

24

Call and Response: Conversations with Three Women Artists on Afropean Decoloniality

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Since 2012, when the first BE.BOP. BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS took place in Berlin at the Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, I have been making a special emphasis on enabling the invited artists to speak about their work on their own terms. BE.BOP is a generative curatorial script envisioned to allow each participant to recreate it following their own connection with Spirit. As a safe space for healing colonial and imperial wounds, BE.BOP is a coalition that thinks through the body while facing what Gloria Wekker (2016) has aptly described as “*white* innocence.”¹ Established in Berlin with an international impact through presentations in major cities across three continents (Amersfoort, Amsterdam, Cadiz, Copenhagen, Dakar, Durban, Durham NC, Graz, Kassel, Johannesburg, La Habana, London, Madrid, Malmö, Middelburg, New York, Santo Domingo, Stockholm, Visby, Windhoek), BE.BOP is committed to building public discussions in which neglected storytelling and histories achieve a greater visibility. BE.BOP engages collectively in undoing the asymmetries of knowledge brought about by colonialism. It aims at empowering the disempowered in mainstream silencing of histories and bringing forward coloniality, the darker side of modernity, and the consequences that are still present in this day and age are no exception.

At BE.BOP knowledge is understood as a collective creation, a collective healing process. Parallel to this, BE.BOP has engaged European audiences in intricate detail with the outrage generated by Black/African Diaspora peoples when confronting a racist world order structured along the lines of coloniality. We have examined through a myriad of narratives (for example, the racializing legacies of the Enlightenment) how European aesthetics became “universal.” A significant proportion of the participants are from the Caribbean Diaspora and, as do the rest of those invited, work mainly with moving image and performance. We have also de-linked from modernity’s hierarchical modus operandi by means of sharing the space on the same level. During our discussions, artists, scholars, and activists have the same amount of time available to present their ideas, projects, and works. Resonating with BE.BOP’s collective knowledge creation stamina, in the following conversations we shall hear directly from three women artists from the Caribbean Diaspora living in Europe how they have chosen to dismantle the hegemonic “supremacy” of modernity by means of confronting its violent racializing gaze, among other similarly radical undertakings.

My curatorial preference for performance art and film stems from an understanding of art practice as inseparable from the circumstances where it is gestated. Caribbean Diaspora poet, scholar, and feminist Audre Lorde, considered by many as the founding mother of Black Consciousness in Germany and the rest of Europe, reminds us:

Over the last few years, writing a novel on tight finances, I came to appreciate the enormous differences in the material demands between poetry and prose. As we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women. [...] The actual requirements to produce the visual arts also help determine, along class lines, whose art is whose.²

Artists working with performance are utterly aware of how the art market considers their practice as essentially non-commercial, automatically categorizing them as less worthy of attention. Their persistence is a testimony of the intrinsic need we share as humans to communicate directly with our bodies; a narration imperative materializes in their practice against all odds. There are too many untold stories to be shared, and the safe space of performance, in direct contact with the audience, provides the ideal habitat for these much needed dialogues. This ethical imperative is particularly remarkable in the case of Black Diaspora artists in Europe who, in addition to this a priori devaluation, must face the corresponding labeling of their work as “foreign” or “non-European,” categories that are ingrained in the foundational racism of the Enlightenment and its invention of modern aesthetics.

Given that European philosophy has been prolific in the politics of confusion, namely the interchangeable usage of terms such as “modernism,” “modernization,” and “modernity” to designate similar but different phenomena, I will start by clarifying how the terms “modernity,” “coloniality,” and “decoloniality” are being applied today by those who first discussed it in the Americas, based on the seminal essay by Aníbal Quijano “Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad,” published in different versions between 1989 and 1992 and reproduced in the volume *Anibal Quijano. Textos Fundacionales*, compiled by Zulma Palermo and Pablo Quintero.³

Quijano established that “decolonization” goes beyond the Cold War’s understanding of the term as the removal of colonial and imperial powers in favor of an independent nation-state, and aims at a more radical endeavor: to completely dismantle the entire knowledge system that justifies and supports this modern/colonial state and its control of the economy and of subjectivities. In other words, the differentiation between the terms “colonialism” and “coloniality” became a marker, an epistemic bullet aimed at stating loud and clear that colonialism continues after formal decolonization; this mutation is called “coloniality.”

Considering modernity as inseparable from coloniality, Walter Mignolo (2008) exposed how the rhetoric of modernity was always inseparable from the exploitation and eventual extermination of entire populations, the markers of European colonization.⁴ “Progress” and promises of “bringing civilization” were the masquerade of an economic enterprise based on murderous colonial systems. There are no formulas for unmasking modernity/coloniality, as each context demands its own strategies. In my case, my interest as a Caribbean Diaspora writer based in Berlin has been to expose Europe’s colonial amnesia specifically with regards to the Berlin–Africa Conference (1884–1885) and the Herero and Nama Genocide (1904–1907), in my scholarly work

and curatorial projects. The relationship between citizenship and coloniality with regards to Black presence in Europe is a key preoccupation in these undertakings. “We are here because you were there” is a self-explanatory dictum on this matter.⁵

