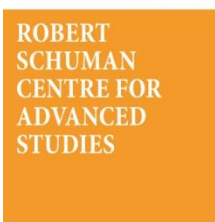




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**Black Europe? Some views from Afro-Surinamese
migrants in the Netherlands**

Sabrina Marchetti

European University Institute
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies
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Abstract

Today, when comes to racism and ethnicity-based discriminations, the attention of European media and policymakers is predominantly on discriminations against Muslims, Roma and other minorities. Instead, the preoccupation of people who consider they are oppressed because of their skin colour generally remains without a response. This paper thus contributes to the discussion around the specificities of discrimination based on people's skin colour, and what this means for society in general and, especially, for the people who experience it in person. These are also the concerns of the scholars who have elaborated the notion of a 'Black Europe' that I am choosing as reference framework with the aim of drawing attention to the question of blackness and to the way it affects the experience of migration to Europe.

In order to do this, I will refer to the subjective experience of a group of women who migrated from Suriname to the Netherlands during the 60s and 70s. As I will show, this group shares the common self-identifications of Blacks and at the same time of postcolonial migrants – as was the case for many of those who migrated to Europe from former colonies. Moreover, these women have in common the fact that they found employment in the domestic work sector in the city of Rotterdam. Their memories are a small and yet significant example of the negotiations that Black migrants in Europe have made in order to resist the race-based discriminatory attitudes they encountered after their arrival.

Keywords

Suriname, the Netherlands, Migrant domestic work, Racism, Blackness

1. Introduction

As I write, the world is mourning the death of Nelson Mandela, Nobel Peace laureate and hero of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The world is mourning a man for whom terminating the oppression of Blacks was a life-long mission. While contemplating this historic moment, I cannot avoid wondering about the condition of Black people in the context in which I live. What does it mean to be Black in Europe? In other words, what does it mean to live in Europe, in terms of both personal and collective conditions, for people that identify themselves as Blacks?

Although the response to this question should be differently nuanced depending on each national European context, the picture is generally quite worrisome. Just think for example about the African fruit-pickers in Italy who, in January 2010, had to run from the bullets of people chasing Blacks working in the orange fields. Around the same time in Sweden, a hidden sniper repeatedly shot at Blacks walking in the streets. In the Netherlands every year at Christmas time, the country is riven by a fierce debate over the racist implications of the fact that *Zwarte Piet*, a key character in the national folklore, is a person with black make-up on his face. Recently, prominent parliamentarians such as Cecile Kyenge in Italy and Christiane Taubira in France have been mocked for their skin colour. This is particularly astonishing in the case of France, which in the 1950s and 1960s saw such a great flourish of studies on racialization and the construction of blackness (e.g. Fanon, 1952; Genet, 1958). Likewise in the United Kingdom, where the debate around these issues arose especially in the 70s and 80s (e.g. Gilroy, 1987; Hall, 1981), Black Britons and migrants still feel discriminated against (Communities and Local Governments, 2011). In fact, although the attention of the European media and policymakers has more recently shifted to Muslims, Roma and other minorities, the preoccupation of people who consider they are oppressed because of their skin colour remains without a response.

Normally when discussing this issue, there is a general concern that the European debate might end up just replicating that in the United States, where social issues are more straightforwardly discussed in terms of White vs. Black categories. This concern is certainly valid, since the process of racialization of people in Europe has had a markedly different history in comparison with what happened in the United States, not to mention South Africa, Latin America and so forth (Theo-Goldberg, 1990). In Europe, racialization has crucially intertwined with the history of (ancient and modern) slavery, colonialism, migration and anti-Semitism¹ and Nazism. Xenophobia and intra-European conflicts have always had a crucial role in shaping discriminatory attitudes in Europe.

However, I believe that it is important to keep alive discussion around the specificities of discrimination based on people's skin colour, and what this means for society in general and, especially, for the people who experience it in person. These are also the concerns of the scholars who have elaborated the notion of a 'Black Europe', which I will illustrate in detail in the following pages. For this reason, I am choosing the idea of 'Black Europe' as my reference framework for this paper with the aim of drawing attention to the question of blackness and to the way it affects the experience of migration to Europe.

In order to do this, I will refer to the subjective experience of a group of women who migrated from Suriname to the Netherlands during the 60s and 70s. As I will show, this group shares the common self-identifications of Blacks and at the same time of postcolonial migrants – as was the case for many of those who migrated to Europe from former colonies. Moreover, these women have in common the fact that they found employment in the domestic work sector in the city of Rotterdam. Their memories are a small and yet significant example of the negotiations that Black migrants in Europe have made in order to resist the race-based discriminatory attitudes they encountered after their arrival.

¹ For the case of Italian Fascism, see Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013.

