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The Art of Resistance: Artists and Black Identity in The Netherlands
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“Today the 100% came in!” exclaims Quinsy Gario as he greets us, having just completed a crowdfunding campaign for his own television show. Gario is a performance artist and spoken word poet mostly known for his campaign against the use of Zwarte Piet, a controversial children’s figure in the Netherlands. He is one of many young artists, contributing to a strong sense of Black identity emerging in the Netherlands. We sit down with three of these talented voices - Quinsy Gario, Ivan Words, and Aisha Martina.

Quinsy Gario: Disturbing the Public Space

Quinsy already has a name for his future show: *Roet In Het Eten*. This roughly translates to the English expression of *putting a spanner in the works*, a phrase that refers to disturbing the norm, ruining the “fun;” very fitting, as the series’ purpose is to give Gario and other marginalized voices a media space to shape and discuss issues concerning The Netherlands. The show is an extension of Gario’s artistic practice and aims to illuminate how those in power “decide what happens in the public sphere and discourse, who creates video and media, and what is to be shown and whom to speak.”

One of the main themes Gario works with is blackness in the public sphere. He seeks to make visible how Black voices have been underrepresented in institutions and erased from history. Amongst others, Gario has been trying to expose the problematic nature of [Zwarte Piet](#) in perhaps the most well-known festivity in the Netherlands, Sinterklaas. In November and December every year, children all over the country celebrate the arrival of the elderly Saint from Spain, who rewards those who have behaved nicely in the past year. He is traditionally accompanied by unintelligent and clown-like servants called Zwarte Piet or Black Pete, who assist him in distributing presents while children are sleeping.

The most controversial aspect of Zwarte Piet is his Blackness and the relation his appearance has to Dutch colonial and slavery past. During the festivities, the role of Zwarte Piet is played by white people who have blacked up their faces, thickened their lips with red lipstick, wear golden hoop earrings and Afro wigs. While many Dutch people consider this an innocent children’s holiday, the invented tradition is rooted in racism and perpetuates stereotypical images of Black people as childlike, stupid and inferior.

He first began his work addressing the racist nature of the Zwarte Piet figure in 2011 when he participated in a Slam Poetry competition. The competition, he felt, provided a great opportunity to talk about Zwarte Piet. It was also where Gario debuted his infamous *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* T-shirts. Drawing on the symbolic nature of two popular convenience stores, Gario linked the

aesthetic and cultural value of the shirts to the problematic nature of Zwarte Piet, highlighting the way Dutch colonial history is manifested in everyday life.

“The original shirt was bought from Zeeman, whose logo represents a sailor. The image of the sailor is important for the Dutch national psyche: it refers to the VOC [the time of colonial conquests] when the Dutch ruled the seas,” Gario explains. Incorporating this image, Gario seeks to critique the positive and nostalgic image of the colonial era in popular media, and the neglect of past atrocities. “The spray paint was bought from HEMA, the authentically Dutch budget store,” he adds. HEMA promotes itself as representing the average Dutch man and has recently gone international. In bringing the Dutch tradition of Sinterklaas to parts of the United Kingdom, Belgium and Germany however, HEMA did not introduce the character of Zwarte Piet. For Gario, this is significant, because “if HEMA is aware of the problematic nature of the image [Zwarte Piet] that means that they are in the Netherlands as well. They are at the forefront of pushing this, pushing the idea of blackface and Zwarte Piet as problematic in the Netherlands.”

When Gario and a number of others were violently arrested for wearing the shirt in question at the Sinterklaas parade in 2011, the campaign reached a national level. In an interview on his work, Gario stated that after the arrest and his media appearances, he became more visible which “enabled him and others to place a finger on a sore spot [in the Dutch legacy of racism] in a way that had not been successful before that.” Through his work, Gario not only exposed the remnants of the Dutch colonial past, but also the infrastructure and systemic practices that reproduce racism on a daily basis.

Following the campaign, the Dutch media have often referred to Gario as the head of the *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* movement. “The moment you become visible or hypervisible, people stick the label of leader on you,” Gario tells us. Gario’s intention however, was for the phrase to “become a staple of the discussion and a rallying cry that empowers people to stand up and fight for their right.” Envisioned as a leaderless movement, it has been carried on by many other artists and activists in The Netherlands.

For Gario, the role of the artist is “to trouble and disturb the norm and resist the idea that everything is as it is supposed to be.” Gario’s *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* T-shirts resulted in backlash against and aggression towards Gario and others who wore them. Yet Gario’s T-shirts and the larger campaign were successful in exposing the present state of cultural racism in The Netherlands as well the Dutch denial of and disinterest in confronting its colonial past. Not only did they spark a national debate in traditional and social media, but they were also recognized by cultural institutions internationally. Recently, Gario gifted the original T-shirt to the Amsterdam Museum. Since then, institutions such as the Stedelijk Museum, the MACBA in Barcelona and the MuHKA in Antwerp among others, have commissioned his performances. With the support of these museums, Gario has inscribed himself within the historical narrative that is promoted by these institutions, making his work against Zwarte Piet visible on a larger international level.

