

# Colonia

MINDSET  
in Dutch

# Gay Spaces

Essay 01 in a Series by Owen Earl

I think of gay spaces as one of the original safe-spaces. Gay clubs, saunas, bars: spaces that are built for gay men to meet each other and mingle.

I am lucky to be living in a time and place where one can be openly gay without fear of losing their job, where there exist legal protections against discrimination, where there is wide-spread societal acceptance. It wasn't so very long ago that the only places where it was safe to be openly gay were the clubs and bars built by and for the gay community.

There is a gay club in my hometown in the Netherlands that has been open since the eighties. It is a place where men go to find other men to have sex with. Younger gay men don't need spaces like this because they can meet each other the same way their straight counterparts do: at work, on dating apps, at school. The people who frequent this club are all older than me; many are in their sixties. They

# Gay CLUB



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tell me stories of how the club was back in the day. One man tells me about how he always wished to be a father, but it wasn't possible for him because gay men couldn't adopt back then. Another man tells me about how he used to work at the club over thirty years ago.

I am acutely aware of the fact that I am an outsider. I am younger than everyone, and I am an American. I haven't lived through the AIDS crisis; I didn't grow up before the internet. I will never share the cultural background and experiences that these men share, but I feel accepted by them, welcomed into the space. I feel a sense of solidarity.

I'm at a gay club in Amsterdam and I don't feel safe. I don't feel welcomed into the space and I don't feel the same sense of solidarity. On paper this club should be much better equipped to cater to me. The folks here are young, and there are more international guests. This is the second club I'm visiting in Amsterdam



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that I'm having this reaction to. The second time I visit a place ostensibly built for my demographic and am feeling less welcome than at a place that is clearly not for me.

Why is this? The thing that first comes to mind is a lack of struggle. People here grew up in a world that accepted them; they have never experienced the kind of prosecution their elders have. They take this world of acceptance and accommodation for granted. They feel entitled to what they have.

But why should they suffer? Isn't it good that people here don't know what it was like to live in a world where they can't marry the person they love? Aren't they entitled to everything this world grants them and more?

The issue that I'm running into is a bit more complicated than just a lack of suffering, and its implications are a bit more insidious.



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There is a prevalent ideology that exists in these spaces. It is a mindset that I would characterize as colonial, and it is harmful, both in that it works to further the project of Dutch colonialism, and in that it interrupts the solidarity that has historically defined these spaces and comminutes.

Life for the average Dutch person is fairly good. It is one of the richest counties in the world. There is a robust social safety net. By some measures, Dutch children are the happiest in the world. It is one of the best places to live.

Different people have different accounts of why this country is so successful, but one contributing factor is its history of colonialism. The Netherlands, like many northern European nations, was once a colonial super-power. It ventured into the Americas and Asia and used its brutal power to extract wealth which it brought back home. The people who live here refer to this era as the "golden



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age" and only recently has the conversation about whether or not this was a good thing to do has really begun. In fact, a recent survey conducted found that a majority of Dutch citizens say they are proud of their colonial legacy.<sup>1</sup>

As an outsider, it feels quite obvious to me that colonialism was wrong and bad. I'm very happy that the Dutch are able to afford such a nice standard of living, but it came at the expense of the people who were colonized. During the "golden age," the Dutch accumulated massive wealth by forcing literal slaves to work in subhuman conditions so that they could enjoy luxuries back home.

It doesn't matter how well the country is run, or how industrious its population is today, several hundred years ago they conquered and stole a bunch from other parts of the world, and any country that did so would have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://yougov.co.uk/international/articles/28355-how-unique-are-british-attitudes-empire>

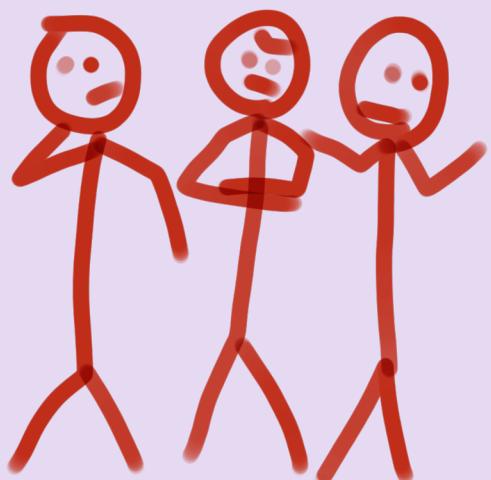


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a leg up on the people they stole from.