By taking this case, I am therefore also contributing to the current debate on the resurgence of racism in the Netherlands which has become an object of international attention in recent years. The difficult position of Black Dutch and migrants in the country has repeatedly been highlighted in the previously mentioned debate over *Zwarte Piet*, as well as in instances such as the establishment of a Slavery Monument and Museum in Amsterdam (Verbeek, 2012). Together with a national increase in islamophobia, the troubles surrounding the issue of blackness in Dutch society are a reason for concern for those scholars who denounce a hidden “ethnicism” entailed by the Dutch mode of multiculturalism (Essed, 1991, p. 6). For this reason, I will discuss the interviews that I have carried out more specifically in relation to the question of anti-Black racism in the Netherlands as a sub-question within the broader issue of a ‘Black Europe’.

At the same time, the case also makes reference to the current debate on migrant domestic work (e.g. Parreñas 2001, Anderson 2000, Lutz 2008). More in particular, I find very relevant to this specific topic some early studies on the relationship between Black maids and white mistresses in the context of slavery and racial segregation. Examples of this are the study by Phyllis Palmer (1983, 1989) on the relationship between middle-class white US women and their African-American maids between 1920 and 1945, and that by Jacqueline Cock (1989) on the relationship between white employers and Black employees in the domestic sector in South Africa during Apartheid. Along the same lines, Judith Rollins (1985) focuses on the experience of African-American domestics working in white households in Boston. These studies demonstrate the functioning of what Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) calls the ‘racial division of paid reproductive labour’ in countries where Blacks have historically been placed at the bottom of the social ladder and are thus given the most demeaning jobs – such as caring and cleaning for affluent people. For Glenn, in the U.S. this stratification is based on racial categories which are largely inherited from the time of slavery and racial segregation. The present study, however, aims to inaugurate a specifically European debate on this issue, where talking about the relationship between Black domestic workers and their white employers cannot but take into account the inheritance of colonialism.

In conclusion, I would just like to mention that the empirical material for this paper is part of a wider project in which I compared Eritrean and Surinamese postcolonial migrations towards Italy and the Netherlands respectively. In this paper, I will make use of 15 in-depth interviews from this project which I held with Afro-Surinamese women living in the city of Rotterdam in the years 2007-2008. All the interviewees arrived in the Netherlands before 1980, when Surinamese were still entitled to Dutch citizenship. At the time of the interviews their ages varied between 45 and 77 years. The majority of them are already retired or have a different job, but all of them have in common the experience of having, at one point in their life, worked for white Dutch families. My argument in the following pages will be mainly based on an analysis of their views of this experience, as Black migrant women living and working in the private homes of their former colonisers. Let us first start, however, by illustrating the theoretical debates that are framing my study.

2. Black Europe

I have mentioned already that the need to reflect on the experience of Black persons in Europe² has pushed several scholars to formulate the idea of a ‘Black Europe’. One can probably find some early reference for this debate in the work of Paul Gilroy (1987), who first expressed the need to discuss the issue of ‘race’ in Europe as contextualised within the history of colonial imperialism and as distinct

² The most recent estimates of the number of ‘Black Europeans’ date back to 1996 when Europe’s Black citizens amounted to less than five percent of the total population (Eurostat, 1996, cited in Blakely, 2009). In his ‘Black Europe Map’ Allison Blakely (2009) reports the highest presence of Black population in the United Kingdom (1.5 million) and France (2.5 million). The presence is also quite significant, however, in smaller countries such as Ireland (30,000 Black people), the Netherlands (about 500,000), Italy (194,000) and Sweden (55,000). In counter-tendency instead is Germany with ‘only’ 168,000 blacks among its vast population of 80 million people (p.4).

from the U.S. debate, which had been prominent until that moment. It is in this light that with his *There ain't no black in the Union Jack*, Gilroy broke the ice by providing an analysis of the exclusion of 'blackness' from the construction of the British national identity. This, in his view, did not incorporate the inheritance of the colonial past and, therefore, did not acknowledge the way 'race' had changed the configuration of 'class' and 'nation' in Britain's contemporary identity, which was, thus, ultimately racist.

More in general, when we talk about 'Black Europe', we are bringing to the fore the phenomenon that David Theo Goldberg calls the 'racialisation of Europe' (2006). In other words, we come to an awareness of the (negative) representations which are given to Blacks in the moment one envisions Europe as an *only* 'white' continent. In this perspective, the use of the notion of 'Black Europe' challenges the idea of Europe as something which "did not have, until recently, any ethnicity at all. Or didn't recognize it had any", in Stuart Hall's words (1981). This is exemplified by the fact that the founding documents of the European Union, from the beginning and throughout recent decades, make no mention of colonialism and postcolonial migrations even by name (Nimako & Small, 2009, p.9).

Thus, at the level of imagination and identity construction, the power of the notion of 'Black Europe' lies in its capacity to uncover the many paradoxes and conflicting beliefs that circulate in Europe today. In this vein, Gloria Wekker sees 'Black Europe' as an *image* which is capable of unsettling assumed identities and discovering the limitations of possible transformations of identity. This is exemplified by the power of this image to express at once the "desirability and [the] impossibility of being a Black European" (2009, p. 278). The contradiction between desires and possibilities which pertain to a 'common' European identity questions the very foundation of the idea of Europe which has been so passionately discussed in recent decades (see Passerini, 2003).

