NOTES ON IMAGINING AFROPEA
Charl Landvreugd

Abstract
The title of this article refers to a form of imagining that takes place from a personal and artistic subject position. Imagining, it is assumed, is always a given feature of creativity and inevitably culturally hybrid. In Landvreugd’s practice as an artist, he complements his visual work by exploring a sense of belonging, processes of identification and self-identification, and by positing the significance of his creative endeavours in relation to that of his peers. The purpose of this article is to tease out the relevant artistic subject positions that may be taken by artists in a European setting, specifically in the Netherlands. Pushing the boundaries that result from historical circumstances, the discussion shows that turning toward the imagination is a means to explore how distinct cultures are coalescing, in order to model a new artistic environment that lies beyond an older critical concern with the processes of representation. Dutch artists of the African diaspora, such as Landvreugd, are producing works shaped by different cultural heritages and media cultures. Their creative explorations have resulted in new subjectivities that are diasporic and belong to a wider transatlantic Afro community and yet, at the same time, have a direct bearing on the Netherlands. The changing nature of cultural difference implied in such a process constitutes a field of conceptualisation that may be described under the provisional heading of ‘Afropea’.

Keywords: Afro-Europe, Afro-Dutch, Afropea, art, subjectivity, diaspora, difference
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Biographical note
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NOTES ON IMAGINING AFROPEA

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Locating origins
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I was born a creole. In the Amazon, on the northern edge of the forest, in Paramaribo, Suriname. In this multi-ethnic society, creole is understood as referring to people of African descent with multiple racial backgrounds. My ancestry may be traced through centuries of forced and voluntary migration from a range of places, including West Africa, Iberia, India and China to the continent of South America. My creoleness comprises contributions from enslaved people, slave traders, free blacks and indentured labourers. What they all share is a history of oppression, migration, survival and adaptation. Whatever line of ancestry one explores, what emerges as foundational to creole subjectivity are multiple diasporas and an internal cultural multiplicity. The national space in which this creole was nurtured is the Netherlands. I came to live in Rotterdam after my parents joined the great migration from Suriname to the Netherlands around the time of Suriname’s independence in 1975 (Hoeft, 2013, p.110). These circumstances of an individual who has a domestic culture (life among family ‘at home’), which is embedded in a larger national culture, should be recognisable to all. For children of parents who migrated, the roots of these two cultures are constructed and talked about differently. As a consequence, these children are compelled to combine at least two modern cultures and transform them into something new. Habits, sensibilities and concepts from the country of origin lose their meaning through diasporic displacement, or at least they are meaningfully altered in the new and emerging constellation of a lived cultural heritage.

Understanding myself as a creole seems always to involve an ethnic category that is native to another land, a form of belonging elsewhere. The Caribbean then, is held up as one’s geographical area of physical origin. In the Netherlands, I am perceived as black (with a small ‘b’, denoting colour rather than politics) and automatically as someone with an immigrant background; in Suriname as creole, but Dutch; in the UK perception points towards Black British; in the USA as African-American or Black; and in Egypt as either a Nubian or European – the identification here seems to go either way. Being perceived as racially African, ethnically South American and culturally European calls for a rethinking of that particular creole subjectivity.

Figure 3.1: Charl Landvreugd, movt nr. 8; Late Birds, 2015. Performance/photograph, C-print, size variable. (Courtesy of the artist)
challenging the category altogether. Depending on the location, cultural identity as a construct (which includes ethnicity and expected social status) seems to shift, changing with the context. The historical significance and lived experience of creoleness, in particular its inherent multiplicity, is always lost in translation in any of these locations.

In response to this sense of loss, I have sought to frame this problem by way of a few questions. How is one to gain a contemporary sense of self which allows for an understanding of my cultural identity as both hailing from the European continent (specifically the Netherlands), and yet also as a creole person? How can this identification with Europe and the African diaspora simultaneously articulate a conceptualisation of the self? In 'One Finger Does Not Drink Okra Soup' Gloria Wekker explains that the 'I' in Surinamese (working class) creole subjects is conceptualised as a multiplicity. One is partly biological and partly spiritual. One's Kra (an immortal soul that consists of male and female elements), is bestowed upon the physical body by one's male and female Dyodyo (parents in the world of the gods) at birth. These four elements are conceived as personalities with their own characteristics and together they define one's personality, intellect, consciousness, character traits and mind. Their individual agency is reflected in the different ways one can speak about the self or act in different situations. A person thus is physical and spiritual, male and female and all combinations thereof. This conceptualisation gives an entry into understanding the cultural multiplicity of this sense of self. The European thus is an additional personality to the creole parts of the 'I' as a 'kaleidoscopic, ever-moving sequence' (Wekker, 1997, p.336) that is always a multiplicity. What I have in view is an understanding of a creole cultural multiplicity that is enriched by diasporic life in continental Europe. I am suggesting the need to allow for a multiplicity of subject positions and the appreciation of shifting perspectives, moving away therefore from attention to a fixed cultural identity in order to think more seriously about multi-layered subjectivities as exemplified by the 'I' in the Surinamese creole sense of the word. With this conceptualisation in mind, it is clear that articulating the self as (culturally) Dutch is never in contradiction with speaking about the self as part of the African diaspora, or vice versa.

