Heritage, Blackness and Afro-Cool

*Styling Africanness in Amsterdam**

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Abstract

This article focuses on the recent emergence of an “Afro-Dutch” category of self-identification among young people in Amsterdam. Dutch-born youth of different Afro-Caribbean and African backgrounds show a new sense of (and search for) a shared African heritage, and a growing desire for public exposure and recognition of this Africanness. Manifesting in, for example, media initiatives, performing arts, cultural festivals, and bodily fashions, this trend is characterized by an aesthetic emphasis on globalized African styles and by political struggles about the inclusion of African heritage in Dutch imaginations of nationhood. Approaching Africanness as a *process of becoming* and a *practice of self-styling*, this article explores the convergence between the renewed interest in African roots among Dutch-born Afro-Caribbeans and the ways in which Ghanaian youth engage with their African origins. It discerns three prominent, but contested tropes with regard to their framing and design of Africanness: “African heritage”, “blackness” and “Afro-cool”.

Keywords

Africanness – Afro-Dutch – Self-styling – Cultural Heritage – Blackness – Afro-cool

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Résumé

Cet article attire l'attention sur l'émergence récente d'une catégorie 'afro-néerlandaise' d'auto-identification que l'on peut retrouver parmi des jeunes Amstellodamois. Nés aux Pays-Bas mais d'origine afro-caribéenne et africaine, ces jeunes témoignent d'un nouveau sens (et d'un intérêt) pour un héritage africain commun ainsi qu'un désir croissant de montrer et de faire reconnaître publiquement leur africanité. Se manifestant, par exemple, sous la forme d'initiatives médiatiques, de spectacles des arts de la scène, de festivals culturels ou encore de modes vestimentaires, cette tendance se caractérise par l'accent mis sur les styles esthétiques africains mondialisés et les combats politiques en faveur de l'intégration de l'héritage africain dans l'imaginaire national néerlandais. Traitant l'africanité sous l'angle d'un processus de «devenir» et d'une pratique de «stylisation de soi», cet article explore la convergence entre ce regain d'intérêt pour les racines africaines parmi les jeunes afro-caribéens nés aux Pays-Bas et la manière dont la jeunesse ghanéenne aborde ses origines africaines. Il distingue trois tropes principaux – quoique non exempts de controverses – concernant la définition et la conception de leur africanité: «l'héritage culturel africain», «l'identité black» et «le style *afro-cool*».

Mots-clés

africanité – afro-néerlandais – stylisation de soi – héritage culturel Africain – identité black – *afro-cool*

Introduction

Who is an African? What does it mean to be African in Europe? Is African the same as Afro? Are black people automatically African? These questions are hotly debated among young people in Amsterdam today. On online discussion fora, Facebook pages, and blogs, and in community centres, entertainment halls, and at festival grounds, questions of African identity, belonging, and heritage are recurrent and their answers diverse, and often passionately argued.

Joyce¹ is a fashion designer, born in Amsterdam of Ghanaian parents: "I can be Dutch and Ghanaian at the same time and both things are true. But inside,

¹ In order to respect the anonymity of my interlocutors, I use pseudonyms, except for publicly known persons voicing issues that are already widely circulating.

I am African; my parents gave me that ... even if I didn't feel African until I was 22."² Now, her African background is an important source of inspiration for the clothes she designs, and likes to wear. Angela is a hairdresser and a student of fashion. She said: "I was born in Curacao of mixed blood, even Spanish, and raised in the Netherlands, but I am simply African."³ Nothing in her professional practice or her dressing style explicitly shows this and she has never been to any African country; for her, being African consists of a strong awareness of the history of transatlantic slavery and the place of origin of some of her ancestors. Bamba Nazar is a well-known DJ in Amsterdam's Afro music scene. Born in Amsterdam of a white Dutch mother and a black Surinamese father, he grew up largely in Suriname, lived in New York for some years, and then returned to Amsterdam. He said: "I see myself first of all as an African, I recognize my roots. Our history and who we are is a very powerful thing."⁴ His recognition of his African roots resulted in him organizing an annual African Homecoming festival.

For a few years, young Dutch people of what in official discourse would be termed "different ethnic backgrounds" – "Ghanaian", "Antillean" and "Surinamese" – show an emergent sense of – and search for – a shared African heritage, and a growing desire for public exposure and recognition of this Africanness as part of new, hybrid forms of being Dutch. A new identity label is in vogue: "Afro-Dutch". Kenneth, however, born in Amsterdam of black Surinamese parents, is critical of the label: "All this Afro stuff nowadays ... pfff ... I have got nothing to do with Africa. Some of my ancestors maybe, but not me. I am not ethnic; I am simply Surinamese-Dutch. Creole, Hindu, we are all Suris."⁵ Kenneth explicitly rejects "this Afro stuff" that is increasingly in fashion nowadays, and wants to refrain from "being ethnic". He rather claims a hyphenated identity as Surinamese-Dutch. Being Afro-Dutch is a choice, it appears, and competes or blends in with other identifications.

2 "Ik kan tegelijkertijd Nederlands en Ghanees zijn en allebei zijn waar. Maar van binnen ben ik Afrikaans, dat heb ik van mijn ouders meegekregen ... ook al voelde ik me tot mijn 22^{ste} nooit Afrikaans."

3 "Ik ben geboren in Curaçao, van gemengd bloed, zelfs Spaans, en opgegroeid in Nederland. Maar ik ben gewoon Afrikaans."