Finally, at a more political level, the use of the term 'Black Europe' denounces the (low) social and economic position of Blacks in Europe, and the relation of this phenomenon to those of race-based exclusion, stigmatisation and discrimination. This intellectual project is thus in contrast with mainstream research which categorises immigration as an independent historical event and thus downplays subordination of Blacks and its racist implications (Essed & Nimako, 2006).

The notion of Black Europe is particularly relevant to people belonging, as Afro-Surinamese do, to the African Diaspora in Europe as defined by Stephen Small and Kwame Nimako. Small and Nimako indeed argue that one can include in the African Diaspora all people whose migration was a consequence of European colonialism (Nimako & Small, 2009, p. 28-29). In this sense, they see a connection between the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the slavery in the Caribbean and in the Americas, and the twentieth century migration of continental Africans to North America and Europe.

However, the individual and collective migratory paths which have brought members of the African Diaspora to settle in Europe have articulated this differently over time; moreover, they also have different motivations. Just to give some examples, some of the Blacks coming to Europe during the last century did so for study reasons, as is the case of Africans in Russia, while others travelled to Scandinavia for political asylum. Afro-Caribbean people travelled to France, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands as labour migrants while still others, such as some Africans in Italy, travelled for religious purposes. In this view, an attempt to define the composition of the African Diaspora in Europe is hampered by the variety of trajectories that Black people now living in Europe might have followed (Blakely, 2009).

It is with this in mind that I use the notion of 'Black Europe' in my analysis of Afro-Surinamese women's experiences in the Netherlands. It can shed light on the interviewees' narratives of their experiences of racial discrimination and, more generally, their processes of identity formation in their relationships with their former colonisers.

3. Anti-Black Racism in The Netherlands

We know that the question of migrant integration in Dutch society was for a long time underestimated, in the belief that the Netherlands was a successful model of ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘tolerance’, wherein racism and ethnic discrimination did not exist. Today, however, the ‘tolerance’ that Dutch people considered a positive quality inherited from their past seems to stand on shaky ground. In fact, Kees Schuyt argues that if it was possible to talk of an exceptional religious openness in this country during the 16th and 17th century based on values of freedom of conscience and worship, this does not imply any capacity of contemporary Dutch society to welcome ethnic diversity (Schuyt, 2004, pp. 113-114). In fact, the Dutch columnist Sjoerd de Jong (2005) suggested the notion of ‘regret-revenge’ (*spijtwraak*) in order to account for the backlash against the renowned Dutch ‘tolerance’. With this term, De Jong argues that the Dutch are now taking revenge on their earlier position of tolerance towards immigrants in the 1970s, which left them powerless and alienated.

Others point to the contradictions within the concept of ‘multiculturalism’ to say that it hides a specific form of racism which one can easily find in the Netherlands. This is the racism embedded in the tendency of the Dutch people to maintain ‘whiteness’ as the fundamental character of national identity, while blackness and migration remain ‘alien’ to that identity (Wekker, 2009, p. 286). Thus, Dutch ‘multiculturalism’ is redefined by Philomena Essed rather as a form of ‘ethnicism’, “an ideology that explicitly proclaims the existence of ‘multiethnic’ equality but implicitly presupposes an ethnic or cultural hierarchical order” (Essed, 1991, p.6). Colonial legacies have a crucial position in this:

Contemporary Dutch racism against Blacks is a complex combination of remnants of colonial paternalism, structural marginalization, and cultural assimilation under conditions of advancing pluralism. (p. 14)

Thus, today, racism in the Netherlands appears to be more than simply present and well grounded, in contrast, once again, with the expectations related to the aforementioned self-image of the Netherlands as a multicultural and tolerant country.

Going back in time, to the period of the interviewees’ migration, one finds that huge problems of unemployment and deficits in labour participation affected Surinamese (and other migrants) during the 1970s and 1980s. When indeed, after the ‘oil crisis’ of 1973, a general restructuring of the industrial sector took place in the Netherlands, it forced many workers, postcolonial migrants among them, to leave their jobs because of the increasing automatization of production methods. Unemployment became a structural feature of migrants’ presence in the country, remaining very high notwithstanding later periods of economic growth. The large masses of unemployed migrant people were undoubtedly a crucial social problem of the time, leading to social tensions and increasing racist sentiments among white Dutch people (Bleich & Schumacher, 1984).

As today people of Muslim background are targeted as ‘dangerous’ subjects by a spreading islamophobia in the Netherlands, represented by people such as Geert Wilders, it should be remembered that Afro-Surinamese and other Caribbean people have been equally put ‘on the spot’ in the past for their ‘deviant’ social behaviour (Ahmad Ali, 1984). It is striking indeed to consider that Surinamese people in the Netherlands are officially defined as ‘aliens’ (*allochtonen*), in spite of their full entitlement to Dutch citizenship and the historical bond between Suriname and the Dutch Kingdom (Wekker & Lutz, 2001).