In the Netherlands however, a distinction is made by the CBS (Central Agency for Statistics, known as Statistics Netherlands) between allochthonous (from elsewhere) and autochthonous (indigenous) individuals. The allochthonous are divided between Western (Westerners, Indonesians and Japanese on the basis of social, economic and cultural positions) and non-Western (Turks, Africans, Latin Americans and Asians). The government develops public policy on the basis of these target groups. The major groups are people from Suriname, the Dutch Antilles and Aruba, Morocco and Turkey. One belongs to one of these groups if at least one parent is born in one of the target group countries. When both parents are born in the Netherlands one is considered autochthonous by the CBS definition. However, this autochthonous definition does not hold in actual practice, since everyday life dictates that an allochthonous identity applies to anyone who is not considered white, including those of Indonesian and Japanese ancestry. It is evident that cultural self-identification as Dutch is not necessarily in line with how one is perceived by society or governmental bodies. Consequently, self-identification as Surinamese, Dutch-Surinamese, Surinamese-Dutch or Dutch becomes a political choice in reaction to the status quo. Contemporary Afro-awareness is showing that some Dutch artists, including myself, are trying to imagine themselves beyond the post-colonial, and beyond migrant spaces and histories that would compel us to choose either of these identifications.

Due to a lack of art critique and general public engagement dealing with the Dutch colonial past and its legacies, efforts to speak about us as artists depend heavily on British and American scholarship pertaining to the Black experience and so-called Black Art. This scholarship and the (until recently) lack of local (Black) scholars contesting these experiences from a Dutch perspective, has set limits for how these artists are spoken about. The artists' practices and their outcomes are consequently connected to the artistic space of their (parents') region of origin, or the African diaspora in the UK or Americas. This strategy generally overlooks the specificities that address local Dutch concerns and fits well into the public denial of the relevance of our colonial past to the present day. Therefore, works of art are, more often than not, criticised on the basis of their relation to conversations taking place outside the Netherlands. For the purpose of finding a starting point from which to speak about these artistic practices and locating them as native to the Netherlands, the American, British and Caribbean scholarship on belonging, processes of identification and self-identification that are used to criticise art made by diaspora artists should be taken as a given and understood to be native to the original hybrid space from which this imagining jumps off. Having said that, concepts and the language originating in or deriving from these discourses, need to be investigated to determine the extent to which their significance...
applies to the Dutch situation and with what revisions. By adopting them too readily, they sometimes deny local sensibilities and push the discussion in unwanted directions.

As the political anthropologist David Scott rightly points out in his book *Conscripts of Modernity*, ‘an adequate interrogation of the present (postcolonial or otherwise) depends on identifying the difference between the questions that animated former presents and those that animate our own’ (2004, p.3). For the purpose of doing so, he conceptualised the idea of a problem-space. A problem-space is a specific historical period with its own particular problems that brings forth its own questions and creates a horizon of future goals to achieve. It is meant to demarcate a discursive context, a context of language and argument and therefore a context of intervention. It is defined by ‘questions that seem worth asking and the kind of answers that seem worth having’ (p.4). A problem-space has a temporal dimension that alters historically because the shape of the problems changes. ‘In new historical conditions … the old paths between questions and answers … remain visible as the norm or the convention’ (p.4), but these paths do not necessarily lead to answers as the ‘stakes involved in walking them have dissolved’ (p.4). ‘[W]hat was a “horizon of the future” for them has become our “futures past” – a horizon which we can “no longer imagine, seek after, inhabit”, or indeed create in, see or represent in the same way’ (Hall, 2006, p.7). The concept of the problem-space is a useful tool to start looking at the problem of borrowed concepts and language stemming from other historical periods and places. In the case of the Netherlands, the question may be asked whether the current issues are influenced by the same sort of social and political circumstances as those of the original space in which the borrowed concepts and terms emerged? Even though parallels can be drawn: do the questions about art of the African diaspora, which I am raising with regard to the European continental mainland, need the same type of answers as those from the UK and the US? What type of intervention may be needed on the continent and what possibilities lie at the horizon of the future?