4 "Ik beschouw mezelf in de eerste plaats als Afrikaan, ik erken mijn roots. Onze geschiedenis en wie we zijn is een heel krachtig iets." <http://www.zubb.nl/muziek/839/interview-bamba-nazar>, accessed 22 January, 2014.

5 "Al die Afro-dingen tegenwoordig ... pfff ... ik heb niks met Afrika. Een paar van mijn voorouders misschien, maar ik niet. Ik ben niet etnisch; ik ben gewoon Surinaams-Nederlands. Creool, Hindoe, we zijn allemaal Suri's."

Being hotly debated as part of identity politics, Africanness is also, and increasingly so, mobilized in the arena of lifestyle and entertainment. A great variety of cultural entrepreneurs, from fashion designers, lifestyle magazines, and dance groups to bloggers, DJs, and other tastemakers, address a growing market for African styles. Inspired by globally circulating images and sounds of Africanness, and thriving on aesthetic appeal, design, and marketing, they vest “being African” with an aura of urban cool that attracts increasing numbers of young people and provide them with the materials – “all this Afro stuff” – with which to flesh out their – often newly found – identities.

To be clear, even if people themselves may use the category of Afro-Dutch quite matter-of-factly – in talking about “the Afro-Dutch community” for instance – it is not to be taken at face value as an “ethnic group” that automatically includes all who can trace ancestry to someplace in Africa. Rather, we are dealing here with a trend that a growing number of people, highly diverse in terms of ethnic and racial backgrounds, chose to join.⁶ In that sense, being African is also *becoming* African, as Joyce clearly expressed: “I didn’t feel African until I was 22.” One of the most influential theorists advancing an approach of cultural identity as both “being” and “becoming” has been Stuart Hall. In his seminal essay “Cultural identity and diaspora,” (1993: 392) Hall suggests that “perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation”. The new Afro-cultural practices in Amsterdam do not express some already existing identity; they are the media through which previously non-existent Afro-Dutch identities are coming into being.

In this article I propose to approach Afro-Dutch identity as a *practice of self-styling*: designing the self and the group(s) to which one wants to belong by means of media, style, and (sub)cultural consumption. These things are often considered superficial, in contrast to something like “ethnicity”, that is supposed to be “deep-seated”. But I would like to stress that practices of self-styling and cultural consumption are at the heart of the contemporary identity question. My emphasis on style and self-styling takes inspiration from Michel Maffesoli’s understanding of “aesthetic style” as a binding force in an

6 Whether the growing interest in Africanness is to be understood as a hype, a trend, a social movement or something more solid and lasting is subject to local debate among those involved, including a web poll on the question. My use of the term “trend” is not to endorse one such assessment, but to acknowledge the historical waxing and possible waning (see also Modest and Jaffe, this issue) of African self-identifications.

age in which primordial loyalties and group affiliations have lost their self-evidence (1996: 31ff.; see also Meyer 2009). It also refers to the ubiquity of the “I am ...”, or what Sarah Nuttall has called “the emergence of explicit forms of selfhood within the public domain and the rise of the first-person singular within the work of liberation” (Nuttall 2004: 432). It thus directs attention to the social-aesthetic work involved in processes of identification and self-realization (which gets ever more urgent with the centrality of visual social media in young people’s lives). Across the globe young urbanites self-confidently mobilize and reassemble ethnic and cultural traditions as they fashion themselves in a global “identity economy” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; see also: Maher 2005). “African culture”, ever reinvented, ever reimagined, is booming as a reservoir of materials with which young people shape their lifestyles and identities, both in cities on the continent (e.g. De Witte and Meyer 2012; Nuttall 2004; Spronk, this issue) and in the diaspora (e.g. Sansone 1999). This is no different in Amsterdam, where “Africa” increasingly features as a source of pride, pleasure and empowerment for young black people in search of who they are. The question to be explored here is how this apparent process of self-styling comes into shape.

My approach to Africanness as self-design raises questions about the theoretical nexus of identity and authenticity and the role of anthropologists in substantiating the identity work of our interlocutors. Conceiving of Africanness not as some kind of authentic primordiality but as a historically and socially situated construct (see also the introduction to this issue), I posit that any assessment of whether or to what extent something is “authentically African” makes little sense (see Scott 1999, p. 108ff.). The question that remains to be addressed, however, is how self-constructed identities come to be experienced as authentic or primordial, that is, as anything but self-made. This would direct our focus not on “African authenticity” but on the practices of authentication that imbue designed selves with a “felt authentic grounding” (Van de Port 2004). Primordiality then may resurface as a resource people employ as part of their identity work. For instance, bodily tropes such as race, blood or DNA appear as powerful “authenticating devices”, such as when people ground their Africanity in phenotype (e.g. skin colour, hair type), bloodlines or genetic ancestry tests (Balkenhol 2011; Schramm et al. 2012). This interplay of design and authentication is an important theoretical and empirical question which I will pursue in detail elsewhere. Here I focus on the multiplicity of and dynamics between formulations of Africanness in a local setting with people of various African backgrounds.

