activities illustrate how “individual’s ethnic minority background is used as a resource, as a means to engage in civic activity, rather than as a path to…passivity.”

Forms of globalization have allowed the bands and the organization to engage youth with their wider communities. For example, using the Internet and having access to cheaper and easier forms of travel and communication have facilitated contact and deeper relationships to places outside of one’s own locality, to places across the region, the European continent, or even to areas further away, such as Somalia. As “single identity movements” (versus those emphasizing cross-cultural integration), the bands and Somali organization work to develop positive intra-community identities and values. These organizations within the Protestant and Somali communities form a coherent identity narrative, linking the past, present, and future. In a globalized world, how identity is used, cultivated, and shared will affect dramatically how one takes part in local and global society.

B. What ought I to do?

The formation of a European, or even a global, solidarity requires the active expansion of local forms of solidarity. Too often solidarity is assumed as part of our “essential humanity,” “something within each of us…which resonates to the presence of this same thing in other human beings.” However, ethnic cohesion is a result of an interactive process that supports a positive identity, builds networks, and provides responses to distinct socioeconomic, cultural, and political circumstances. To construct a wider form of solidarity, there needs to be (1) recognition of how cohesiveness works on community levels, and (2) encouragement of “everyday democratizations.” The first point speaks to the importance of actively constructing a wider solidarity (e.g., European or global) by building on existing local sentiments. The philosopher Richard Rorty significantly notes that, “our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as ‘one of us,’ where ‘us’ means something smaller and more local than the human race.” Thus, a rooted understanding of solidarity, which already has the culturally responsive mechanisms needed for its existence, can be used to allow for a more global cohe-
Eleni Zimiles

The second point implies that in order for an expanded solidarity to exist, democratic institutions must address the processes of exclusion that plague ethnic communities. It would be unjust not to recognize that a clear hindrance to their full civic participation in their at-large regions is their marginalized positions. Giddens points out that while there needs to be the foundational elements of care, civility, and local integration, a European solidarity will have to include mechanisms of “everyday democratization.” Defined as “the advance of substantive freedoms in everyday life,” everyday democratization speaks to the need for citizens to feel that macro-democratic institutions are addressing their needs on a regular basis. Young citizens of both the Protestant and Somali communities expressed disenchantment with their political representation. “I don’t know if I can ever vote again; I always am left feeling betrayed,” said one Shankill youth. A Somali male, after talking about Wilders, wondered whether he should stay in the Netherlands if the political system was not going to accept him. These democratic deficits cannot be ignored when attempting to construct solidarity.

C. What can I hope for?

These ethnographic cases and subsequent discussions raise this question: is cosmopolitanism relevant, and can it be developed by these organizations? Often described as a “chic lifestyle choice exercised by a small international elite group,” cosmopolitanism is perceived by many as an idealistic and privileged disposition. Accepting that there are theoretical dilemmas involved with the philosophy, nonetheless, the existing challenges of sectarianism and ethnic tensions illuminate the growing necessity for a cosmopolitan framework. While a sentiment of solidarity is an element of cosmopolitanism, there must be an extra step, that of critical adaptation. Amin refers to the principle of “mutuality as the basis of identification and belonging.” On the one hand, critical adaptation necessitates a level of self-criticism, and, on the other, an openness to critiquing others. This “active engagement with, and negotiation of, difference” negates simplistic views of allegiance, and makes room for the dynamic nature of human identity. If local organizations can encourage a simultaneous celebration and cri-
tique of one’s particularities, then a universal framework of empathy, solidarity, and responsibility can follow.

VI. Conclusion

Ethnography is always a personal endeavor. This article scrutinized the experience of ethnic cohesion in youth communities in Northern Ireland and the Netherlands. The research process itself explored the intimacies of belonging. Margaret Mead once wrote, “to what past, present, or future can the idealistic young commit themselves?” This research project has led me to conclude that a commitment to cosmopolitanism is more necessary than ever. However, in the precognitive moment of thinking about globalization and cosmopolitanism, there is home. As a young adult myself, I realized that investing myself in another community required reflections of where I had come from, of places and people to whom I belong. We as youth can be either pallbearers or gardeners—using tradition to de-legitimize and neglect our communities or sowing the seeds for the development of structures that positively build our communities and our identities. Ultimately, youth have a responsibility to work toward creating a global consciousness that rises above the static and singularizing forces of sectarianism.

This effort, however, has to be partly rooted in locality. We young people must commit ourselves to cosmopolitanism and the critical adaptation of otherness, but we must also commit ourselves to our home. Gradually, as we inquire, endeavor to understand, and invest ourselves in the hopes and plights of others, our understanding of home expands. Portions of myself now belong in Northern Ireland and the Netherlands, and have become part of what I consider home. In our world today, as globalization accelerates, we need to challenge ourselves to believe in the complexities of our reality, in a sense of home. We also need to move beyond our own “peace walls” and believe in possibility.

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Notes
5. Giddens 2007, p. 112.
6. Ibid., p. 113.
10. Ibid., p. 25.
15. I use the term “Protestant” to define the descendents of the Protestants from Great Britain who settled in Ulster Province. While perhaps not politically correct, the community most widely refers to themselves as Protestant, and it was how I was expected to address them. It is important to note the wide misconception that the Protestant population is Irish. The community identifies itself as British and some as Northern Irish. As a youth organizer on the Shankill said to me, “it is a terminological minefield here.”
17. Note that this is an interesting episode of globalization and the linkage between my two case studies. “King Billy” represents one of the major cultural waves of globalization, when Protestantism swept across the European continent. Coincidentally, King William III (Billy) was from Orange in the Netherlands. While a local hero to Ulster Protestants long embedded in ethnic and religious conflict, the Orange family in the Netherlands was a site of religious tolerance, particularly in the face of Spanish oppression.
22. Ibid., p. 94.
23. McKay 2000, p. 22.
35. Ibid., p. 341.
37. Ibid.
40. Klausen 2005, p. 27.
41. Ibid., 30.
46. Ibid.
47. Neckerman et al 1999.
57. Ibid.
60. Amin 2004, p. 3.
61. Ibid., 4.
63. Giddens 1994, p. 95.7
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Eleni Zimiles


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**Audio and Visual Sources**