The unmasking of modernity/coloniality becomes decoloniality when it goes beyond exposing those truths to de-linking from them, to creating spaces where narratives are shared and legacies become re-enacted from a decolonial perspective. As Rolando Vázquez explains:

Unlike contemporary art that is ensnared in the search for the newest abstraction, Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis seeks to bring to the fore those other forms of sensing and inhabiting the world that have been subsumed under the long history of this western-centered world, of the modern/colonial order. In my view, decolonial artists are not seeking innovation and abstraction for the sake of it, they are not seeking the recognition of the contemporary art world; rather, they are bringing to light through their practices, through their bodies and communities the histories that have been denied, the forms of sensing and inhabiting the world that have been disdained or erased.⁶

In addition to this decolonial perspective, the choice of bringing together artists from the Caribbean Diaspora in Europe is a result of my own frustration with the lack of knowledge, particularly within the Black Community itself, about the Caribbean as a stronghold of Black liberation narratives globally. Freedom fighter Malcolm X is vigorously conclusive on how Caribbean liberation narratives are clearly detectable beyond the region, in the African continent itself:

[M]ost people in the Caribbean area are still proud that they are Black, proud of the African blood and their heritage, and I think this type of pride was instilled in my mother, and she instilled it in us too, to the degree that she could. [...] In fact she was an active member of the Marcus Garvey movement. [...] It was Marcus Garvey’s philosophy of Pan-Africanism that initiated the entire freedom movement, which brought about the independence of African nations and had it not been for Marcus Garvey and the foundation laid by him, you would find no independent nations in the Caribbean today. [...] All the freedom movements that are taking place in America were initiated by the work and teachings of Marcus Garvey.⁷

In the best possible continental European scenario, when these contributions are honored, this recognition fails to highlight the common Caribbean legacy that unites them. Aimé Césaire, Marcus Garvey, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, Audre Lorde, Bob Marley, and Gloria Wekker are always the first names I invoke to conjure my frustration.

The designation Call and Response describes the antiphony effect characteristic to African musical legacies in which the audience responds to a leading voice at systematic intervals. I have chosen to use this model of interaction accordingly, by posing the same questions to Teresa María Díaz Nerio, Jeannette Ehlers, and Patricia Kaersenhout. The result is a powerful testimony of how the legacy of those inspirational Caribbean figures of Black Consciousness in Europe is growing stronger, expanding the territory of what Jamaican writer, sociologist, and activist Erna Brodber has described as the “Continent of Black Consciousness.”⁸

On healing coloniality and collective knowledge creation: A dialogue with teresa maría díaz nerio

Teresa María Díaz Nerio moved from Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic to Amsterdam in 2002 to study at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie and later at the Dutch Art Institute. Her practice and research is currently focused on performance art, Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis and Black Consciousness from a womanist perspective. Historical re-enactments and transfigurations are also central to Díaz Nerio's engaging approach to time-based practice. From the dictatorial legacies of her native Dominican Republic, in *Throne of Gold* and *Trujillo's Island* (2007), for example, Díaz Nerio echoes the narratives of a history that she initially heard from historical and familiar accounts and then spent considerable time researching. In these two performances, Díaz Nerio comments on the hyper-masculinity embedded in an autocratic persona. Avoiding oversimplifications by mimicry or caricature, these portrayals rely on a hieratic mode that is also present in the rigidity of *Hommage à Sara Bartman*, a South African Khoisan woman who was exhibited in Europe in the early 1800s in the context of dehumanizing freak shows popular in that period (Figure 24.1). In 2002, Baartman was acknowledged as a national heroine thanks to the activism of Black feminists and the direct intervention of Nelson Mandela. Frozen in a landscape of epic dimensions, these historical reverberations are also accompanied by a meticulous



Figure 24.1 *Hommage à Sara Bartman*, 2013, performance by Teresa María Díaz Nerio. BE.BOP 2013, Black Europe Body Politics. Decolonizing the “Cold” War. Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin. Photo by Wagner Carvalho. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/55443738@N08/8988481918/in/album-72157634016878405/>, accessed 16 November 2018.

manual work. Very often I have been asked if this image is a sculpture, and indeed the artist created this costume with clear three-dimensional intentions. The polarized, gendered dramatizations at both ends of the spectrum, on the one side the despotic hyper-virility and on the other the tragically exploited nudity of Sara Baartman – objectified to the point of absurdity – find a different resolution in Díaz Nerio’s latest work, *Ni “mamita,” Ni “mulatita”* (2013). This lecture performance, based on the hyper-sexualized “mulata” and the “faithful servant,” or “mamita,” illustrates how these figures emerged in Cuba during colonialism, often becoming symbols of nationalist renderings after independence.

By challenging these heteronormative parameters, Díaz Nerio provides a much-needed space for knowledge creation from a Black woman’s perspective, honoring at the same time African ancestral devotions. In her performance at Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, as part of BE.BOP 2014. SPIRITUAL REVOLUTIONS AND THE “SCRAMBLE” FOR AFRICA, she was playing the clapsticks, an instrument of Cuban rumba that marks the rhythm, while the audience took their seats. Dressed in yellow, the color that represents Ochún, the goddess of rivers and gold, she rang bells at different moments to invoke the *loas*, the ancestral spirits invoked by Haitian and Dominican Voodoo practitioners or “servers” as they call themselves. Towards the end, as a final decolonizing⁹ gesture, Díaz Nerio removed from her neck an *iruke*, a consecrated horse tail amulet used in the Cuban Yoruba religion, in this case made from her own hair, sprinkled with gold leaves and a *nazar boncuğu*, a Turkish evil eye pendant. By swinging this intercultural amulet above the heads of the audience and whispering a protection blessing, a moment of intimate communion materialized in the name of some of the spiritualities that inform her daily life in Amsterdam. In this interview, Teresa María Díaz Nerio explains the theoretical, spiritual, and emotional aspects of her work, emphasizing the role that collective knowledge creation plays in her current projects.