Ivan Words: Speaking Resistance

Perched on a corner of West Kruiskade street in Rotterdam, we meet the spoken word artist Ivan Words. The street is the heart the multicultural city, with entrepreneurs and artists from different ethnic backgrounds who have made it their home in the past decades.

Words performs his poem, *Heal the Wound, Leave the Scar*, in which he reflects on experiences and the memories they leave behind. “After the sounds of war faded out, I am tired of silence...” he says with a rhythm that follows the various emotions he feels with each word of the poem.

Words, a Dutch spoken word artist of Afro-Surinamese descent is one of a growing number of Black spoken word artists in The Netherlands. Words uses poetry and spoken word performance “to move crowds, to express, to inspire, and to make people self conscious.” Words is part of a long history of individuals within the Black Diaspora using oral performance to preserve Black identity.

The distinction between spoken word and traditional poetry mostly lies in the ways spoken word is performed for an audience. It uses rhythm, improvisation, word play, and slang to convey messages usually reflecting on injustice, current events, history, or personal narratives. Spoken word is not unique in that it uses rhythm and words to create meaning. The intersection of literature and music has always been a prominent theme in Black art culture. From Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes’ use of blues and other rhythms of Black music in his poetry, to Toni Morrison’s use of Jazz in her writing, words and rhythm are a natural pair in Black art.

Rhythm and poetry (Rap), one of the artistic elements that make Hip-hop is also a catalyst for the emergence of spoken art. Similar to hip hop, the art of spoken word was founded in urban cities (Chicago and New York) amongst youth and marginalized communities in the U.S. Perhaps that is what makes it a necessary and fitting tool of resistance in the Netherlands, a country of passive racism towards its Black and migrant populations.

Despite being predominantly white, the Netherlands has a sizable composition of ethnic and racial minorities, including a Black of population of former and current colonies like Suriname and the Antilles, and immigrants from West Africa and the Caribbean. According to an entry published on the Afro-Europe International [blog](#) in 2010, there were 400,000 Black people living in the Netherlands. However, this number should be assessed carefully considering the population may have increased within the last five years. Additionally, it is difficult to quantify the Black population within The Netherlands because the Dutch government and media avoids referring to ethnic groups by their race.

“They don’t speak about racism, but we do, it [racism] is denied by white supremacy in this country. Being marginalized, we [Black people] are tired of being victimized, of not being taken seriously. The way my work contributes to this is that I want to empower people with my

words,” Words tells us. His poetry creates a Black identity that is united, full of love, and allows multidimensional views of the world. He also responds to current events regarding Black people in the Netherlands, for example, during the anti-Zwarte Pete campaign, Words performed poetry incorporating the subject, “I wanted to talk about the society we live in, I wanted to give a political news flash through my poetry.”

Additionally, Words gives writing workshops at schools to children ages 14-21. He describes this part of his work in a poetic style, “I teach to make them [the students] conscious, the education system doesn’t teach them to think, to state their opinion, writing is for expression, to tell the world that you do matter.”

Words’ commitment to write, perform and teach spoken word as a form of resistance in a country that avoids naming its race relations, is especially significant. By writing to create consciousness of Black identity, Words and other local spoken word artists use the The Netherlands’ refusal of acknowledging race to not only speak their resistance, but to negotiate the way they, as a people and as individuals are defined.

Aisha Martina: Africa on Stage

Spoken word is only one of various performing arts used in the broader resistance movement. To understand what role theater plays in the Dutch Black community, we talk to Aisha Martina, the founder and creative director of the theater and dance company *Untold Empowerment*.

Martina welcomes us in the Bijlmer Parktheater where the majority of *Untold*’s rehearsals take place. The theater [opened](#) in 2009 to serve the Amsterdam South East neighborhood as a major cultural and artistic center. Upon entering the theater, we immediately see various African-themed posters for the company’s current and future productions. Shortly thereafter we are greeted by a smiling Martina, who is keen to give us a tour around the building. She explains that *Untold* is just one of many initiatives connected to the theater, next to dance, circus and other plays.

“Actually, *Untold* dates from before the Bijlmer Park Theater was opened. We started in 2002 as different groups looking to tell our stories through a show: jazz, hip hop, drummers,” shares Martina. “We wanted to tell who we are and where we come from, as descendents of people from Suriname and the African Diaspora.”