**Where is Afropea?**

There are currently three terms that I have singled out in order to speak about practices of identification and subjectivity in this article: Black, Afro-European/Dutch and the neologism ‘Afropean’. My contention is that the historical developments that took place in the United States resulting in Black indicating African-American and in Britain, where the Black or black British label has historically also has been embraced by people of other backgrounds, need to be carefully studied but set aside from Dutch histories and present circumstances so these can develop on their own terms. At present, Black serves only as an often-used borrowed denomination, without actual, concrete consensus on its meaning or applicability among members of the African diaspora in the Netherlands. Since a Black— or better still Afro—self-awareness is growing, naming all such subjects as Black at this point in time is (possibly prematurely) advancing a case for recognition of a specific continental European Black condition. Such a distinctive cultural and political identity on the European mainland is still at a nascent stage and far from reaching any conclusion. I therefore see possibilities for rethinking this term and, more so, for intervening in this problem-space for the arts. What is clear is that the Dutch context reveals subjectivities that are in a state of becoming: a definite Afro space (indicating a community of African descent), but one that points to distinct possibilities for political agency, cultural creativity and subject production.

The term Afro-European echoes the term Afro-American, Afro-Cuban etc., but its uses and limits are different. This identifier summons up the discourse of the historical merger of Africans with the country or continent in which they now live. Countries in the New World could not have developed into what they are today without African input and labour physically present. This literally gives the descendants of those African peoples the grounds for claiming civil rights, but also land rights and cultural sovereignty – suggesting that their ancestral contributions were foundational to the settlement and advancement of territories in the New World. However, such ‘Afro’ communities have held a different, if no less integral, relationship to the development of European nations. The label Afro-European then indicates a problematic: Europe seems to occupy a normative status, with its Afro-presence somehow grafted on, deviating from, if not diluting, its purity. Since there is little equivalence between the sort of hyphenated identities of elsewhere (African-American, Afro-Latin, etc.), it should be clear why Afro-European (and Afro-Dutch) is a term that I would use to refer to the social and political circumstances connected to the addition of Afro to the idea of Europe.

Indeed, both Black and Afro-European fall short in fully encapsulating the subjectivities that I have in mind. The terms position artists and other subjects, such as myself, much against our will, drawing us into the prevailing ‘Americo-centric discourse’ (Gilroy, 2004, p.xvi) on race, a discourse that needs to be questioned, if not transcended (see Wainwright, 2013). What I
Adventures in Afropea

With the album *Adventures in Afropea* (1993) a space was imagined in which the African diaspora community in Europe could be culturally native. Afropea is a real environment for those who shape it by leaving marks. The marks create culture and the culture in turn realises the Afropean in a mutual and simultaneous state of becoming. In Afropea, the Afropean is the diasporic subject who transcends social and political circumstances of her Afro-Europeaness, and claims humanity through cultural practices. The resulting subject is a European individual centralised in Afro-ness that takes Europeaness as an inherent quality and part of its subjectivity as an Afro multiplicity. She exemplifies the need for awareness of hybridity on top of the already existing hybridity. Afropea then is born from the in-between magical space of hybridity, yet it is more than the sum of its parts. It is fruitful to imagine Afropea as a wholly new cultural space that leaves intact its contributing structures, including the in-between space from which it originates. It is the space where the rules that are in place on all sides of the hybridity spectrum, including hybridity itself, are part of the multiplicity.

This construction suggests that Afropea is a multi-layered space, much like the Afropean subjectivity encapsulated in the Surinamese ‘I’, as a multiplicity outlined previously. Afropea can be said to function as an inhabited cultural space, while Afropean describes its embodied subjectivity. In both instances, the individual agency of all the points along a spectrum of cultural differences have their own characteristics and together define personality, intellect, consciousness, character traits and mind. This opens up the possibility of imagining space as a subjectivity and subjectivity as a space. Here one can locate the continental Afro-European through an expressly native Afropean subjectivity. The best way to sum this up is to note that such a subjectivity is self-referential, with a multiple ‘I’ that has the potential to break away from seeing the self through the Afro-European condition and the lens of race-based, identity-driven identification.

**Horizons of the future: Getting to Afropea**

In order to understand the shifting problem-spaces of art production that delimit Afropea for Dutch artists, I will briefly outline the conditions that created the various horizons that emerged about a century ago in the United States. I am interested in doing so because it is specifically through African-American and British history that certain terms and ways of thinking about ethnic relations may be said to underlie and motivate current cultural debates in the Netherlands.

With the move of African Americans from rural to urban centres around 1900, the philosophies of Black leaders changed in regard to self-expression and the means to gain political power. W.E.B. DuBois’ work led, from Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise (Washington, [1895] 1974), to the formation of the Niagara Movement. The Niagara Movement advocated a strategy that was not based on patience and submission to white political rule, but on active demands on political, social and economic levels (Dubois and Trotter, 1905). Out of this development came the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909. From this climate and what is known as the first Great Migration (1910–30) emerged the most famous African-American art movement to date. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has described the Harlem Renaissance to have taken its artistic inspiration from Europeans. The European appreciation of African art and its subsequent move into view for the avant-garde, broadening the ‘cultural imagination of the West’, also opened up its potential for political use (Gates, 2012, p.453). (I mention this specific quote as an example of how thought and visual language can move from Africa to Europe and then on to North America, and in each location result in a movement with its own specific lexicon, strengths and sensibilities. After almost a century, it jumps the ocean again to inspire artists and thinkers in Europe.) This movement succeeded in placing the Black experience in the frame of American experience and with its political message and core of racial consciousness forever changed how African Americans are viewed around the world.