Black migrant domestic workers can often encounter mistreatment and abuse which can be defined as ‘racist expressions’, i.e. individual or collective “beliefs and verbal outbursts (epithets, slurs, etc.); acts and their consequences; and the principles on which racist institutions are based” (Theo-Goldberg, 1990, p.296). If we focus on this aspect of the workers’ stories, their experience of work and migration in the Netherlands appears *inherently* based on racial hierarchies inasmuch as these hierarchies are always latently present and they can, now and then, come to light as manifest mistreatments. Thus, the

experiences of these workers can be seen as embedded in a 'systemic domination' in which white people dominate over Black people (Fay, 1987, p.123).

In this context, I found it very interesting that the interviewees tended to talk about racism *as* an inheritance of slavery. In fact, the Afro-Surinameses described the racial discrimination, offences or abuses received from white employers as something which echoes, in their view, forms of slavery-like oppression. In this sense, their stories contribute to a vision of contemporary forms of paid domestic work as 'modern-day slavery', a job in which racial abuse is the norm (Wijers & Lin, 1997). This echoes Basil Davidson (1994) saying that just as racism was the excuse for the excesses of slavery, so slavery gave birth to modern racism.

However, the association between racism and slavery, as a descriptive tool or as a rhetorical device, is not an easy one, especially when this association is made in contemporary Europe, as David Theo-Goldberg (1990) and Philomena Essed (1991) remind us. For instance, one has to be conscious that the images Europeans possess of slavery refer to a repertoire based on the history of the United States: films such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *The Color Purple* greatly influenced the understanding of slavery-like practices for those who did not have direct access to them. Similarly, we can say that anti-Black violence in general is, in most people's minds, associated with the case of the Jim Crow Laws, the Ku Klux Klan, or, finally, South African Apartheid. And indeed, images associated with these forms of anti-Black discrimination are a recurrent trope in most interviewees' narratives. Through these images, the interviewees gave expression to their standpoint on the experiences of slavery and racial discrimination which took place along with Dutch colonialism.

4. Afro-Surinamese Women in Rotterdam

In 2006, when I started my research project, the total number of Surinamese people in the Netherlands amounted to 331,900, of whom 16% were living in the city of Rotterdam³. Looking at the female population in more detail, the Rotterdam Statistics Institute (Cos) stated that the number of Surinamese women living in Rotterdam was 16,942, i.e. 27% of the non-western foreign women living in the city⁴. Women then represented 54% of the total Surinamese population in the city of Rotterdam, which consisted of 31,061 people born in Suriname. Of these women, 35% were aged between 45 and 64, while 8% were over 65. This number included all the Surinamese ethnic groups (Afro-Surinamese, Hindustani, Chinese and Javanese), among which, however, the Afro-Surinamese seemed to be the majority (Niekerk, 2000).

The experience of Surinamese people is profoundly determined by the identity of the city of Rotterdam itself, known as the most 'multicultural' city in the country, with a large amount of the population having a migrant background. This representation as an 'ethnically diverse' city is due to the cultural mix created by the large amount of people that in recent decades have arrived from all around the world to work in the city with the biggest commercial harbour in Europe. As early as the 1960s, one could already find guest-workers from Cape Verde employed in constructing the extension of the harbour (Nimako & Small, 2009), and young nurses from Suriname working as apprentices in Rotterdam's hospitals (Cottaar, 2003), to mention just two examples. This has influenced the social and economic development of the city, which is still today one of the first destinations for overseas migrants to the Netherlands.

However, Rotterdam was also a place of high racial tensions, with racist incidents taking place in some of the city's peripheral neighbourhoods. Examples are the riots taking place in the areas of

³ From *Statistics Nederland 2007*, available online via the StatLine website.

⁴ The distribution of the Surinamese population in the city of Rotterdam is quite irregular. The district (*deelgemeente*) called Delfshaven is the one counting the largest percentage of its total population (13%), followed by Feijenoord (11%), IJsselmonde and Charlois (10% each).

Afrikaanderbuurt in 1972 and in Schiedam in 1976 (Lucassen & Penninx, 1994). The results of these tensions can be seen in the ghettoization of those areas where Surinamese and Caribbean migrants reside and gather. In particular, I refer to the stigmatization of the area around the street called West Kruiskade, whose Surinamese and Antillean cafés, bars and shops have often been represented as *only* a reservoir for drug dealing and street gangs (see Buiks, 1983). Stigmatization also frequently occurs in the representation of Surinamese people, women especially, who, in my view, have often been used as material for social investigations as ‘socially others’, and put under scrutiny for their ‘deviant’ sexual and social behaviour (cf. Lalmahomed, 1999).

As mentioned, the Afro-Surinamese women I interviewed all had jobs in Dutch private households: ten of them did elderly homecare, two people did cleaning work, two others were nannies and one was a home nurse. These women belong to the group that, to resist the social and economic difficulties encountered after the arrival, slowly made their way into the care and domestic sector. In a very short time, Afro-Surinamese women came to be the cornerstone of Dutch society when it came to caring for elderly and sick people. The majority of them had been working in the care sector all their lives, switching between public and private forms of employment, and between hospitals, nursing homes and private households.

