

# The Upsurge of Autochthony: Politics, Rhetorics and Aesthetics

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The concept of 'autochthony' has great popular appeal in strikingly different situations, whether on the political agendas of several European countries or in the violent genocides sweeping across parts of Africa in the 1990s. In practice, however, its referents are in constant shift and there is always the danger of being unmasked as 'not really' belonging, a danger that can be taken quite literally, as in Geert Wilders's "Polenmeldpunt," or in the Vlaams Belang's electoral pledge "Wij ruimen op." During the forthcoming Platform meeting on **Friday 22 June** in Amsterdam we discussed various questions related to the challenge that the upsurge of autochthony presents not only to present-day multicultural societies but also to postcolonial thinking itself.



Dating back to classical Greek history and meaning 'self' and 'soil,' the concept of 'autochthony' promises the basic security of being rooted in the soil as a primordial form of belonging and therefore has great popular appeal in strikingly different situations, whether on the political agendas of several European countries or in the violent genocides sweeping across parts of Africa in the 1990s. In practice, however, its referents are in constant shift and there is always the danger of being unmasked as 'not really' belonging, a danger that can be taken quite literally, as in Geert Wilders's "Polenmeldpunt," or in the Vlaams Belang's electoral pledge "Wij ruimen op."

In what manifestations do claims of autochthony occur, and to what effect? How do they relate to the idea of national citizenship, especially in our contemporary, increasingly globalized world? According to anthropologist Peter Geschiere, it would be misleading to regard the present upsurge of autochthony as reflecting an effort to return to some sort of "traditional" situation. Autochthony in all its different forms and strong emotional appeal, as his argument goes, can be understood only in relation to incisive global changes. How do these new developments in the struggles of belonging and the globalizing historical context influence one another? And to what extent do such analyses and questions also lead to an effective critique of autochthony?

The upsurge of autochthony appears to present a challenge not only to present-day multicultural societies but also to postcolonial thinking itself. Nowadays it seems to be 'bon-ton' to make autochthony claims and proclaim the failure of the multicultural society. This observation runs counter to the fact that postcolonial theory, at least according to its proponents, has effectively scrutinized debates on identity and difference and explored new and existing imaginations of multicultural 'conviviality' (to use Paul Gilroy's notion). Thus, the autochthony debate raises questions about the role and nature of postcolonial theory in society. While some may say that postcolonial criticism has been slow on the uptake in the Low Countries, could it be that the debate has meanwhile moved on to questions of the global and the transnational on the one hand, and fundamentalism and autochthony on the other? To what extent is, in fact, the postcolonial paradigm at all relevant in the Low Countries? And how are these various debates creatively rendered in art and literature and how do the latter intervene in these debates?

We will spend a lively day, in a small group of enthusiastic (young) researchers, with lectures, workshops, close readings, and especially intensive discussions focusing on the theoretical debate on autochthony, the challenge it presents to postcolonial thinking, and its creative expression in the arts. A reader will be distributed in preparation of the seminar and on the day itself foods and drinks will be provided.

The seminar is open for all researchers, Research Master and PhD students working in the field of postcolonial studies. If you are interested in participating, please register with Eloe Kingma of NICA/OSL ([nica-fgw@uva.nl](mailto:nica-fgw@uva.nl)). Active participation by Research Master students (presentation, response, short paper) may be awarded with 1 EC credit.