The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s saw a series of events and a plethora of organisations that strove to undo the disenfranchisement of Blacks in the United States following in the footsteps of...
previous activists. Organising boycotts, protests, sit-ins, Freedom rides, marches, non-violent and violent action, and court battles were part of the strategy of civil resistance in favour of improving life for African Americans. It was ‘the intersection of art and activism’ (Levesque, 2014). The movement was made up of all layers of the Black community, and supported by the American-Jewish community and white sympathisers. From the Civil Rights movement emerged the Black Power movement that was prominent in the 1960s and 1970s, with an accompanying Black Arts movement that served as the Black Power movement’s ‘aesthetic and spiritual sister’ (Neal, 2000, p.236). In 1968 Larry Neal claimed: ‘The new aesthetics is mostly predicted on an ethics which asks the question: Whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or the oppressors?’ (Neal, 1968, p.29). And, in the same year, Ron Karenga stated that ‘all Black art, irregardless [sic] of any technical requirements, must have three basic characteristics which make it revolutionary. In brief, it must be functional, collective and committed’ (Cunningham, 1968, p.5). The Black Power movement gave rise to the Black is Beautiful movement celebrating black skin, hair and facial features rejecting standards of white beauty. This development generated a celebration of blackness notably with Afro/natural hairstyles, name changes and handshakes. In this problem-space, culture took the role of politics among those whose motivation it was to bring together ethics and aesthetics. This development acted as a link between diverse political strategies and articulated a new black consciousness (Van Deburg, 1992, p.190). From a common ancestral past, the Black Power movement used all forms of expression to advocate for self-determination and self-definition. The American problem-space that shifted through time from resignation to the situation of the Atlanta Compromise, according to which Southern Blacks were supposed to submit to white political rule as second-class citizens, and then further into the era of Black Power, also shifted the horizons of what was possible for African Americans. They found a way beyond the situation of being addressed by diminutive names such as ‘boy’, and of being told to look up to whiteness, spelling out this change through the declarations ‘I am a Man’ and ‘Black is Beautiful’. The horizons of becoming full citizens and what one could do with Black Power produced two notable ‘renaissances’ with a plethora of artists operating in diverse cultural, public and political spaces.

Across the Atlantic in Europe, Stuart Hall, has described the British situation for Black people after World War II, as the first of ‘three moments in post-war black visual arts in the UK’. In Hall’s 2004 speech at London’s Conway Hall, he underlined that there was ‘no single “movement” here, evolving teleologically, to which, say, all the artists … can be said to belong’, but rather moments in which different kinds of elements, generations and types of works converge (2006, p.3). He spoke of the ‘last colonials’ who were born in the early 1900s and came to Britain after WWII in the 1950s and 1960s ‘on the eve of decolonization – following, in the Caribbean case, the political upheavals of the 1930s, or in India and Africa the rise of the independence movements’ (p.4). This ‘first’ generation entered Britain to fulfil their artistic ambitions and to participate in the heady atmosphere of the most advanced centres of artistic innovation at that time, producing distinctive writers and artists. They came as subjects of the Modern movement with the ‘promise of decolonization’ (p.5), firing their ambition and sense of themselves as ‘modern persons’, a conceptualisation that ‘liberated them from any lingering sense of inferiority’ (p.5). Indeed, ‘“modern art” was seen by them as an international creed, fully consistent with anti-colonialism which was regarded as intrinsic to a modern consciousness’ (p.6). Their ‘horizon of the future’ was independence and a new era of progress in which ‘sights and sounds, cultures and tradition, histories and memories of their places of origin …’ were seen ‘within a modern vision-field, via the modern consciousness of a certain “de-territorialisation” of colour and form’ (p.15). Such artists and writers were seeking that vision of ‘progress and freedom which would be the basis for a new, post-colonial culture as well as enhancing the individual’s capacity for creative innovation’ (p.15). In the late 1960s, Black Power jumped the Atlantic and was adopted in Britain. This intersected with Michael X and the London Free School’s involvement in the ‘Carnival of the Poor’ that developed from a ‘jump up’ street party for children in 1966 to an organised strengthening of community cohesion in 1967 (Notting Hill Carnival, 2015). By the 1970s this first generation, who for a while were ‘central to the avant-garde of the day’ (Hall, 2006, p.16), became disenchanted due to ‘institutional indifference’ (Araeen, 2001, p.95) and the shift in attitudes towards Modernism, among other things. The situation changed and politically the ‘shadow of race’ fully entered the discussion by the mid-1970s (Hall, 2006, p.16).