What is your interpretation of the Colonial Wound? What role does healing play in your artistic practice?

More than an interpretation it is a fact, the legacy of colonialism is the incarnation of the Colonial Wound. I dwell in the inescapable ancestral memory of that fact. Healing comes as a daily act of survival and therein my artistic practice is essentially a healing process. The practice becomes a total acknowledgement of the strategies and tools needed to heal from the effects and after effects, that is colonialism and coloniality, and the wounds inflicted to being, nature, knowledge, and the legacy of genocide, the systematic destruction of our memories and bodies, our ancestral embodied knowledge. Therein healing covers in-depth research and reenactments, dialogues, journeys, and a practice which is a learning process on listening, involving patience, and working towards recovering.

In your own words, what is Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis?

Decolonial Aesthesis is the possibility to rethink the colonial matrix of power as the all-encompassing distortion of the pluriversal and its effects on our senses and

sensibilities. It dissects aesthetics, decolonizing it and embracing the feminine, the Sister Outsider,¹⁰ it is a communal endeavor that requires delinking and healing.

How was your first encounter with the “Continent of Black Consciousness” in the art world, and in art education?

Back in 2007, when I started to research on the performing Black body and was confronted with ethnological fairs, vaudeville, minstrelsy, etc. I came across the performance works and writings of Coco Fusco and also her collaborations with Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Two pieces which were important to me were *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* (1992) and Fusco’s collaboration with Nao Bustamante in *Stuff* from 1996 to 1999. Meeting Sithabile Mlotshwa, a Zimbabwean artist and curator, in December 2007, was a great moment of mutual understanding, and later taking part in a residency she organized in 2008 in Arnhem, the Netherlands, where I met amazing artists like Jamaican UK ceramist Kevin Dalton-Johnson and environmentally concerned installation artist Bright Eke, a Nigerian living in Los Angeles, among others, has been a great process of socialization with Black and Black Diaspora artists. A turning point in my encounter with the “Continent of Black Consciousness” has been our collaboration since 2009, and specially taking part in your conceptual and curatorial project BE.BOP. BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS (2012, 2013, 2014, 2016) where I have encountered many artists,

Is the experience of learning and practicing performance art in Europe as a Black artist different from the US, the Caribbean, or the UK? What is your connection to different networks of Black Diaspora artists? Could you comment briefly on how you perceive the nuances between each context?

Yes, I believe it is definitely different. Studying art in the Netherlands I was barely confronted with Black teachers or students. I think there were only five of us in the whole school, at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie. There were no other Black artists doing performance, in my whole year we were very few, mostly women who focused our work on performance. That was back in 2007. Whilst at the master program at the Dutch Art Institute, I received studio visits from or heard talks by artists like Otobong Nkanga (Belgium-based) and Michael Uwemedimo, Anjalika Sagar, Kodwo Eshun (UK-based), and others. Practicing art in the Netherlands as a Black performance artist hasn’t been easy. My experience as learning and practicing art concentrates in mainland Europe, but it seems obvious, maybe I am wrong, that being a Black performance artist in the US there is more of a framework, more support, grants, and more of a community. The same goes for the UK. Before leaving for the Netherlands, in Santo Domingo, I was surrounded by artists, most of them Black mestizas/os yet I never met a performance artist. That was back in 2001–2002. Currently I am mainly in contact with other Black Diaspora artists through BE.BOP. Currently in Santo Domingo, I am in conversation with Jorge Pineda, an amazing artist I met thanks to curator Nancy Hoffmann, as we both participated in an exhibition on Caribbean art entitled *Who More Sci-Fi Than Us* that took place in the Netherlands in 2012, where I was invited by Quinsy Gario in the context of your lecture on Decolonial Aesthetics.

How relevant is it to give these nuances a national inflection such as a “German” or “Dutch” Black Diaspora? How would you rather frame the question? As European Black Diaspora? As Afropean Decoloniality? As Black Diaspora *in* Europe? Or would you rather frame it as Black Diaspora *and* Europe? Please explain your choice. Also, please feel free to add your own suggestions.

The context and historical conditioning of Black Diaspora in different nation-states within the matrix of modernity/coloniality is indeed of importance. Yet, embracing decoloniality and denaturalizing coloniality needs an international effort, that is both local and “global” recognition of each other’s work, aims, needs, etc. It is not up to me to judge how a specific group of Black Diaspora peoples decide to name themselves, yet I find it difficult to understand the necessity of some groups to identify themselves with Europe. The most reasonable choice of naming, which will both contain people like me, who do not identify with Europe, as in identities-*in*-politics, and people that for one reason or another do, would be Black Diaspora and Europe, as it includes Black Diaspora everywhere, it unites us and questions our ongoing historical, economical, and social relationship with Western Europe.