What is interesting about the Dutch situation at this particular moment in history is that the renewed interest in African roots and self-styling among

Dutch people of Afro-Caribbean (Surinamese, Antillean) backgrounds (Balkenhol 2011) coincides with the coming of age of a second generation of Africans (in Amsterdam predominantly Ghanaians), who engage with their so-called African heritage in ways that are very different from their parents' ways of being African. The district of Amsterdam Southeast in particular is a place where groups from various black and African origins come and live together. With high concentrations of people categorized as being of "Surinamese" (32%), "Ghanaian" (10%), and "Antillean" (6%) descent (Amsterdam BOS 2013), it is home to a great variety of Afro-oriented cultural productions, media, and events. Here, second and third generations grow up in the same neighbourhood, attend school together, and hence develop their identities in interaction with each other.

This social reality seriously destabilizes the still dominant research focus on distinct "ethnic minority groups" (Brubaker 2004). In the Netherlands, dominant discourse about so-called "ethnic minorities" – apart from confusing country of origin with ethnicity – leaves little space for analyzing the processes of differentiation and merger that crosscut distinctions between officially recognized ethnic categories, as well as those between "ethnic minority" and "Dutch majority". Crucially, such discourse persistently excludes minorities from Dutch nationhood by failing to acknowledge their Dutchness. Self-identification as *Afro-Dutch*, which clearly echoes (the now outdated) "Afro-American", is also a claim to Dutchness and a call for recognizing hyphenated identities.⁷ Instead of reproducing the language of "ethnic minorities", I suggest analyzing the trend towards Africanness in terms of dominant discourses about identity and selfhood that tout the value of "becoming who you really are" (Guignon 2004: 3) by discovering your "inner self" and styling yourself accordingly in the social (media) world.

In this process, the question of who or what is African, and on what grounds, turns out to be far from self-evident, even if statements like "I am simply African" present it as such. As the debates and stories presented in this article show, the difficulty of naming is part and parcel of the urgency with which young people discuss the issue of Africanness. Instead of taking their claims

7 This "politics of naming" complicates the terminology: there is a multiplicity of cross-cutting emic terms of self-identification that interact in multiple ways – critically opposing as well as strategically appropriating – with the ascription of identity categories by policy discourse (e.g. in demographic statistics) and with researchers' terminologies. It is important to recognize that all such terms are situational and relational, and thus embedded in often-unequal power structures, and that the terms we as scholars use in our writings are inevitably part of this politics of naming.

to Africanness for granted, I propose to study them as part and parcel of situated actions and events, creative and political projects, and discursive and aesthetic frames (Brubaker 2004: 11). Becoming African happens on the ground, in the encounters between people of various backgrounds. In these encounters and events, Africa features in different, sometimes contradictory ways. The question this article addresses is around what new forms of Africanness different “Afro-Dutch” groups can unite. And how the forms around which Afro-Dutch identities may crystallize are appropriated or contested. In what follows I explore the convergence between Dutch-born Africans and Afro-Caribbeans as they search for and design Africanness in media, expressive culture, and practices of self-styling. Differences in migration history, language, culture, and connection with Africa, make this convergence an ongoing search with an uncertain outcome, involving struggle, contestations, creativity and reflection.

As a background, I first give a brief description of the history and multiplicity of African diaspora in the Netherlands. Discussing examples from the burgeoning field of Afro-centred cultural production in Amsterdam, the second section sheds light on current trends and identifies three important tropes: “African heritage”, “blackness” and “Afro-cool”.⁸ The first two are empowering and engaging, but interpretations of heritage and blackness respectively seem too divergent and contested sometimes to bolster a collective Afro-identity. The third one, the recent trend towards a celebration of Afro-cool aesthetics in fashion and music, appears to hold more potential in that respect. Young people of various backgrounds unite more easily in the present turn to contemporary urban African arts and popular culture. Global in circulation and cosmopolitan in appeal, a variety of urban African cultural expressions provide young people in the diaspora with the positive vibe and fashionable aesthetics around which to shape a shared sense of Africanness.

8 I use the term “trope” in the sense of a representational formation (discursive or aesthetic) that encodes and evokes complex, historically sedimented and contextually variable bodies of knowledge and feeling (cf. Palmié 2007: 164). While the terms “African heritage” and “black” are established (but, as this article shows, not uncontested) terms widely used by local actors, I have selected the term “Afro-cool” from a range of newer, less sedimented terms currently in circulation. Referring to the positive, creatively hybrid, mostly urban-oriented restyling of Africanness in the 21st century, “Afro-cool” differs from the “aesthetic of the cool” that Robert Farris Thompson (2011) analyzed as an essential characteristic of Afro-Atlantic culture, although there may be connections between the two that merit further exploration.

African Diaspora in the Netherlands

In contrast to the US, in the Netherlands the hyphenated category of Afro-Dutch has only recently emerged, but also been contested, as a category of self-identification, mainly among young-Dutch born people of various black African and racially mixed backgrounds. Black migrants from Dutch ex-colonies in the Caribbean and various African countries have long been living in the Netherlands, albeit as somewhat distinct groups. Three main historical currents, although not strictly separable, contributed to the current composition of the Dutch African diasporic population: colonial history brought large groups of Surinamese and Antilleans to the Netherlands; post-WWII economic history accounts for today's strong Moroccan presence; and political and economic crises in various African countries, especially since the 1980s, brought increasing flows of migrants seeking safer and/or 'greener pastures'.