It is with this horizon of race rather than anti-colonialism that the ‘second generation – the first “post colonials” – who were born in Britain’ emerged (Hall, 2006, p.1). Political and artistically active artists stormed the scene in a reaction to the extent of racial
discrimination. They pioneered the Black Art Movement and the creative explosion of the 1980s, and were ‘anti-racist, culturally relativist and identity-driven.’ They were politically polemical, collage-based artists embracing the figural and more subjective strategy of ‘putting the self in the frame’ (p.1). Who are we, where do we come from and where do we really belong were central questions in this period of identity politics, which surfaced after the 1970s. This new problem-space in which not anti-colonialism but race and identity were defining the ‘moment’ produced a polemical and politicized art: a highly graphic, iconicographic art of line and montage, cut-out and collage, image and slogan; the “message” often appearing too pressing, too immediate, too literal, to brook formal delay and, instead, breaking insistently into “writing” (p.17). Black Art became a tool to ‘assist in the struggle for liberation’ (Chambers, 1981). Hall argues that:

the emergence of the identity question constituted a compelling and productive ‘horizon’ for artists: not so much the celebration of an essential identity fixed in time and ‘true’ to its origins, but rather … what we would now call ‘the production of a new, black subject’. And since that is a conception of identity and subjectivity which can only be constituted within, rather than outside, representation, the ‘answers’ in practice which music and the visual arts provided were absolutely critical. (2006, p.19)

What Hall is describing is the performative side of identity that was brought out in a new Pan-African diasporic imaginary … redeeming through image and sound the breaches and terrors of a broken history (p.18). An example of this would be Bob Marley’s ‘roots’ reggae with its contemporary masquerade as traditional music. Through different practices of this era that made central the ‘black body’ as a visible object, a foreign body, a site of excavation, a canvas, a point of convergence, a gendered body, a sexual body, the body as subject rather than object, its belonging was put into question. In his essay ‘New ethnicities’, Hall explained that there is a ‘diversity of subjective positions social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category “black”’. Black is ‘essentially a political and cultural constructed category’ (Hall, 1996, p.443). The result was an enormous diversity of meanings around blackness and what Hall called ‘the end of the essential black subject’ during the 1990s (Hall, 2006, p.20).

Taking note of developments in the United States and Hall’s account of Britain, I would like to draw out some crucial distinctions surrounding the situation in the Netherlands, in particular efforts to define the contemporary Afro-Dutch history of art and its accompanying practices of belonging, identity and identification. In the Netherlands mass immigration of people of African descent, including those from Suriname in the Caribbean began in the 1970s. Already the timing of those migrations signals a discrepancy of generation, differing from the main decades of migratory movement to the United Kingdom from its colonies and former colonies in the Caribbean. Unlike in the US and the Caribbean there was not a demonstrable Black culture in the Netherlands that they could connect to. Black history, taught as part of national history, was never part of the school education system. When the topic did arise, the history of slavery and its legacies were discussed only in the context of the United States, never in relation to the Netherlands. Consequently, many Dutch people understood that Black people had come from the colonies without realising the underlying history of slavery and its consequences. Even though the first generations of adults were experiencing discrimination, and issues of adaptation and integration, many of my generation grew up believing in meritocracy. As a child, little incidents occurred that challenged this idea but to my mind, there was nothing that would unseat the power of merit and personality for exercising one’s entitlement to a place in society.