There is a long history of performances of Blackness in Europe in the framework of coloniality. How do you approach this legacy in your work? Do you see a common thread with other practitioners in Europe in this regard?

My piece *Hommage à Sara Bartman* (2007) deals directly with how the Black body has been dehumanized as an excuse for empire and colonialism in Western Europe. That is, how the *white* gaze was supposed to decide on the humanity of Blacks. Simultaneously, I am saying: NO, you don’t decide who I am. My humanity, my being, is beyond anything you can imagine. It is important to clarify that we make history together, so I believe that this piece speaks volumes about our “relationship.” My current investigation into the “mamita” and “mulatita” stereotypes of Caribbean women in the cinema and other media of the 1940s and 1950s in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Mexico, which for the moment has resulted in the lecture performance *Ni “mamita” Ni “mulatita”* (2013) hopes to grow into a research on Black Diaspora women in Europe and the stereotypical places set up for them as domestic and sexual workers. Jeannette Ehlers’ performance *Whip it Good* (2013) is one of the works I have seen that more strongly personifies and gives sound to the unspeakable, the torture the Black body had/has to suffer is now inflicted to a white canvas. The whip hits the canvas leaving a black mark, which inscribes itself again and again. She then invites the audience to “whip it good.” Also Patricia Kaersenhout’s performance *Stitches of Power, Stitches of Sorrow* (2014) deals with colonial legacies and African women’s bodies, inviting the audience to stitch the image of an “Amazon of Dahomey” carrying a rifle, whilst a projection on the floor shows a Black girl going out of a water well (Figure 24.2). The sound is that of Angela Davis defiantly answering a question on violence; after delineating some episodes of violence against Blacks in her neighborhood, she states: “That’s why when someone asks me about violence I just find it incredible, because what it means is the person who is asking has absolutely no idea what Black people have gone through, what



Figure 24.2 *Stitches of Power. Stitches of Sorrow*, 2014. Performance by Patricia Kaersenhout, BE.BOP 2014. Black Europe Body Politics. Spiritual Revolutions and “The Scramble for Africa.” Nikolaj Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen. Photo by Nikolaj Recke.

Black people have experienced in this country since the time the first Black person was kidnaped from the shores of Africa.”

How do you see the role of art institutions, which I refer to as the “art plantations of modernity”¹¹ as catalysts for decolonizing aesthetics? How have you been able to decolonize your own relationship with them? Are these strategies equally as effective in Europe as they are in other parts of the world?

The appropriation of radical discourses is one of the safeguards of the art institutions, “the art plantations of modernity.” Therefore, I believe that real change can mostly come from individuals or collectives, artists, thinkers, curators, etc. who do not shy away from pointing out, again and again, the role that “modern” art has in implementing the regime of Western European “aesthetics.” Yet, I do hope that those individuals and collectives who truly believe in the decolonial turn can make a change within the institutions. I do not have a relationship with institutions, only with people. Therefore, I feel decolonized because I am not hoping for an institution to recognize my work, but I do hope that some individuals within certain institutions see the importance of what I have to say and help me to share my work with a wider audience. The only strategy which I think works in this regard is perseverance and believing in the work that needs to be

done. Also believing in people, it is a labor of love that we are aiming at, and love and perseverance are pluriversal.

How would you define solidarity among people of color (POC) in Europe today? What are the urgencies? What has been achieved so far? What has been the role played by performance in these strategies of re-existence¹²?

I think there is not enough solidarity in mainland Western European countries, as People of Color are divided by different interests, class, origins, language, and citizenship status. Black Diasporic existence in Western Europe ranges from refugee to citizen; that gap can be huge considering the diametrical interests of these different groups. In relation to “integration,” many of us are not aiming at “integrating” Western European cultural values into our existence, but others seem to have a need to be acknowledged as an integral part of these societies, and therein becoming a *white* man’s meme. This unfortunate situation could be improved if Black Diaspora peoples, while claiming their right to be here, remember in the first place why they do have a right to be here in relation to the colonial matrix of power. I believe it is urgent to unite, and Africa, our ancestors, is/are what unite us, so instead of blindly praising Europe we should look at Africa and the Black Diaspora worldwide. There are plenty of achievements. I see that there is more dialogue going on now, and I can witness this through my participation in BE.BOP. It is urgent to unite beyond borders. The role of performance art is indeed remarkable, as the actuality of the encounter with the audience and the possibility of a dialogue are more likely than with other art forms, also the “strategies of re-existence” performed by artists bring back ancestral knowledge, languages, spirituality, music, and critical analysis that strengthen a solidarity that we are so much in need of.