The largest presence of African-descended people in the Netherlands results from the Dutch participation in the transatlantic slave trade. Between 1600 and 1815 about half a million enslaved people, primarily from West African regions, were shipped to Dutch colonial possessions in the New World – initially Brazil, later Suriname, the Dutch Antilles, and Aruba. After the end of slavery in 1863, colonial authorities promoted the assimilation of the now free black population to Dutch culture, mainly through the colonial education system. In 1954 all inhabitants of the Dutch colonies became citizens, which opened the way for migration to the Netherlands. Whereas until 1965 small numbers of Surinamese and Antilleans had come to the Netherlands temporarily for study, from 1965 onwards larger numbers of Surinamese migrants from all socio-economic ranks came to find jobs or to apply for social security on the basis of their Dutch citizenship. Most Surinamese migrants, however, came just before Suriname's independence in 1975, when those who had little confidence in the country's economic and political future decided to leave. After independence, many more Surinamese made use of the 'last option' to migrate before they would lose their Dutch citizenship in 1980. A total of about 300,000 Surinamese came to stay in the Netherlands, over one-third of the entire Surinamese population. This is a very heterogeneous population, consisting of people of Hindustani, Creole, Javanese, Chinese, Maroon, Indian (native Surinamese) and mixed descent.⁹

9 Creole (*creool*) is the name commonly used for descendants of enslaved Africans; maroon (*marron*) for the descendants of those who fled from slavery and created independent settlements in the interior.

A new flow of colonial migrants gained momentum in the 1990s: Antilleans. Before that time most Antilleans in the Netherlands were study migrants. Since the mid-1990s, more and more underprivileged Antillean youth came to look for economic chances in the Netherlands. They face many social problems and Dutch Antillean youth are often associated in the public imagination with criminality (Sharpe 2014: 109, 205). Because the Antilles are still part of the Dutch Kingdom, Antilleans are Dutch citizens and therefore entitled to free access to the country and its social security system. More than one-third of the Dutch Antillean population resides in the Netherlands (about 130,000 people).

In terms of post-WWII economic history, a defining moment was the shortage of labour force caused by the quick reconstruction and industrialization processes after the war. During the 1960s employers, and later the government, started recruiting semi- and unskilled industrial workers in Southern Europe and later in Turkey and North-Africa, primarily Morocco. First, second, and third-generation Turks and Moroccans, most of them Berber, now make up a large portion of the Dutch population. Despite their roots on the African continent, Moroccan-Dutch are not normally seen as being of African origin (without the qualifier North), whether by themselves or by others. This reveals a strong yet often taken-for-granted conflation of “African” with sub-Saharan African or black. The strong North-African presence in the Netherlands is relevant to exploring the category of Afro-Dutch and revealing its blurred, contested boundaries. Some African-oriented events and cultural productions do explicitly address Moroccan-Dutch as part of their audiences, but with limited success.

Since the 1980s the Netherlands has seen a growing influx of asylum seeking refugees from many parts of the world, caused by wars and political crises, but also by poverty and economic crises, and made possible by quick improvements in global communication and especially transport. Among others, large groups of Africans (predominantly Somali, Cape Verdeans, Ghanaians, Ethiopians, Eritreans and Egyptians), found their way to the country, through official or unofficial routes. Admission policies for asylum seekers have become stricter and stricter, and people whose application for asylum has been denied, are “removed” from the country via special “removal centres” [*uitzetcentra*]. Increasing numbers of people, however, opt for a life in “illegality”.

Dutch society is thus characterized by a high level of cultural diversity with a long history. But as much as the Netherlands has often been recognized as a prime European example of multiculturalism, it is at present accorded a paradigmatic status in what has been called “the retreat of multiculturalism” in Europe (Joppke 2004). Dutch policy and public debate exhibit a strong and

persistent tendency of “othering” anyone who does not fit the image of mainstream white Dutchness (Essed and Trienekens 2008; Wekker 2009). Especially since the turn of the millennium, right-wing populism has been on the rise and a wave of anti-immigrant sentiments has been sweeping the country. African and Afro-Caribbean youth, born and raised in the Netherlands, are facing ongoing questioning of their Dutchness, and of the legitimacy of their being in the Netherlands, expressed as a growing pressure to adapt to “Dutch culture” or “fuck off to your own country”.¹⁰ As Sibò Kano, a contributor to the Afro-Europe blog, writes:

Black people in Europe, whether with brown or black skin, whether born there or not, whether having a white parent or not, whether adopted or not, whether they speak the national language or not, whether integrated or not, ... are all perceived as a certain kind of foreigners from a common continent. [...] This experience is central in the creation of our identity.¹¹

Undoubtedly, the growing popularity of the “Afro-Dutch” category of self-identification comes partly in response to shared experiences of racist othering. Such experiences not only “force [black youth] to recognize their commonality as “blacks” or “Africans”” (Blakely 2005: 593); they also urge them to proclaim that, although not white, they too are Dutch. However, behind this “commonality as “blacks”” in the face of everyday racism, important differences, if not tensions, exist between various African-descended groups in the Netherlands that complicate their “commonality as Africans” or any taken-for-granted assumptions about an “Afro-Dutch” identity.