Although it is impossible to find statistical data on the actual numbers of Surinamese women employed in the care sector⁵ in the Netherlands, I have reason to believe that they make up the majority. My assumption regarding the over-representation of Black migrant women in this sector is based, first of all, on the many personal testimonies that I collected during my fieldwork about the fact that the number of Surinamese care workers has always been very high, from the 1970s until today. I also find evidence of this large representation in other essays about Afro-Surinamese women’s lives in the Netherlands. Gloria Wekker (2006), for example, observes that working-class Afro-Surinamese women predominantly found occupation in the care sector as if this was ‘naturally’ the job for them. Another example comes from Anne-Mei The’s study based on ethnographic research in a Dutch nursing home (The, 2008). On the basis of her observations, Black women (Afro-Surinamese, Caribbean and Cape Verdeans) represent 60% of the personnel working in the sector.

The reason for this over-representation can be found by looking back at the 1970s, in the fact that access to other sectors was difficult for these immigrants because of an economic and political situation which did not favour Surinamese integration. A form of ‘institutionalised social inequality’ in the labour market made it very difficult for them to climb the social ladder⁶. At the same time, around the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, the care sector in the Netherlands went through a crisis. Because of the rapid ageing of the population, changes in the structure of traditional families, and an increase in women’s labour participation, more and more elderly were in need of 24-hour personal care. The existing nursing homes could not meet the demand and many elderly had to remain in their homes. This gave rise to a demand for care of the elderly in domiciliary form, for a service which had to combine some sanitary care with housekeeping and simply providing company. The service was mainly provided through the social security system, with patients paying for extra services out of their own pockets. This type of domiciliary work was not considered desirable by many white women. While indeed at that time it was common for working-class Dutch women to have cleaning jobs in wealthy households, home care was not considered an attractive occupation⁷. Thus, the number of Dutch women who took these jobs was not enough to ensure a complete provision.

⁵ The reason for this lack is the fact that neither the general census (CBS) nor *Home Care* allow a distinction between the different ethnic backgrounds of the employees.

⁶ This inequality is confirmed by H. M. Becker and G. J. Kempen (1982), who report widespread prejudice on the part of Dutch companies, of which 57% declared a preference for white workers over Black ones (Becker & Kempen, 1982, cited in Konter & Megen, 1988, p. 40).

⁷ It is also true that while cleaning could occasionally be paid under-the-table to people receiving a state subsidy without them losing it, the care sector, in contrast, was better regulated.

It was during this same period that, either following a husband who had migrated years before, or travelling alone, sometimes with young children, Afro-Surinamese women were arriving in the Netherlands. They were all in possession of Dutch citizenship, and the Netherlands for them was a 'land of opportunities' – 'Paradise the Netherlands', as they say. Their trajectory coincided with the fact that from the late 1960s onwards private or semi-private care agencies such as *Home Care*⁸, *Moelen&Moelen*, not to mention other smaller ones, channelled the great supply of workers made up of Afro-Surinamese and other Caribbean women into this newly burgeoning labour niche in Rotterdam. These agencies gradually replaced Christian charity groups which had for a long time organised various forms of assistance to poor and needy people or to mothers with newborn babies (Lienburg, 2001).

5. Black Dutch

The fact that from 1667 until 1975 the Netherlands was the colonizer of Suriname (then called Dutch Guyana) is of course of the utmost relevance. The Afro-Surinamese population descends from the West Africans who, over the centuries, the Dutch took by force to put them to work in their tropical plantations in South America. It was only in 1954 that these people acquired Dutch citizenship. This turned out to be a very important point when in 1974, on the eve of Surinamese independence, what has been defined as a 'leaving psychosis' (*vertrekpsychose*) set in. Immediately before and after the declaration of independence from the Netherlands, people's distrust in the economic capacity of Suriname inspired the biggest wave of migration in absolute terms between the two countries.

During the childhood and youth of the Afro-Surinamese interviewees, the Dutch presence in Suriname was in its last phase (1954-1975). This phase is generally called 'the autonomy period' (Jones 2007; Leistra 1995; Gobardhan-Rambocus 2001). The cultural scene at this time was characterized by two major, only apparently conflicting, tendencies: a strengthening of Suriname's cultural emancipation on the one hand, and an intensification of the *Netherlandisation* of Surinamese society on the other.

This is the context in which the identities of people like Georgina – born in Paramaribo in 1940 – were taking shape. In the following excerpt she powerfully illustrates the complexity of her feelings of belonging to the Dutch nation. From her standpoint, her participation in the construction of the Dutch cultural identity is an element that later affected her migratory path and her feeling of inclusion in the Netherlands, where she migrated in 1969. In Georgina's words:

Look, in Suriname you were raised as Dutch. [...] But when you arrive here, then you know something: they are white. [...] We were black and this was a white... part... and only the river, the sea, divided us from each other. But exactly the same education that you had there, you had it here. So, you are a 'black Dutch'. Only, you are born in Suriname, South-America.