**Striving for self-education, consciousness and knowledge:
A dialogue with Jeannette Ehlers**

A Vodoun ceremony heralded the beginning of the end of Europe’s savage capitalist enterprise in the Caribbean and elsewhere, in the forest of *Bwa Kayiman*. According to Laurent Dubois,¹³ we are all descendants of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) and therefore accountable to its ancestry. Jeannette Ehlers is a Caribbean Diaspora artist born and based in Denmark who has followed this predicament in her digitally manipulated video-art, photography, and performance consistently. In *Black Magic at the White House* (2009), for instance, she performs a Vodoun dance reminiscent of the foundational narrative of the Haitian Revolution. The video is staged in a landmark house in Copenhagen, built, as were countless similar European architectural highlights, with profits from the transatlantic enslavement trade. The silencing of Denmark’s brutal and corrupt history is defiantly challenged by the ubiquitous and phantasmagorical appearance of the artist, whose presence is alternatively erased and exaggerated. Today this building, Marienborg, is the official summer residency of the Danish prime minister.

Sound is as crucial in *Black Magic at the White House* as in the rest of Ehlers’ video-art work. The drumming in crescendo is a powerful reminder of the vibrations that brought together the Maroon leaders who met for a summit in *Bwa Kayiman* with *white*

freemasons, dissidents from the plantation system, and heralded the biggest blow ever received by modernity/coloniality until today.

In her latest piece, Jeannette Ehlers finally did in front of an audience what she had done previously in such works such as the above-mentioned *Black Magic in the White House*, as well as in *Three Steps of Story* (2009). Instead of dancing, however, in her first live performance, *Whip it Good!* (2013), she challenged the audience with a deceptively simple action: whipping. A human-size white canvas was hanging from the ceiling of Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, a post-migrant theater space in Berlin, and she flogged it with in-crescendo intensity for fifteen minutes. She then stopped and invited the audience to repeat the action. One by one, people stood up to follow her appeal. The white canvas was by then tainted with strains of charcoal which the artist rubbed on the lash each time. This re-enactment of the Colonial Wound has since then been presented in the African continent, the United States, and the United Kingdom and continues to mesmerize the audience with its powerful narrative.

In her answers, Jeannette Ehlers is as precise as in her visual narratives; the political economy of meaning is optimized at its full capacity. We can listen to the merciless whipping and at the same time the determination to tell the story as it is, challenging centuries of lies, denial, and selective amnesia.

What is your interpretation of the Colonial Wound? What role does healing play in your artistic practice?

My interpretation of the Colonial Wound is the condition in which racism, oppression, and inequality are an undeniable part of modern society's power structures caused by the European colonial project. But also how these structures are often hidden and denied by the oppressor. My work revolves around these issues and my intention is to learn about and bring focus into areas that deal with these type of questions. One can call it healing. The striving for self-education, consciousness, and knowledge is my drive, and hopefully my work brings into light and challenges coloniality in a poetic and artistic way. My work both resonates with many within the diaspora, and I might be a voice for those who cannot speak up for themselves, as well as it reaches out to a universal audience, and hopefully makes a difference.

In your own words, what is Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis?

Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis embraces images that stand in opposition to/discuss/challenge the colonial narrative.

How was your first encounter with the "Continent of Black Consciousness" in the art world, and in art education?

I was aware and familiar with a few different Black artists, mostly African American. I felt both very related to their work and agenda but also a bit distanced because of my European background. Even though I always sympathized with and was interested in Black culture, growing up in an all-white and quite ignorant Danish society gave me a

completely different experience than, for example, the African American experience. A Black community hasn't shaped me all the way and not to talk about the art world, as I know it here in Denmark, I always had the feeling it was a no-go to work with stuff that has anything to do with "Africa." So apart from my travels to Trinidad as a teenager and adult, my first crucial encounter with the Continent of Black Consciousness on a high theoretical level was with BE.BOP 2012. BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS. It was a turning point in my personal as well as my artistic life. I want to go as far as to say it was an epiphany. A complete feeling of belonging and at the same time alienation because of my lack of knowledge at that time about the European Black Diaspora.

Is the experience of learning and practicing performance art in Europe as a Black artist different from the US, the Caribbean, or the UK? What is your connection to different networks of Black Diaspora artists? Could you comment briefly on how you perceive the nuances between each context?

Again, I think there must be a difference due to the various cultural backgrounds and influences. My experience with Black Diaspora artists is mostly transnational, since there are only a few Diaspora artists in Denmark. This tends to create a complete lack of Danish diasporic discourse, as opposed to the rooted discourse found in the Caribbean, the US, and the UK, among more. Even though the diasporic strategies, perspectives and expressions seem to be quite different from continent to continent and again from artist to artist, it is my experience that in the end everything sums up and connects in the urge for making visible what has been (and keeps being) neglected, denied, and untold.

How relevant is it to give these nuances a national inflection such as a "German" or "Dutch" Black Diaspora? How would you rather frame the question? As European Black Diaspora? As Afropean Decoloniality? As Black Diaspora *in* Europe? Or would you rather frame it as Black Diaspora *and* Europe? Please explain your choice. Also, please feel free to add your own suggestions.

At times I think the nuances could be relevant in order to distinguish the different backgrounds, i.e. different cultural experiences, but I prefer the European Black Diaspora or Afropean Decoloniality. In my eyes they represent unity which in the end is what this is all about.

There is a long history of performances of Blackness in Europe in the framework of coloniality: how do you approach this legacy in your work? Do you see a common thread with other practitioners in Europe in this regard?

To be honest I don't know of many performances of Blackness in Europe but when I think of the few I know of, including my own, it is often related to catharsis and to the notion of being ripped apart symbolically as well as literally.