Differences in colonial and migration history have produced disparities with regard to familiarity with Dutch language and culture, access to citizenship, and socio-economic prospects. Migrants from the (former) Dutch colonies in the Caribbean had already been part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, were imbued with Dutch culture and language, and, mostly, saw themselves as Dutch. It was when they migrated to the Netherlands that their Dutchness was called into question and met with (racist) opposition from the majority, white

10 This pressure came to full-blown expression in 2013, when the (much older) controversy about the figure of Zwarte Piet in the Dutch Sinterklaas tradition reached unprecedented levels of attention on a national and international scale, accompanied by an explosion of anti-black commentary, as well as a refuelled debate about racism in Dutch society.

11 <http://afroeuropa.blogspot.nl/2009/09/what-is-afroeuropa-who-are.html> accessed 11 November 2014.

Dutch society that generally perceived and treated Surinamese and Antillean immigrants as foreigners (Balkenhol 2011: 140). For Ghanaian migrants, the lack of a colonial link to the Netherlands makes for a very different relationship to Dutch society, language and culture, with most of them perceiving themselves as foreigners in a host country. Their children thus come to the question of being Dutch from a different direction than their Caribbean peers. As regards the question of being African, there are, of course, significant differences in the connection to and the imagination of Africa between Afro-Caribbean and Ghanaian Dutch. Whereas for most Surinamese and Antillean Dutch Africa is first of all an imagined place, Ghanaian Dutch have a direct link to a concrete place that their parents call home, even if they may not have visited it themselves. They may speak or understand a Ghanaian language, and know how to appreciate Ghanaian food. Such cultural familiarity, however, does not automatically make them identify as African.

For many Ghanaian Dutch youth, their African background used to be less a source of pride than of uneasiness, confusion and even shame, especially so in interactions with non-Africans. Partly, this had to do with the dominant image of Africa in the mainstream media and the public imagination as poor, war-torn, and backward. Added to this was a local dynamics of ethnic stereotyping between different “black” groups in Amsterdam Southeast. In particular, an aversion for Africans on the part of many Surinamese and Antillean blacks (see also Bijnaar 2002: 137), nurtured by longstanding stereotypes, has coloured many Africans’ experiences of growing up in Amsterdam, especially in Southeast with its large Surinamese population. In a way, being black was easier than being African and some Ghanaian youngsters chose to identify with the generalized “black” community in Amsterdam Southeast and keep silent about their being African. With the current global success of popular music and dance styles from urban Africa (especially West Africa), the connotations of defining oneself as African are now changing for the positive. *Azonto* in particular, a Ghanaian urban dance style that became wildly popular transnationally (Shipley 2013), has played a crucial role in elevating the image of young Ghanaians in Amsterdam and making it attractive to be or become African. As many of them expressed, being African is suddenly “cool”.

Clearly, such historical fluctuations complicate often-heard naturalizing statements like “I am black *thus* I am African” and indeed the very notions of “Afro-Dutch” or “the Dutch African diaspora” as unifying categories. They speak to the variety and mutability of experiences of being black/African, of what that African part of one’s identity means and does. Naturally, these experiences are different for every individual, situated in personal biographies, families, neighbourhoods and schools. But they also emerge out of histories of slavery,

imperialism, colonialism, post-colonialism and migration. These histories, as Marta Sofía López points out, have “enormously complicated the definition of what being ‘African’ means” (2008: 4). The boom in platforms (online and offline) created by and for African-descended people in the Netherlands also speaks to a longing to discuss this question, to share experiences, and to unite around a positive image of Africa. One thing seems crucial for all young people exploring their African roots: the presence of inspiring and uplifting images of Africa and Africans, an “iconography that you would wrap your African identity around”, as a Ghanaian-British put it in a recent vlog. Much of the current trend towards Africanness in Amsterdam thrives on young people’s passionate dedication to establishing and participating in such Afro-iconographies through the production, circulation, and consumption of media content, images, cultural performances, and lifestyle products.

Afro-Iconographies in the Making

Amsterdam Southeast is home to a growing variety of Africa-oriented events, cultural productions and media platforms. Having observed this field over the past three years, I recognize three discursive and stylistic tropes that are prominent in designs of Africanness: “African heritage”, “blackness” and “Afro-cool”. The following examples show that the ways in which people engage with these tropes vary significantly.

Untold Empowerment

A very active organization that seeks to promote “African roots” among young people is Untold, an “empowerment organization” that uses dance and theatre as instruments to “actively engage Afro-Dutch youth in knowing and valuing their identity and culture”. Originally an Afro-Caribbean initiative, led by Otmar Watson (of Surinamese origin) and Aisha Martina (of Curaçaoan origin), it targets black youth between 15 and 30 with the objective of strengthening their self-esteem. Knowledge of the history of the slave trade – “knowing where you are coming from” – and consciousness of “African culture and identity” is deemed crucial to this end. It often starts with teaching (sometimes persuading) people that they have an “African background”. With a group of semi-professional actors/dancers of Afro-Caribbean backgrounds, Untold produces theatre and dance shows that tell “the untold story” of Africa and Africans in the diasporas to audiences in Amsterdam theatres as well as internationally, and seeks to raise debate about, as Untold phrased it, “what is left in the Netherlands of the tradition and culture of the African diaspora”. The stories are

performed through a variety of African and Afro-Caribbean music and dance styles, but the emphasis is on what they call “African traditional” dance, for which Untold has employed an Ivorian dance teacher.¹²