(Georgina, 67 years old, arrived in the Netherlands in 1972)

Georgina's very suggestive narrative illustrates how her relationship with the Netherlands was forged by a process of acculturation to the country. Moreover it is worth noticing that despite the impression that she is talking about 'others' when talking about the Dutch, she claims belonging, her participation in the *same* identity construction of the colonisers: "the same education that you had there, you had here. Thus, you are a black Dutch". The image of the 'river' (which stands for the Atlantic Ocean) cutting the Netherlands in two parts, a white and a black one, is a common trope in the Surinamese rhetoric of recent decades (see Jones 2007). The aim is to emphasise the bond and connection between contemporary Suriname and the Netherlands after independence.

From my point of view, Georgina offers the image of Dutch identity as one of a 'community', along the lines of what Benedict Anderson (1991) defines as 'imagined communities'. This is the

⁸ *Home Care* and *Moelen&Moelen* are pseudonyms.

(imagined) community living under the same flag, speaking the same language, reading the same school texts, etc., and therefore sharing a common national identity. In this perspective, she seems to have grown up under the influence of what Anderson calls an ‘abstract sense of imagined simultaneity’. However, after her actual migration, Georgina perceived that other kinds of boundaries existed between the Dutch in the Netherlands and the people in Suriname. Where she used to see ‘unity’ (language, history, culture), she found instead ‘separation’. The ‘river’ comes to symbolize this separation. In Anderson’s words, it is as if “the image of the communion” (Anderson 1991, p. 6) with the other members of the imagined community, an image which lives in their minds in its abstract form, dissolved at the moment of the *actual* meeting with the part of ‘her community’ living on the other side of the Ocean.

Her migration stands as a turning point in the understanding of her identity, which she ‘discovers’ to be crucially affected by her skin colour. She responds to this coming to awareness with a conceptualisation of her blackness as a *variation*, a modification of Dutchness’s main characteristic, i.e. whiteness. In order to do this, she makes up a hybrid entity, that of ‘the Black Dutch’: people that have absorbed the culture, the language and the knowledge related to ‘being Dutch’, and yet maintain their skin colour as a sign of their difference, as a symbol of their geographical and cultural roots.

6. ‘A Black at the Door’

The complex identity construction to which Afro-Surinamese people refer to by saying “I am a Black Dutch” for many of them dramatically clashed with the experience of separation, exclusion and anti-Black racism to which they were exposed after their arrival in the Netherlands. In particular, Afro-Surinamese women in the care and domestic sector can retell countless episodes in which they, or their colleagues, felt offended and mistreated for ‘being black’. Often these episodes describe an encounter between a white person and a Black woman who had to take care of him/her and of their houses. This encounter is told as being far from easy: fear, distrust and anxiety are the feelings that the white person, especially old people, repeatedly express when meeting a Black person. In these encounters, phenomena of postcolonial ‘othering’ and stigmatisation of blackness are at play, in my view.

In this section, I will briefly illustrate different dimensions of these troublesome meetings as I understand them through my interviewees’ descriptions of the difficulties experienced by white elderly people meeting Black persons, and in letting them enter their houses and take care of them. Thus, I contend that several moments from these encounters can be seen as moments, situations or conditions which are stored in Black people’s memories as what Philomena Essed calls ‘scenarios of racism’ (Essed, 1991, p. 293).

Many of the stories I collected are about problems arising at the first appointment, after the domiciliary care agency sends its new worker to a new address. How will the old/sick person react to an unexpected meeting with a Black woman? Wilma remembers an episode which today makes her laugh, but which signals the atmosphere of racial tension in which she had to carry out her work. In Wilma’s words,

I had to do home care for a lady. But yes, the people were not used to seeing dark persons. [...] Then, once I got the address, I went. I rang the doorbell. And the woman came to the door and: [Laughs and makes a scared expression]. Then – yeah – then she was scared! ‘Cause she didn’t expect that she would get a dark person at the door.

(Wilma, 62 years old, arrived in the Netherlands in 1974)

I find the image of this encounter very telling about the forces affecting the care provided by Black migrant women to Dutch white people. One can imagine Wilma in front of the door, ringing the bell, longing to start a new job, and the other woman cautiously opening it, and feeling scared of this ‘alien’ Black person threatening to enter her house.

The scene thus reveals a fundamental dimension of the dyad between *being needed* and *being inferior* which is powerfully at play here. Here we see that, despite her fear and her anxiety, the Dutch woman needs 'someone' to help her, just as the Afro-Surinamese woman needs a new job opportunity. One can find in Wilma's words the paradox of feelings of being, at the same time, *rejected* and *desired*⁹. The dominant group needs someone to take care of their elderly and sick people, but this someone has always to be reminded of her inferiority, through a display of repulsion for her person.