Martina shows us an album documenting some of the group’s first performances. We see various photos of young dancers in colorful outfits. Aisha tells us the clothing is inspired by traditions in Egypt, West-Africa, Caribbean and Latin America. She explains how the company developed since those first performances: “producers liked our shows and we got opportunities to grow. Soon, we started to do more and work with children: workshops, fashion shows and productions linked to their African and Caribbean heritage. This is how we ended up in this neighborhood.”

Amsterdam South-East, also known as the Bijlmer, is one of the most multicultural neighborhoods in the city. Designed in the post-war years as a modern living space for the middle class, it instead housed a diverse immigrant community from Suriname and the Antilles. Poverty, lack of economic opportunities and government services led to it being designated a '[ghetto](#)', with high crime rates and drug activity. Since the 1990s, redevelopment plans have succeeded in reducing criminal activity and improving the neighborhood's public image. Its predominantly Black community however, continues to face obstacles in obtaining the same socio-economic opportunities as other residents and populations in the city.

"Black kids in the neighborhood are quickly called 'risk children'. They are not always given the chance to show what they are capable of," says Martina. While originally from a different part of town, she felt that Amsterdam South-East was the right place to bring *Untold*. Here, children from a Surinamese, Caribbean or African backgrounds [are much less likely to attend higher forms of education](#). Often it is negative perceptions by educators and institutions that result in lower confidence and achievement for the students. Martina addresses this: "At *Untold*, they can find opportunities and a community, and develop their creativity and talents. We were always inspired by education in creating our performances."

Displaying the Black diaspora's shared African heritage is the way *Untold* creates a powerful sense of community. "People of color from the former Dutch colonies did not use to identify as African. For many, Africa stood for poverty and problems - an image they did not want," Martina tells us. However, shared experiences and current topics such as the Zwarte Piet discussion has emphasized the common ways Black people are treated in the Netherlands.

Martina explains when the African ancestry is increasingly placed in the forefront of discussion, it becomes a stronger part of an individual's identity. "At school our pupils only get a part of the colonial story. We want to shed light on the stories of the formerly enslaved in the Caribbean that are ignored or suppressed. This way youth understand where they came from and the struggles they might face in Dutch society." *Untold* combines various dance and art traditions in its curriculum - from West-African dance to the Surinamese [winti](#) culture, a mix of African and Surinamese indigenous spirituality that is a vital characteristic of the organization. *Untold's* theater productions often focus on stories of how Black enslaved people were brought to the Caribbean, and how the combination of many Black cultures and traditions created a unique artistic heritage. Engaging youth in these traditions gives them a sense of belonging and motivates them to stand up for themselves when facing injustices, Aisha explains .

"Many of our students come from families with little financial opportunities to be engaged in arts. That's why we ask little or no contribution, even if we do not receive much funding," says Martina. In fact, *Untold Empowerment* receives relatively little institutional support compared to other productions in the theater. They are allowed to use the building, but are limited in their

operational budget. Most of the organizers, Martina tells us, work there voluntarily and contribute in their free time. Martina volunteers her time and energy to the initiative because she is personally invested in seeing the youth succeed. She explains, “my passion is to give kids something I did not have while growing up. I was also labeled ‘risk youth’, but made it by falling and getting up.”

Why art? Martina sees it as a natural form of resistance. “Coming from Africa and the Caribbean, it is natural to express yourself through music and dance. Our enslaved ancestors had their own arts that were a source of strength during their oppression. They were told their rituals are bad and evil, but they still kept the spirit alive.” *Untold* seeks to translate that very same feeling of empowerment to the youth they serve. “Using art allows kids to express themselves. Everything we do is fun, but everything we do also has a message. We teach them to know their worth, and to stand up for themselves and their communities. The younger you begin, the bigger impact you’ll have on the kid’s life.”

Performing also allows Martina to reach beyond its main actors and create links between communities. “Being in our productions is a big deal in the neighborhood. We receive a lot of support and our shows are often sold out. People from the former colonies but also immigrants from African countries: everyone comes together in discovering this shared heritage.” *Untold* also gives its youth the opportunities to connect with the global Black diaspora through youth exchanges and trips. For instance, they often go to London to celebrate Black History Month, and have also done volunteer work in Ghana. Martina hopes that young representatives of *Untold* can be a powerful voice of the Dutch Black community abroad and build lasting relationships across borders. More importantly, she hopes *Untold* will help the youth reach their full potential: “Knowledge of the Black identity will help you become a better person.”

At the end of our interview, Martina takes us to a youth dance practice. About twenty girls along with their choreographer dance with ease. They are doing various African dances - Azonto, Alkayida and a touch of modern Hip-hop - all to a Ghanaian Hiplife song. At the end, they wrap up the upbeat routine by striking a confident pose. Aisha, standing on the sidelines, watches them with pride.

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