Shows performed over the past few years include “Untold: The Story”, about the history of the Surinamese and Antillean Dutch who originated from Africa, the Dutch history of slavery; “Remember: A Journey through Time”, about an eighteen-year-old “Afro-Dutch” girl in Amsterdam, who after the death of her grandfather is overwhelmed by visions that take her back in time to Africa and the Caribbean; and, most recently, “Obia”, about the Afro-Surinamese winti religion, that emerged but was heavily suppressed in the context of slavery. Although winti is not necessarily “African” but rather “Surinamese”, Otmar explicitly stresses its Africanness and teaches members how winti deities came from different regions in Africa – Kromanti and Apuku from “Ghana” for instance and Luangu from “Angola”. Interestingly, when I asked Otmar why there were so few Ghanaians among Untold’s membership, the first reason he gave was that most Ghanaians are committed Pentecostals and find Untold’s interest in winti problematic.¹³ So while winti may be mobilized as “African heritage” linking Afro-Caribbeans to Africa, including Ghana, it serves much less easily to link them with their Ghanaian peers. Together with a predominantly Surinamese audience, I attended an Obia show on 24 November, 2013. Named after a healing spirit/god in the winti religion, Obia tells of the spiritual transformation of an Afro-Dutch boy, who, late at night at a deserted suburban bus stop, is suddenly visited by his ancestral spirits. He tries to run away from them, but they confront him with his own identity questions and finally make him feel the power that dwells within him.

In Untold’s empowerment approach, Africanness comes to be directly associated with blackness. The drive is to free black youth of feelings of inferiority caused by the history of slavery and colonialism, which defined blackness as inferior to whiteness, and by current media stigmatization of black youth. Improving one’s self-image requires knowledge of this history, as well as knowledge of the fact that you are not a descendant of slaves, but of a people that had a rich culture that you can be proud of. A central place in Untold’s the-

12 “African traditional dance” is a widely used, but problematic term not to be taken for granted. Evoking a timeless past, it is a historical construct that emerged in the context of nation-building in West Africa as colonial and postcolonial states promoted the reformation and canonization of existing performance practices, mainly through national dance troupes and schools (see Neveu Kringelbach 2013 for Senegal).

13 This parallels Pentecostals’ negative stance towards the mobilization of “African traditional religion” as heritage in Ghana; see De Witte and Meyer 2012.

atre productions (and the production process), then, is taken up by research into and representation of “the African heritage” that Afro-Caribbeans were severed from by the transatlantic slave trade. Preparing the shows not only consists of African dance classes and rehearsals, but also of “empowerment training sessions” and workshops about black history and social issues confronting black youth. Untold’s formulations of African heritage are thus inseparably connected to broader struggles for disseminating knowledge about and gaining public recognition of this history (see Balkenhol 2014).

The Africa that Untold turns to in their shows, then, is an Africa that is projected onto the past. This is expressed through the neo-traditional dances the group focuses on in their choreographies, originating from various African countries but mainly from Cote d’Ivoire, the home country of the dance teacher. In terms of visual styling too, much inspiration is taken from an imagined, “tribal” African past. Conspicuous dress elements include colourful kente and wax print, made into skirts of vertical fabric strips with short tops for the girls, and for the boys, loose fitting trousers with two diagonal bands across their bare chest (like the strings of beads worn by traditional priests in West Africa) or sleeveless dashiki-style shirts;¹⁴ feathered or raffia-like calf and ankle bands; and sometimes “African tribal make-up” of patterned white/black dots and stripes on the face and body.

As set out in the introduction to this special issue, the trope of “African tradition” or “African heritage” has a long genealogy both in diasporic discourse itself as well as scholarship about it. The mobilization of a notion of Africa as a lost essence that can be recovered and that offers the black diaspora a means to regain a lost sense of purity and authenticity has been critiqued most prominently by Paul Gilroy. As Gilroy argues in his seminal work on the Black Atlantic (1993: 188), “tradition” is understandably invoked “because racisms work insidiously and consistently to deny both historicity and cultural integrity to the artistic and cultural fruits of black life”. “However”, Gilroy continues,

the idea of tradition is often also the culmination, or centre-piece, of a rhetorical gesture that asserts the legitimacy of a black political culture locked in a defensive posture against the unjust powers of white supremacy. This gesture sets tradition and modernity against each other as simple polar alternatives as starkly differentiated and oppositional as

14 “Traditional” African fashion styles like kente cloth and dashiki shirts found a market in America during the Black cultural and political struggles in the 1960s and have since become important visual markers of African consciousness in African diaspora worldwide.

FIGURE 1 *Untold Empowerment performing at Bijlmerparktheater. Photo courtesy Untold Empowerment.*

the signs black and white. In these conditions [...] the idea of tradition can constitute a refuge [...] from the vicious forces that threaten the racial community (imagined or otherwise).

GILROY 1993: 188

Although Untold's discourse of black empowerment and its use of "pre-modern" African styles may invite such an assessment as a form of escapism into a "pure" Africanness uncontaminated by "Western" (and "white") culture, the passion that Untold's members have for African drumming and dance styles is far from that. For them, the dances and rhythms are also a source of aesthetic delight and artistic creativity, which they engage with in a "cut and mix" kind of way (Akom Ankobrey n.d.), expanding their eclectic cultural-artistic repertoires. Most notably, they enthusiastically participate in contemporary, urban "Afro-cool" styles of music and dance. Gladys Akom Ankobrey (n.d.), who studied the group as they prepared for the Obia show, observed that urban African dances were very popular among the members and that they would often listen to Ghanaian hiplife music and practise azonto dance moves before their dance classes started. Their artistic leader Otmar, however, distanced himself from what he considered "commercial" music and refused to teach dances like hip hop and azonto. This is not only because he loves "traditional African dance", but also because "it is an expression of Untold's objectives" (ibid.: 18–19).