How do you see the role of art institutions, which I refer to as the “art plantations of modernity,” as catalysts for decolonizing aesthetics? How have you been able to decolonize your own relationship with them? Are these strategies equally as effective in Europe as they are in other parts of the world?

Like society in general, most art institutions are not ready for decolonization, and I think especially in Europe the lack of self-reflection is massive. I still struggle with decolonizing my relationship with them. My strategy so far has been to criticize and make my point via the art institutions and related spaces and spheres.

How would you define solidarity among POC in Europe today? What are the urgencies? What has been achieved so far? What has been the role played by performance in these strategies of re-existence?

I think solidarity among POC in Europe is there for sure but still needs to be far more articulated. As opposed to the Caribbean and the United States, the Black European Consciousness lacks unity, and I think more conferences and (relevant) performance pieces will play a very important role to get there.

Bare feet in the snow: A conversation with Patricia Kaersenhout

Her recent interest in performance has brought Patricia Kaersenhout’s Black radical imagination to a mesmerized audience. Articulated intuitively, her performance *Stitches of Power. Stitches of Sorrow* (2014) combines her long interest in (in)visibilities with the juxtaposition of moving image, sound, three-dimensional objects, and audience participation. By means of unveiling the inherent violence of the apparently innocent act of embroidering, she triumphantly conveys key contestations of epistemic disobedience. The narratives of the Continent of Black Consciousness become an embodied knowledge in the thirty minutes where members of the audience alternate their seats in rotation, and work on the portion of a shared piece of cloth where their stitches will be permanently embroidered as a collective memento. Kaersenhout herself is embroidering in a separate chair. Silence is almost a ritual while the voice of Angela Davis on a loop challenges the white reporter who asks her about her opinion on violence over and over. It is simply electrifying. In the following conversation, the artist shares her vision and engagement with the rigor and passion that permeate her artistic contributions.

What is your interpretation of the Colonial Wound? What role does healing play in your artistic practice?

Being a descendant from Surinamese parents but born in the Netherlands, my artistic journey became an investigation of my Surinamese background in relation of being raised in a West-European culture. Both my parents were brought up with the idea that Western views were the best. This was passed on to me and in it laid the roots of my invisibility. Not knowing the social codes made my parents decide to raise me with the thought not to draw attention to oneself because of being different. Invisibility is one of the running threads in my work.

In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,”¹⁴ Stuart Hall emphasizes that we can properly understand the traumatic character of the colonial experience by recognizing the connection between domination and representation. “They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as Other of a dominant discourse.” As long as I can remember I’ve lived my life in multiple realities and I’ve found my own safety hiding behind my “veil.” I came to realize that I, as a daughter of Diaspora, am in an advantageous position because I could look through my veil at the Other while they could not see my reality hidden behind my veil. This realization gave me the strength to reclaim the neglected histories of my ancestors, returning them their much-deserved dignity.

In your own words, what is Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis?

Even though I consider myself a visual artist, written language and how to interpret words is very important to me. The word “Decoloniality” still beholds a colonial thought/feeling. I would prefer the term “Blak Aesthetics/Aesthesis”. The “c” in “Black” should be banned, because it also stands as a symbol for a colonial thought. Why do we need a “c” in “Black” while in the pronunciation we cannot hear it? Blak to me symbolizes a political movement open for every person who is willing to liberate him-/herself by joining the revolution of the Blak community. They should destroy themselves and be born again as beautiful Blak persons. I would like to quote from *Black Looks, Race and Representation* by bell hooks, on her approach to James Cone’s understanding of the possible solidarities between the oppressor and the oppressed:

In his work, Cone acknowledges that racism harms whites yet he emphasizes the need to recognize the difference between the hurt oppressors feel and the pain of the oppressed. He suggests: “The basic error of white comments about their own oppression is the assumption that they know the nature of their enslavement. This cannot be so, because if they really knew, they would liberate themselves by joining the revolution of the black community. They would destroy themselves and be born again as beautiful black persons.”

Since it is obvious that white folks cannot at will become “black” that utopian longing must be distinguished from a solidarity with blackness that is rooted in actions wherein one ceases to identify with whiteness as a symbol of victimization and powerlessness.¹⁵

A couple of years ago I was at the launch of an art magazine on contemporary Aboriginal art. It was there where I first encountered the word “Blak” and its political meaning. Aboriginals from all over the world were questioning the relevance of the word “Black.” They also discussed the power of colonial language and how to reject it by means of deliberately writing it phonetically or with spelling mistakes.

How was your first encounter with the “Continent of Black Consciousness” in the art world, and in art education?

One of my teachers at the art academy said that in the arts we all know that there are some universal truths as, for instance: “Everybody knows that when it’s cold we need to wear a warm jacket.” My thoughts wandered off to the winter of 1962–1963, one of the coldest winters in Holland since the beginning of that century. My mother opened the

curtains of her dormitory and saw to her surprise that the outside world had turned white. She ran outside in her bare feet wearing only a nightgown. In her eagerness to grasp this wonder she didn't feel the cold. When one of her fellow students urged her to go inside and get a coat she realized how cold it was. She was mesmerized by the beauty surrounding her...