There was an earlier generation of contemporary artists that tackled issues of migration, integration and subjectivity. The successful writer Edgar Cairo (1948 – 2000) is a great example of a Dutch thinker who was trying to enhance the individual’s capacity for the creative production of a sense of self. His book Ik ga dood om jullie hoofd (1977) takes its title from a phrase in Suriname’s lingua franca, Sranan Tongo, meaning ‘I care for you deeply’ (literally, ‘I am dying because of your head’). The book is a collection of weekly columns, originally published in several newspapers, that discusses the issues of discrimination and adaptation experienced by Surinamese people. His style of writing often takes Sranan Tongo and translates it directly into Dutch as is often done by people of Afro-Surinamese descent. Through it he demonstrates the already existing hybridity of the Dutch language and advocates for acceptance of one’s own cultural and linguistic specificity as part of the integration process. Cairo is one of the first generation of Dutch artists who today prove to be a great inspiration for contemporary Afro-Dutch creative practitioners such as myself. The point he makes in the book anticipated the current usage of translated Surinamese words and expression in contemporary Dutch language.
By the time Music Television arrived on the European continent in the early 1980s, the majority of Afro-Europeans were still only of the first generation. The youth culture that developed found many of its tools through MTV, starting perhaps with Michael Jackson’s *Thriller* (1982). It was the aesthetics of music videos that provided examples and the basis for activating a creative subjectivity that could integrate the creole and the Dutch. My peers and I, emulating televised American (Black) street coolness, produced a 1980s sense of self through expressions (dance, rap, graffiti, language, posturing), signs (graffiti tags) and other countercultural symbols. Central to the production of this sense of self after this initial period is the development of media through the digital. Internet penetration starting in the early nineties brought other diaspora experiences closer; Afro-Europeans could now place their experiences in a much larger African diasporic context. Embodied experience found resonance in what were until then hidden diaspora stories being told elsewhere. Moving into the new century, growing Internet literacy stimulated the creative and intellectual production of a budding Afro-awareness that was native to Europe. In the Netherlands, Internet penetration at home grew from 61% in 2003 to 95% in 2014 (Eurostat, 2015). This development provided the tools for self-naming strategies that have either embraced or denied the more globally circulating representations of diaspora identity, bringing out the areas of difference but also important similarities. For present-day Afro-Dutch artists, mediating a sense of self through the digital has held the promise of challenging the status quo, and through newly found strategies establishing ways of being Dutch, Afro and Afropean.

Apart from the Internet, the government also played a role in the process of Afro-awareness with the ‘cultuurnota’ (cultural policy report) that is issued every four years. Since 1992, the idea of cultural identity has been incorporated into this report. The cultuurnota that followed it (in 1996) advanced the idea that ‘cultural diversity has become a reality and there is a growing urgency for active exchange between diverse cultural traditions’ (Bleeker, 2005, p.42). It was in 2000 that cultural diversity based on target groups (including women, youth and people outside of the major cities) became one of the priorities of the art policy. It was here that a significant change occurred because culturally diverse artists seemed to receive preferential treatment and they were looked at askance by their white colleagues. As one artist told me in private: ‘All of a sudden we were not just good artists, but good because we were Black’. Such artists already knew they were Afro-Dutch but now they were made so explicitly through arts policy. The cultuurnota that followed in 2004 also spoke about the importance of cultural diversity, but it rejected the target group approach with separate measures and a focus on cooperation between institutes (Bleeker, 2005, p.42). It was in this situation that artists Remy Jungerman, Michael Tedja and Gillion Grantsaan applied for the Intendant Cultural Diversity project (by Fonds BKVB now merged with the Mondriaan Fund) with the Wakaman Project (2006-10). The project included a dialogue that questioned ‘the issues they came across as non-Western artists living in the West when it comes to categorization, recognition and interpretation’ (Mondriaanfonds, 2010). They were looking for a theoretical framework in which the specific visual language and symbolism used by artists with a Surinamese background could be placed. Their approach to cultural diversity and the vision carried by a range of artists resulted in three publications: *Wakaman: Drawing Lines, Connecting Dots* (Grantsaan and Jungerman, 2009), *Hosselen* (Tedja, 2009) and *Eat the Frame!* (Tedja, 2009). I argue that this moment and the published record that came out of it, are essential for understanding present-day Afro-Dutch visual arts, in particular the ways that artists have been dealing through their practices with a growing Afro-awareness in the Netherlands.

By 2010, it could be said that this Afro-awareness had grown into a modest movement, producing books, exhibitions and a voice of protest. Due to Internet saturation and the use of social media, most artistic and political expressions gained wider support than ever before among both the black and white communities. The desire for ‘Black self-discovery and race vindication’ (Anderson, 2007, p.302) produced even more protests, non-violent actions and court cases. Annual events such as Natural Black Hair and African Homecoming (2012–14), stressing consciousness, style and fashion, drew large crowds of mostly young people who joined the debate on contemporary aesthetics in a global Afro-Chic mode. All these different culture makers have together worked towards forms of cultural emancipation: their sense of self as a Dutch development of their Afro subjectivity is acknowledged to have shaped national culture in the Netherlands. This is a line of cultural resistance with the aim to self-actualise and self-define. The different and conflicting views on how to reach this goal have brought about wide debate in the Afro-Dutch community.