Something that has emerged in tandem with historical colonial projects is an ideology that justifies these exploitations. It would be hard to, for example, force other human beings into chattel slavery if you see them as your true equal. What we see emerge during these times are concepts like that of "race science," which says that black people are biologically inferior to white people. If black people are naturally stupid and violent and, when left to their own devices, quite destructive, then it is good and justified to make decisions for them. Slavery is good, actually.

We see variations of a similar theme: the rest of the world—the part we are colonizing—is stupid, backwards, and savage. Undeveloped and uncivilized. By entering these places and imposing our worldview onto them we are saving them from themselves. We are doing good. This is the colonial mindset,



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and it justifies an exploitative system.

Historically the views imposed on the rest of the world were puritanical. Often it was Christianity that was used to justify colonialism. The "third world" was full of sinners: sexual deviants, and worshipers of false gods. They would go to hell if they weren't taught a conservative version of Christianity. It is okay if they suffer greatly; Jesus suffered and our suffering brings us closer to God. It is okay if they become poor and destitute. Worldly possessions make it harder to enter the kingdom of heaven. Conservative Christianity is still very present throughout the colonized world.

Ideally the colonizers would have dropped this colonial mindset back when the colonized countries won their independence. In many ways they have. The Dutch have become quite secular, can hardly be accused of puritanism, and have rejected "race science." But the most important aspect of the



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colonial mindset remains. Namely, the Dutch still believe they are superior to the rest of the world. They still view the rest of the world as backward, savage, and stupid, but now for the exact opposite reasons. They see the puritanism, religiousness, and conservatism of the rest of the world as backwards. They judge the colonized world for the very ideologies they imposed on them centuries prior.

This is what disturbs me so much about the ideology present at the gay clubs I've visited in Amsterdam. For many people in these spaces, gay acceptance is viewed through a framework of Dutch superiority. Of course the Netherlands has gay marriage, gay clubs, gay brothels. The Netherlands is the best country in the world. Countries without those things are simply less civilized.

For many gay Dutch men, their queer identity is secondary to their nationalistic identity. They grew up with a government that supported their right to exist, they grew up being



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told that they live in the best country in the world, and they grew up believing that the former was a consequence of the latter.

I feel no solidarity with these men. Any persecution I might face back home is seen by them as evidence of my home country's inferiority. They believe, quite ignorantly, that the Netherlands is a nice place to live because of the ideology of its citizens, that the Netherlands' wealth and its citizens' safety is an outgrowth of Dutch values, if other places are poor and unsafe that it is a result of the backwards thinking of the people who live there.

I wouldn't mind this thinking if it weren't for all the stolen wealth. I wouldn't mind this thinking if it weren't so obviously wrong. A nations' citizens can have any number of values, but if the government isn't interested in respecting its citizens' wishes, their lives won't reflect those values. A nations' citizens can have the same work ethic and



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industriousness as the Dutch, but if economic sanctions are placed against them by the rest of the world, they will remain poor.

It is disturbing to me to witness the ideological shift between generations. Older men are gay first, Dutch second. They remember a time when the government prosecuted them. They don't see the acceptance of gay people, or the existence of gay institutions, as evidence of Dutch superiority, rather they see it as something fought for and won by an oppressed and marginalized minority. It's something that can be taken away if we aren't too careful. Protecting it requires a continued sense of solidarity and a continued identification with marginalized struggles everywhere.

The younger men are Dutch first, gay second. It feels as though gay communities themselves are being ideologically colonized by a belief in Dutch supremacy. An Island of resistance against the hegemonic culture is being consumed and



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reconstituted by its once oppressor in an image favorable to its oppressor's goals.

The project of colonialism is ongoing. I get the sense that the way international trade and economic policy is structured, wealth continues to flow from the "third world" into the hands of the already wealthy "first world," but even if the wealth extraction was a purely historical phenomenon, don't the wealthy benefactors of that system owe something to impoverished parts of the world they stole from?