It is also interesting to notice that Wilma tells the story in an amused tone, finding today the reaction of the old lady to just be silly and exaggerated. I noticed several Afro-Surinamese interviewees having this attitude, recounting episodes of discrimination as something funny, as an occasion for mocking the Dutch as more culturally backward than they expected them to be.

However, another interviewee, Francisca, has a more aggrieved tone, when telling of her constant feeling that white people never really trusted her. Being Black seemed to be enough of a reason for suspicion, lack of trust, and worry on the part of the Dutch. In Francisca's words,

They start to take a [certain] attitude. I don't know where it comes from. I think that they had never seen so many dark coloured people and then they get the idea: 'they are bad people'.

(Francisca, 61 years old, arrived in the Netherlands in 1975)

In Francisca's view her uneasy feeling of being the constant object of prejudice is due to her employer's ignorance. Like Wilma, Francisca refers again to the fact that during the 1970s Dutch people were not used to 'seeing' Blacks. Again, I suggest that Afro-Surinamese women did not expect Dutch people to be so encapsulated in their white and provincial world, which, in their view, was thus culturally behind the already multicultural Suriname.

Another example of the paradoxes intrinsic in the condition of 'being needed, yet inferior' is given by Georgina. She remembers an episode which took place soon after her arrival in Rotterdam when she was working as carer. One of her new patients used to make her work almost impossible because of her fear of being 'touched' by a Black person:

But she, a woman, when I went to work there, I wasn't allowed to touch her. No. I first had to put my hand in a washcloth and then lather that soap. And then she would tell me where I was allowed to wash her. "Here, she would say. [...] And then she said "You should only wash me with the palm of your hand". Yes. [...] And then she said: "But how is it possible that there it's so black and there so white?" And that made me jump. I didn't know how to answer. I had only just arrived.

(Georgina, 67 years old, arrived in the Netherlands in 1972)

Because of the 'racial'/ethnic hierarchies affecting the encounter between the two women, the intimacy required by the performance of care work is turned into rejection and revulsion. Here, again, one can see at play the automatic and unconscious aversion towards black bodies as 'ugly', 'disgusting' and, as in this case, 'dirty'. This links to the seemingly naïve question of the old lady, revealing something Georgina could not yet imagine: the palm of her hand was preferable to its back because the skin there was of a lighter colour. A lighter colour was a symbol of cleanliness, and white people preferred to be touched only with this, as if they dissected her body into a hierarchy of more or less 'polluting' zones. Practices based on the dyad of attraction/revulsion marking, stereotyping, devaluing or degrading certain groups were a major phenomenon in colonial settings (see Stoler, 2002). I consider the repetition of these practices in my Afro-Surinamese women's working experience to be an important element of *continuity* concerning the master-servant relationship from colonial into post-colonial times.

⁹ On the relationship between rejection and desire, see Julia Kristeva (1980) for a psychoanalytical account, and Mary Douglas (1979) for a more anthropological one.

7. The Inheritance of Slavery

In this last section, I would like to focus on the relationship between blackness and the inheritance of Dutch colonialism at the level of the association it carries with slavery. In fact, during the fieldwork in Rotterdam, I discovered how many Afro-Surinamese women living in the Netherlands are confronted with the survival of colonial hierarchies on an everyday basis. Their grandmothers' stories, which are still very much relevant to their family memories, can often make their life in the land of their former slave-masters emotionally challenging. In particular, in the case of women working as home carers and cleaners, the 'ghost of slavery' (Sharpe, 2003) is an ever present matter. Having to cook, clean and serve for white Dutch people gives many the impression of a painful re-enactment of the colonial past.

Some Afro-Surinamese interviewees explained to me that even if slavery was not present in their minds 'everyday', as soon as they felt mistreated in one way or another, they *again* felt that they were 'slaves for the Dutch'. As proof, they said that some of their colleagues could not emotionally bear such a condition, and left this labour sector after a short time of work. Those who remained in the sector tell of having learned to 'get over it', to avoid looking back in time, and to 'think only about the present'. Thus, they generally distance themselves from those who, they say, wallow in negative feelings about the past and cultivate unnecessary resentment against white people.

I am arguing here that these women employ emotional tactics in order to avoid sentiments of revenge against the Dutch, which would frustrate their working life. The simple *need* for these tactics, successful for some and not so for others, demonstrates that the wound of slavery is not completely healed and creates tensions towards white employers in the working relationship.

Here I will offer some examples from the interview with Georgina. Her interview is particularly interesting because of the explicit character that the *re-enactment* of slavery takes in her story. Her employer seemed to straightforwardly want to provoke her inferiority feelings *as* based on the colonial past. The employer did not generally mistreat her, but rather she was 'offended' in the case of some very specific issues. For example, she forbade Georgina from taking a shower in the house, accusing her of 'dirtying the bathroom', and compelled her to sleep in the living-room instead of in a more private room. These are cases of spatial and bodily constraints that summarise well what I have discussed in the previous paragraphs.