In 2010, I began to understand this issue better. With the rise of the borrowed political term Black, taken as a provisional self-identifier within the Afro-Dutch artistic community, and given the aim to engage critically with,
Figure 3.2: Charl Landvreugd, movt nr. 4; Mill Stone Ruff, 2010. Photograph, C-print, size variable. (Courtesy of the artist)
what I then called, ‘a Black-Dutch consciousness in the visual arts’, Patricia Kaersenhout and I organised the debate ‘Am I Black Enough’, taking the phrase from the eponymous song by Billy Paul recorded in 1972. The question was asked: How do cultural producers contribute towards a broader Black awareness? (Landvreugd, 2010). The conversation evolved into a discussion about the usefulness of the word Black and the practice of making Blackness explicit within a work of art, as well as the dilemma over whether to raise the matter of Blackness at all in the professional environment for creativity. The general feeling was that drawing attention to Blackness, unless one is specifically asked to do so, was harmful for career opportunities both in an artistic setting and the wider world of work. Cultural practitioners felt trapped between the private experience of Afro-Europeanness and the public expression thereof. We felt that Afro-awareness remained a private matter with little bearing on the public sphere. The way to change that was by choosing to intervene through the use of strategies drawn from the historical problematisation of race and diaspora, and adapt these to our personal situation. These tools were considered useful to define and work through our problem-space by confronting the blind spots within representation and foregrounding cultural practices. We have advocated taking an approach that considers the economic and political dimensions of artists’ working lives, as well as the discussions that the artist may choose to enter, in those cases where there is a motivation to become critically engaged or seek empowerment through public debate. There was, overall in our project, a desire to break free from the confining circumstances and silence that we encountered in the Netherlands.

What is at stake here is not only how to produce the contemporary ‘political and cultural constructed category’ (Hall, 1996, p.443) of Black and Afro-Dutch, but also how to resist and overcome its limitations. Some artists have embraced the formation of this category, while others, like myself, insist that it fails to capture their individual experience and personal subject positions. This does not mean that embracing and rejecting are mutually exclusive. It all seems to depend on the need for strategic essentialism in situations that forward ethnic relations. So far there is an unresolved push and pull between the impulse to foreground the ‘black body’ (meaning all non-white bodies) in the national discourse while holding on to the notion of meritocracy that puts no such emphasis on a racialised or ethnicised subjectivity. The objective to balance these is hindered by the language that is available. In the case of Afro-ethnicities, the problem lies in the terms that originate from the American and British responses to cultural resistance, since these are not native to the Dutch context (see also Keaton et al., 2012, for how this plays out in France). Do questions about the relationship between art and difference in the Netherlands (or the wider European mainland) deserve the same type of answers as elsewhere?

Through processes of translation to the Netherlands, the terms of diasporic sameness and difference come to lose, as well as gain, meaning. The more established terminology in the US and UK needs to be translated into Dutch, both linguistically and culturally, in order to make real sense to us. This is not always easy, because a term such as Black (when this indicates racial difference) does not necessarily apply as a Dutch cultural signifier.

Rather than producing a ‘carbon copy of equivalence or the linear projection of progress’ (Hantel, 2013, p.110), this process of translation is more expansive, akin to Glissant’s ‘spiral retelling’. ‘The move from translation to spiral retelling undermines the illusion of global translatability and the possibility of pure transparency because we move through and across scales only by way of the opacity of others and their language’ (Hantel, 2013, p.112). ‘A spiral retelling, then, is the movement out to the multiple from this economy of the One, but it is rhizomatic in the sense of producing a rootedness in the world’ (p.111). In this sense the developments in the Netherlands are not lagging behind on other diaspora spaces but are rather (re)telling certain parts of the diasporic story from a specific sensibility and geographical location.

The most prevalent one of these sensibilities is that the public discourse in the Netherlands is framed around culture and the national idea (self-image) of non-racist racial equivalence. This idea of equivalence is anchored in the constitution and has resulted in a society where historically, tolerance for others tends to take priority over actual full acceptance. Perceived ethnic or racial otherness is discussed as cultural difference post WWII. In this context, to use race-based terminology, when addressing culture, is thought to be undesirable, since it contradicts and upsets the national self-image of non-racist equivalence. To speak of race as an Afro person in the Netherlands is to point directly to the blind spot that has emerged after the Second World War out of the legacies of colonialism. Suggesting that racism may be at work here serves to point to nationalism in the form of an assumed Dutch cultural superiority. Consequently, mentioning race and racism at all is thought to hinder open communication and results in fierce national opposition. As a result, issues that are spoken about as having a basis in the
problem of race in other parts of the African diaspora, were, until recent developments, spoken about as culturally motivated in the Netherlands. The fact that the issue of whether the Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) character is blackface and should change its appearance was raised as a racist phenomenon connected to a post-colonial problem. It resulted in violent opposition by the majority. This line of questioning contradicts the non-racist national self-image and is a good example of a race-based discourse being translated with extreme difficulty into an environment where culture-centred discourse prevails. What it does is refute this self-image and simultaneously question who decides what Dutch culture is and will be.

Afro-Dutch artists and activists are actively changing Dutch culture with their art. One such artist is the popular singer Typhoon who was invited to sing for the King, the Queen and their guests during the opening ceremony for the celebration of 200 years of the Kingdom in 2013. As Typhoon puts it: ‘Zonder donker kan het licht zichzelf niet kennen, vandaar de onwetendheid rond 5 december’ (‘Without darkness, light cannot know itself, hence the ignorance around 5 December’) (Typhoon, 2014). He was referring to Black Pete and the annual Saint Nicholas celebrations, in a reminder of the larger society’s unwillingness to face up to its colonial past. In this song, the artist speaks of the greatness, the accomplishments and culture of the Netherlands and not about race. He reminds us to keep the power with the people and release fear of change because we are judged by where we are going and not by where we were (Typhoon, 2014).