Outside the context of their artistic practice too, Untold members engage with contemporary Africa in ways that are anything but defensive or escapist. These engagements not only break down oppositions between tradition and modernity, but also between "the signs black and white". In the summer of 2014, for instance, a group of them embarked on a trip to Ghana that combined artistic-cultural exchange with roots tourism and volunteer work. As I participated in their preparatory workshops, I noted how strongly their expectations and their charity activities (e.g. collecting second-hand clothing to distribute to "the poor children") were informed by dominant imaginations of Africa and Africans as poor and needy. Such stereotypes are widely shared among "black" and "white" Dutch alike and, as noted above, often annoy Ghanaian Dutch youth. The rhetoric of "white supremacy" versus "black repression" discussed by Gilroy in reference to the Black Atlantic is also present in Untold's vision. In the broader context of people's life world, however, such distinctions are cross-cut by geopolitical economic inequalities between Europe(ans) and Africa(ns).

Kente Festival

While from Untold's transatlantic perspective, "African heritage" is inseparable from the history of slavery, for most African Dutch, slavery is much less of an issue, even though they show increasing interest in it. From a Ghanaian per-

spective, the notion of “African heritage” is closely connected to a different history: the early post-independence period of nation building and the formation of a national cultural heritage as a source of national pride and post-colonial African self-definition (De Witte and Meyer 2012; see also the introduction to this issue). Moreover, for Ghanaian-Dutch youth, it was their parents’ voluntary migration that severed them from their “African heritage”. This gives their performances of “their African culture” – a recurrent element of Ghanaian beauty contests for instance – wholly different dynamics, even if such performances may include similar stylistic elements – e.g. kente cloth, “traditional dances” – and serve a similar goal of re-attachment.

A key figure when it comes to promoting “cultural awareness” in the Ghanaian community in Amsterdam is Veronica van de Kamp, a Ghanaian actress and well-known personality, who came to the Netherlands in the 1990s. “Auntie Vero” leads the Ghana Agoro Mma (GAM) foundation, which seeks to address social and cultural issues in the Ghanaian community via drama, film, television and radio shows (on the local Amsterdam broadcasting channel), cultural events, and debates. Since 2008 she and her team have organized an annual Kente Festival. Originally associated with Asante royalty, costly silk-woven kente cloth is appropriated worldwide as a symbol of African pride and wealth (Ross 1998). Responding to this trend, the Kente Festival sought to “showcase the rich culture and traditions of Ghana”. Kente is a cherished material, Veronica said, that links Ghanaians in the Netherlands with Ghanaians elsewhere in the world. It could also serve to show the Dutch population – “people from the Netherlands, Suriname, Curaçao” – the “other side” of Africa: not war and famine, but “the beauty and riches of Ghana’s unique cultural heritage”. A target group that rose in prominence throughout the years of the festival’s organization consisted of Ghanaian youth born in the Netherlands, “who do not have the opportunity to travel to Ghana to know about their cultural heritage”. The Kente Festival would give them the opportunity to reconnect with their parents’ cultural background.

In fact, in 2013, Veronica handed over the organization and presentation of the festival to a team of Ghanaian youth. As a result the festival was more youth oriented than in previous years. This started with the poster campaign that promoted the festival. To counter the idea among some young Ghanaians that kente is something for the older generation, the promotion posters showed young Ghanaian male and female models in seductive poses and scanty kente dresses, with the text “Too young for Kente? I’m a model and I am @ Kente festival 2013 and I will see you too”. On 28 September, 2013, both generations were well represented in NoLimit, the youth centre where the festival was held this time. They were easily distinguished by their styles, however, with some

of the older generation clad in real, woven kente cloth, worn in traditional Ghanaian styles (togas for the men; long-skirted three piece ensembles (“kaba and slit”) for the women), and the younger ones incorporating pieces of print kente into a variety of trendy, funky and sexy styles.¹⁵ Ladies would wear an ultra-short kente dress, a strapless kente top over black skinnies, or a jeans shirt combined with a kente head wrap. Guys came in jeans and sneakers with kente details on T-shirts or caps, stylish black outfits with kente details, and some in full kente shirts over jeans or black trousers. There were also some white Dutch people and, more than in previous years, some black Surinamese among the audience. There was Ghanaian food available in the hallway – fried fish and kenkey (steamed corn dough) – as well as a variety of Surinamese delicacies.