My first big Blak art project was *Wakaman*, in 2009. This was an exchange project between Surinamese artists living in a Western society and artists living in Suriname. Surinamese artists Remy Jungerman, Gillion Grantsaan, and Michael Tedja initiated the project. One of the important outcomes next to a major show in Paramaribo, the capital, was the publication of a catalogue dealing with contemporary art from Suriname which was totally written from a Blak perspective. My work was contextualized and it empowered me on many levels. Until today we Wakamans meet up and do shows together and some of us have become good friends.

Is the experience of learning and practicing performance art in Europe as a Black artist different from the US, the Caribbean, or the UK? What is your connection to different networks of Black Diaspora artists? Could you comment briefly on how you perceive the nuances between each context?

The Dutch mentality differs so much from the German, French, English, and most Scandinavian ones. We come from a country of farmers and tradesmen and as long as they can make a lot of money ethics are not high on the political agenda. The UK had its abolition in 1807, the Dutch in 1863, but they paid the enslaved owners compensation and the enslaved were forced to work 10 more years on the plantations. According to most Blak folks, the real abolition took place in 1873. Apartheid is a Dutch invention and the word *Baas* (= boss) appears in 53 different languages. Holland is a deeply racist country still invested in its own innocence because it serves its social and economic agendas.

My personal experience is that Diaspora artists from the countries mentioned above are raised in an educational system which allows them to develop a critical thinking and therefore develop a critical discourse. In the Netherlands there is hardly a Blak discourse because we've been subjugated by a politics of confusion for such a long time that we still remain on a one-dimensional level. And we are a minority with no economic or political power.

How relevant is it to give these nuances a national inflection such as a "German" or "Dutch" Black Diaspora? How would you rather frame the question? As European Black Diaspora? As Afropean Decoloniality? As Black Diaspora in Europe? Or would you rather frame it as Black Diaspora and Europe? Please explain your choice. Also, please feel free to add your own suggestions.

As a Blak woman there are not many safe spaces for agency. Fortunately, I know how to live in parallel realities without losing my integrity and myself. I started to feel safe when I got in touch with a broader network of Blak intellectuals and artists dealing with the same issues. I found my liminal space from which I can operate and feel free. Invisibility has become a very forceful power, which I use to my advantage. When speaking to the

oppressor I would prefer a term like “Afropean” or other general terms because it implicates a movement consisting of a big group of humans. Since in Holland we are such a small group, it is good to be able to relate to a European network. But within our own small community I would prefer geographical naming, i.e. the countries where you and your ancestors were born and with whom they paired become a part of your identity. Being a descendant from a Diasporic legacy I get to pick and choose what feels more comfortable for me. I can choose between: Belgian, Danish, Creole, Ghanaian, Indonesian, Indian and Chinese.

There is a long history of performances of Blackness in Europe in the framework of coloniality: how do you approach this legacy in your work? Do you see a common thread with other practitioners in Europe in this regard?

I really don't know. Performance is new to me. It fits in my process of totally liberating myself, it is therefore a very personal process. I haven't had the time yet to dive into other Blak European performance artists and their meanings. But I am sure I will eventually.

How do you see the role of art institutions, which I refer to as the “art plantations of modernity” as catalysts for decolonizing aesthetics? How have you been able to decolonize your own relationship with them? Are these strategies equally as effective in Europe as they are in other parts of the world?

I am just not interested in them, at least not the ones in Holland, because they will treat me as an exotic layer on their colonial cake. As an artist I do not set out strategies. Everything I do comes from my heart and soul. Ethics and integrity are the main focus points in my art practices. I've found my strength by staying in my own circle, and I live my life according to my own ethical convictions. It works like a magnet and like quantum physics: like attracts likes.

How would you define solidarity among POC in Europe today? What are the urgencies? What has been achieved so far? What has been the role played by performance in these strategies of re-existence?

Compared to the US we have geographical and language problems. And we were all victims of different colonizers. It makes it harder to unite but not impossible. I wish there was an overall network representing all the major Blak organizations. A lot is still very fragmented. Proper education is to me one of the major urgencies because there is still a whole generation who cannot see the relation of POC and former colonies. And I am not only referring to *white* people...

There is still a huge denial concerning racism. But unlike what the dominant culture did to me and my ancestors I do not wish to take away their histories and their beliefs. We have been subjugated to their convictions for more than 500 years. It is about time to add other perspectives in order to give our ancestors their dignity back, and for the dominant culture to finally admit that this shared colonial trauma is what connects us.

Maybe then we can start healing colonial wounds. I would like to add this beautiful quote from Malcolm X: “We may never become arrogant towards ignorant people. We all once have been ignorant ourselves. Ignorance of each other is what has made unity impossible in the past. Therefore we need enlightenment. We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity. Once we have more knowledge (light) about each other, we will stop condemning each other and a united front will be brought about.”