It is important then to try to avoid the impression that opting for a focus on race, in a context dominated by attention to culture, would repeat the steps of political progress made elsewhere in the African diaspora. Not only would this carry a view of the Netherlands as lagging behind the wider Atlantic, but it would remove the possibility for alternatives worked on through our local circumstances. Rather than pressing for a change of debate from culture to race, I see possibilities for reframing the discussion on cultural tolerance for other ethnicities to one of cultural acceptance. This may occur in a rapidly changing national culture in an effort to artistically include diverse ethnicities in our national identity. It is here where I would advocate for working on a customised language that builds on an existing cultural base and opens onto more transformative avenues for the production of Afro subjectivity. How such tactics function and how they enable a deeper exploration of the idea of Afropea is a central concern of my ongoing research for which this article offers a first foray.

Afropea
While discussing the last of the three moments in the development of art among Black British practitioners, Stuart Hall proclaimed that ‘the end of the essential black subject’ was fully palpable by the decade of the 1990s (Hall, 1996, p.443). This third moment, he suggested, was the least politicised of all: ‘artistically neo-conceptual, multi-media and installation-based’ (Hall, 2006, p.2), a time in Britain when ‘“black” by itself – in the age of refugees, asylum seekers and global dispersal – will no longer do’ (p.13). This sense of going beyond a single, essential Blackness emerged from the specificity of a problem-space that British artists have contended with, and this idea is echoed in the United States by claims for the uses of a new category of ‘post-Black’ culture – as coined by Thelma Golden and Glen Ligon. In such post-Black art, race and racism are brought into view while simultaneously the concept rejects any interaction between them. Certain artists may be adamant about not being labelled ‘Black’, yet their work is steeped, through deep interest, in the task of redefining notions of blackness and making them necessarily more complex and contemporary (Golden, 2001, p.14). Effectively the term ‘post-Black’ tries to move beyond the deadlock of Black-and-White relations in the field of visual representation.

For all its promise, however, the aspiration to move beyond an essential blackness, beyond the double-bind of Black self-representation, is still contained within the specificities of British and American problem-space. A category such as Continental Afro-European Art is distinct from these conditions, since its art and identities have not yet been properly described or canonised. To make this happen, the salient theoretical frameworks and art histories that have characterised such counter-modernity during the past century need to be brought under further scrutiny to ensure that the local gets the chance to develop on its own terms. The Netherlands has moved from barely any Afro-awarness to full-blown artistic activism in as little as ten years. All the steps of vindication, emancipation, representation and the drive beyond representation connected to wider Atlantic problem-spaces are being made simultaneously on the European mainland, constituting what is effectively a new sort of problem-space which holds the potential for different outcomes. In order to grasp the significance of such developments in the Dutch situation, I recommend the term Afropea – exploiting its analytical and imaginative potential as a term that can be filled with meaning drawn from the actual experience of Dutch cultural change. The constructive paradox of Afropea is that it embraces Afro-ness while speaking of it not as race or ethnicity...
but as culture. It is diaspora in a self-referential manner, meaning a full awareness of its embodied Afro-genealogy, while confirming cultural native-ness to Europe. It is space and subjectivity at the same time. This results in artists operating in different historical diaspora problem-spaces simultaneously while claiming their shared humanity.

It is here where three ideas, the British end of the essential black subject, the American post-Black and the continental Afropea diverge. They are concerned with the same problem of going beyond representation but originate from different problem-spaces that yield different results.

As discussed earlier, Afro-European and Afropean both contain the word Afro and can pose a positioning problem when thinking about the paradox in the working environment of Dutch artists. Afro-European and Afropean are an indication of social and geographical borders that can limit the agency of artists. Current developments in the Netherlands entail a movement from Afro to Black while, using historical tools, asking the question of how useful it is to become Black in the twentieth-century, anti-colonial, Civil Rights sense of the word. Drawing new attention to the Afropea concept may bring certain benefits: inhabiting a zone of separation from the existing art discourse on blackness, while establishing a novel category that seeks to confirms its nativeness in Dutch and diaspora-cultural discourse. As a term that finds relevance on the European mainland, Afropea points toward a meaningful articulation of the Black diaspora – elaborating its own powerful vocabulary in order to imagine an alternative future for the shared continental condition.

**Bibliography**


28 Typhoon (2014) ‘Van De Regen Naar De Zon’ [song], *Lobi Da Basi* [music album], Netherlands, Universal Music LLC.