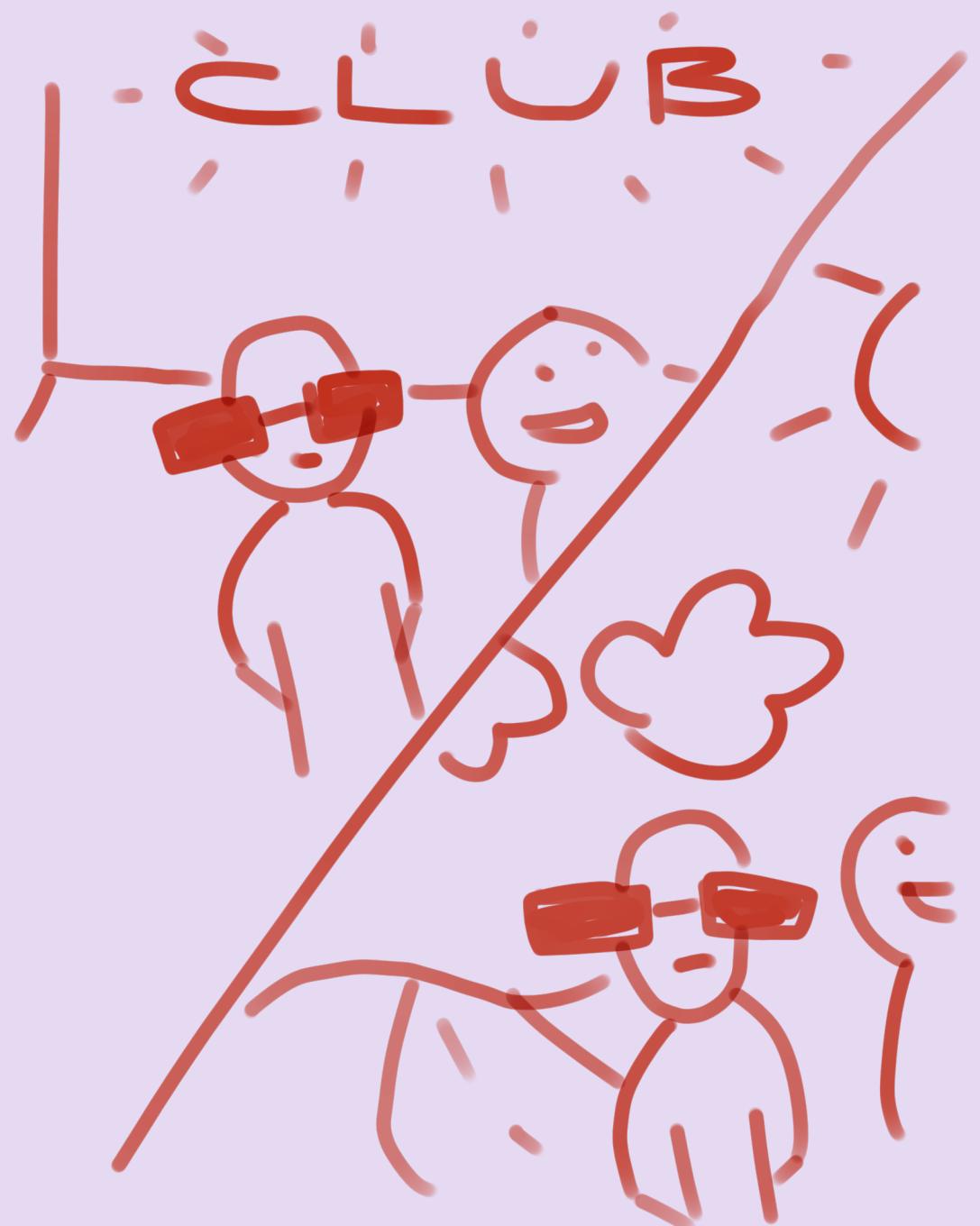
Believing that the rest of the world is less wealthy because it is ideologically more primitive absolves the Dutch from the responsibility to make reparations. If these countries' problems are solely due bad decisions and bad systems of thinking that they are currently participating in, then supporting them is a waste of time. Money and aid would just be dealt with irresponsibly. Trying to help might even make things worse.



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In this way, progressive values and achievements of Dutch society get weaponized. They are used to further the narrative of Dutch supremacy, which, in turn, supports the continued maintenance of colonial wealth and power.

And it is transforming these once sacred safe spaces into places that are unwelcoming to the kinds of marginalized people who fought for the equality and acceptance enjoyed by the youths of today. The culture inside the club is becoming indistinguishable from the culture outside of it. And I'm feeling bummed.



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