Notes

- 1 Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
- 2 Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider* (Los Angeles: Freedom, 1984), 116.
- 3 Quijano, Aníbal, “Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad.” In: Zulma Palermo and Pablo Quintero (eds), *Anibal Quijano: Textos de fundación* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Signo: El Desprendimiento, 2014). <https://www.bajalibros.com/GL/Anibal-Quijano-Textos-de-fundacion-Zulma-Palermo-eBook-1115672?crossFrom=CO&crossFrom=GL>, accessed 16 November 2018.
- 4 Mignolo, Walter, *Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).
- 5 Paradoxically, the African presence in Europe is older than in the Americas. The (still contested) 800 years of African occupation of the Iberian Peninsula is a case in point. And Négritude, the epigram that contributed to the liberation of the African continent in the so-called Short Century, was invented in Paris in the 1930s, where also one of the five European Pan-African Congresses was held (the first Pan-African conference took place in London, in 1900).
- 6 Email conversation with Rolando Vázquez (26 February 2015).
- 7 Erskine, Noel Leo, “What method for the oppressed?” In: Lewis V. Baldwin and Paul R. Dekar, “*In an Inescapable Network of Mutuality*”: *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Globalization of an Ethical Ideal* (Eugene, ON: Wipf and Stock, 2013), 235–254, 251.
- 8 “That so many persons at so many different times and in so many different areas felt spontaneously moved towards this behaviour is what gives Pan-Africanism its essence. This feeling, common to so many, described a Continent of Black Consciousness which included Africa and the geographical areas to which Africans were dispersed from the early days of New World’s slavery to Garvey’s time.” Brodber, Edna, *The Continent of Black Consciousness: On the History of the African Diaspora from Slavery to the Present Day* (London: New Beacon Books, 2003).
- 9 For more on Decolonial Aesthetics/Aesthesis here is the collective conceptualization published in the form of a Manifesto on May 2011. <https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/>, accessed 16 November 2018.
- 10 Lorde, op. cit.
- 11 “The contribution of Afropean decolonial aesthetics to current conceptualizations of diaspora aesthetics is to illuminate the way in which diaspora creators address the occlusions concealed by modernity that hide the dirty job of colonality. In this sense, our presence in what Quinsy Gario has described as ‘modern art plantations’ and I paraphrase as ‘the art plantations of modernity’ is neither tangential nor incidental.

It is, indeed, this inescapable plantation system mentality superbly argued by Antonio Benítez Rojo in *La Isla que se Repite* (*The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 1998) that artists from the Caribbean and other Black diasporas have chosen to challenge. They challenge its coloniality of knowledge and being. They create possibilities of sensing that strip the hegemonic 'supremacy' of modernity." Lockward, Alanna (2013), "Black Europe body politics: Towards an Afropean decolonial aesthetics." In: *Decolonial Aesthetics Dossier*, Mignolo, Walter and Vázquez, Rolando (eds), *Social Text: Periscope*. http://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/black-europe-body-politics-towards-an-afropean-decolonial-aesthetics/, accessed 16 November 2018.

- 12 "It is important to consider that the indigenous peoples as well as enslaved African peoples not only resisted the dominant power but furthermore developed highly creative alternatives to continue inventing their existence sometimes outside the legal framework while at the same time playing along with the establishment. Both in the past and in the present these peoples and communities maintain and develop certain forms of existence production in their everyday lives. I call these acts **re-existence**." Albán Achinte, Adolfo (2010), "Comida y colonialidad." *Calle14*, Bogotá, Colombia, VOL. 4, NO. 5, July–December 2010: 20.
- 13 "The impact of the Haitian Revolution was enormous. As a unique example of successful Black revolution, it became a crucial part of the political, philosophical and cultural currents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By creating a society in which all people, of all colors, were granted freedom and citizenship, the Haitian Revolution transformed the world. It was a central part of the destruction of slavery in the Americas and therefore a crucial moment in the history of democracy, one that laid the foundation for the continuing struggles for human rights everywhere." Dubois, Laurent *Avengers of the New World: A History of the Haitian Revolution* (Boston: Belknap Press, 2005), 6–7.
- 14 Hall, Stuart, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*. In: Williams, Patrick and Chrisman, Laura (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 227–237.
- 15 hooks, bell, *Loving Blackness as Political Resistance* (New York: South End Press, 1999), 14. Cone, James, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1990).

A Companion to Feminist Art

Edited by

Hilary Robinson and Maria Elena Buszek

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

- 21 **The Hidden Abode Beneath/Behind/Beyond the Factory Floor, Gendered Labor, and the Human Strike: Claire Fontaine's Italian Marxist Feminism** 369
Jaleh Mansoor
- 22 **Dear World: Arts and Theories of Queer Feminism** 389
Tirza Latimer
- 23 **From Representation to Affect: Beyond Postmodern Identity Politics in Feminist Art** 405
Susan Best
- 24 **Call and Response: Conversations with Three Women Artists on Afropean Decoloniality** 419
Alanna Lockward
- Part V Relating** 437
- 25 **On Feminism, Art and Collaboration** 439
Amy Tobin
- 26 **Opening the Patriarchive: Photography, Feminism, and State Violence** 459
Siona Wilson
- 27 **Maternal Mattering: The Performance and Politics of the Maternal in Contemporary Art** 475
Natalie Loveless
- 28 **Ars Eroticas of Their Own Making: Explicit Sexual Imagery in American Feminist Art** 493
Tanya Augsberg
- 29 **Masculinity, Art, and Value Extraction: An Intersectional Reading in the Advance of Capital as Post-Democracy** 513
Angela Dimitrakaki
- 30 **New Subjects and Subjectivities** 533
Jill Bennett
- Index** 545