Moreover, this woman pushed Georgina's psychological endurance of the situation with a distinct ritual: she would buy history books that spoke about the slavery time, and asked Georgina to read them aloud to her. This is the way Georgina tells the story:

She bought only books about little Negroes. We were reading those books. She always wanted to be back in that time. That's what.

Which time?

The time of... slavery. She always bought those books. Then she said: "I bought a very nice book". [...] I found that miserable. I found that miserable, to get stuck there. 'Cause that time is gone. That time is gone!

(Georgina, 67 years old, arrived in the Netherlands in 1972).

Georgina describes the fixation of her employer as something so absurd to be pitiable. Yet, in her narrative today she tries to express her anger toward the fact that, at that time, she did not have many possibilities of changing the situation due to her economic need.

Amongst all the interviewees, Georgina is the only Afro-Surinamese interviewee who had already had a direct experience of paid domestic work in Dutch households in Suriname. At the beginning of the interview, she described her experience as a domestic worker in Paramaribo positively, stressing the fact that her relationship with her employers was very good and she never felt they treated her 'as a slave'. I suggest that such a positive description of her job in Paramaribo serves in her narrative to emphasise the contrast with the experience she later had in the Netherlands. Paradoxically, it is only *after* her migration that the colonial past affected her life in the most troubling way, when in her work

as carer and cleaner in Dutch houses, hospitals and nursing homes, the image of slavery was suggested to her several times.

Georgina does not minimise the offences that she received from her employers, and she understands them as parts of a wider trend in Dutch society. In the following excerpt she explains her standpoint regarding the fact that elderly Dutch people grew up ‘dreaming’ of having someone who would ease them and serve them: a Black person to whom they could feel superior, she says. In her words,

They have a very bad life [...] then they want to play at being the 'high lady' that they had never been! But it doesn't suit them. It doesn't suit them. 'Cause they still dream of having a black working for them, and everything that is in those books, what the slaves did then. But those slaves...now... there are not slaves any more! So you are going to react differently to them!

Once again Georgina's feelings are based on a contrast between past and present, between life in Suriname and life in the Netherlands. The two countries live with a knowledge gap: white Dutch people believe that slavery is still ongoing; and that Afro-Surinamese people are still potentially their servants.

Georgina sees the behaviour of Dutch employers as belonging to a sequence of discriminations perpetrated by white people towards Blacks, in a history which leaves very little space for individual reaction, and thus frustrates her sense of justice. Her everyday life is understood in connection with the history of enslavement of Afro-Surinamese people, and in particular the struggle of Afro-Surinamese women rebelling against abuses and oppression suffered at the hands of their white mistresses.

8. Conclusions

Let us try, in these conclusions, to go back to my initial question: what does it mean to be a Black, in Europe? These pages have offered a tentative answer by looking at the personal experience of a group Afro-Surinamese women who have migrated to the Netherlands. I have considered their memories of the time before and after their migration to be a source of insights into the main issues at play, into the standpoint of people who identify themselves as Blacks in Europe. At the same time, I have offered a specific account of the process of formation of a European identity by focusing on the arduous achievement of the ideal of a ‘Black Europe’.

In so doing, I have argued first of all that the issue of blackness and anti-Black racism cannot be disconnected from the inheritance of colonialism and slavery. For the case I am analysing, colonialism and slavery are what fuels not only the representation of Blacks in society, but also their own feelings in relation to it. Afro-Surinamese women are part of Dutch society, they have “felt they are Dutch” since the time of their childhood, even before actually residing in the Netherlands. Yet their skin colour affects this feeling by making them talk of their identity as ‘Black Dutch’. In their imagination, the wide community of Dutch people expands beyond the borders of the Netherlands, thanks to colonialism, and it becomes articulated along the Black vs. White divide.

Secondly, I have shown how everyday settings in which Blacks in the Netherlands found themselves in relationships with white Dutch people could easily become a terrain for expression of this same divide. In fact, care and domestic work in private Dutch households is described along the lines of what Philomena Essed calls ‘scenarios of racism’. Fear and lack of trust of Blacks on the part of elderly Dutch are interpreted as exclusionary and stigmatising practices by the interviewees. The connection here with paid domestic work is extremely relevant: the material tasks of cleaning and caring for sick and old people make it easy for interviewees to associate blackness with abjection. They are simultaneously *rejected* by society while being considered *necessary* for taking care of demeaning jobs.

Finally, I have also shown the importance of the postcolonial dimension of these women's experiences as a source of oppression and discrimination. In fact, representations and symbols taken from the time of slavery often came to be tools used in the hands of employers to subjugate their workers. The question of slavery has emerged as a powerful rhetorical device used by employers in their interactions with their employees.

In conclusion, however, I have also shown the importance of my subjects' capacities to use narrative construction as a means to endure and resist conditions of abuse and distress. These features together illustrate the negotiations enacted among Black Dutch and migrants, and the meaning of blackness for Dutch society in general.

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Author contacts:

Sabrina Marchetti

RSCAS, EUI

Via delle Fontanelle 10

50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)

Italy

Email: Sabrina.Marchetti@eui.eu