After an opening prayer in fervent Pentecostal style, followed by the Dutch and the Ghanaian national anthems, the main dish of the evening consisted of fashion shows by three young Ghanaian-Dutch designers presenting their labels Demanso, Mushasha, and Terracles. Models – most Ghanaian, but also some Surinamese and white Dutch – showed an eclectic mix of “African-inspired” clothing styles, all designed to help you, as Terracles’ slogan put it, “embrace the African in you”. Pieces included a red leather jacket with kente applications (fig. 3), worn open over a black bra, a cat suit in kente print, kente hot pants over black net stockings, a men’s jeans shirt with kente applications, a black dress jacket with kente revers, and a variety of ultra-short or ultra-long dresses that mixed kente print with transparent or plain-colour fabrics, all highly individualized and combined with global fashion trends such as colour blocking, skinny jeans, wedges or loose-fitting boots (fig. 2). Kente thus restyled and blended was not so much directed at celebrating a distinctly Ghanaian heritage, but at seducing young audiences to “get in touch with your African roots” and “honour your African self”.¹⁶

With the take-over of the festival by the new generation of Ghanaians in the Netherlands, a shift can be observed from “kente represents our national cultural heritage” to “kente is cool”. Stylistically, this means a shift from an

15 The difference between the first and second generation of Ghanaians was also obvious in the music and dance interludes between the fashion shows. Whereas the older generation would swarm the dance floor as DJ Cudjoe played 1990s highlife songs, the young crowd would only leave their hideout in the hallway when Ghanaian-Dutch hip hop and hiplife artists Ultimate Destiny, Lord Rich, and Slim Kofi came on stage.

16 www.terracles.com: “Welcome to the Afrocentric world of Terracles, a place where the African self is honoured and highly favored. Get in touch with your African roots for all Africans and lovers of Africa.”

FIGURE 2 *Terraces fashion show at Kente Festival 2013. Photo by Harry van Kesteren.*

FIGURE 3 Visitors and models posing at Kente Festival 2013. Photo by Harry van Kesteren.

emphasis on riches and royalty, expressed by the sheer amount of cloth, and the value of traditionally woven silk kente over cheap print fabrics, to an appreciation of the sophistication of small kente details and the sexiness of minimal fabric use (fig. 3). Although both tropes – Ghana’s “rich cultural heritage” and contemporary “Afro-cool” – are still present, for the youth, heritage and tradition are no longer key words; instead, self-expression is the credo and anything “heritage-like” can be restyled to this end. This new afro-iconography, characterized by creative mixing of styles and celebration of individuality, not only fits the “Afropolitan lifestyles” of young Africans self-confidently at home in the world (Tuakli-Wosornu 2005); it is also more open to young Afro-Caribbeans searching for ways to engage with their generic, not ethnically or nationally specified African roots. The easy generalization of specifically Ghanaian or other West African styles as “African”, however, is also criticized. An Eritrean-Dutch lady I spoke to said she cherished very different styles of dress (and music and dance) and felt that the current celebration of “African culture” dismissed not only her Eritrean heritage, but the rich diversity of cultures in Africa. Moreover, the celebration of Africanness in terms of individual self-expression stands in tension with collective projects geared towards Pan-African solidarity.

African Homecoming

On Sunday 30 June, 2013 (one day before Keti Koti, the annual celebration of the abolition of slavery in the former Dutch colonies) the second edition of African Homecoming was held in Amsterdam. Marketed as “a day in which we commemorate the legacy of African people, both on the continent as well as those scattered throughout the diaspora worldwide”, it called on black audiences to “reconstitute the black family, celebrate our contribution to civilization and reflect on our past, present and most importantly our collective future”. On the event’s flyer, Malcolm x featured prominently at the centre of a collage of iconic faces of Pan-Africanism and black emancipation. The event included music and spoken word performances; a New African Market with fashion, arts and crafts, music, literature, food, and information; a small “black eye movie festival” in the venue’s café; a debate about “the New Pan-Africanism and the meanings of diaspora”; and an after party with DJ threesixty bringing “the electrifying sounds of a continent on fire”.

DJ threesixty is the pseudonym of Bamba Nazar, a well-known DJ in Amsterdam’s Afro-music scene, producer for several African hip hop artists, Afro-activist and driving force behind African Homecoming. Born in Amsterdam of Dutch and Surinamese parents, he grew up in Suriname and then moved to New York. He feels a strong connection with Africa and a passion to revive the spirit of Pan-Africanism in Amsterdam through “a celebration of fresh afro aesthetics in fashion, music and art”, as the slogan of Bamba’s Amplified Africa parties goes. In an interview with Tolhuistuin, the venue where the African Homecoming was held, he talked about his personal African homecoming.

As a person of African descent, I was always busy with the question, where do I come from. The hip-hop scene in 1988 in New York had a big impact on me. Stetsasonic, Public Enemy, Lakim Shabazz, Jungle Brothers, Queen Latifah ... At that time hip-hop forced you to think, to read books, it was not like today. Hip-hop was about our collective African roots, the Islam and history. Inspired by hip-hop, I started researching the continent and traveled to the continent. Egypt, Senegal, Gambia, Tanzania and Zanzibar were my personal African Homecoming, but I didn’t share them with a large audience.¹⁷

17 www.tolhuistuin.nl/zomerblog-3-broodje-met-bamba-nazar-african-homecoming, accessed 27 August, 2012.

Feeling an urge to share his personal experience with an audience, he came up with the concept of an African Homecoming event, “a coming together of creative souls inspired by the spirit of Pan-Africanism and dedicated to the bridging between Africa and the diaspora”.

On the day of the event, the Tolhuistuin breathed an atmosphere of black activist creativity mixed with summer festival relaxation. A display of African consciousness in personal aesthetics was popular among the audience: natural hairstyles were dominant, often combined with Afrocentric clothing and accessories. Although African Homecoming was explicitly framed as a black event, it attracted a racially diverse audience, including many “whites”. Black history was an important theme, but the Africa that was engaged with here was a contemporary Africa too, a global Africa. The African Homecoming stage featured a Pan-African line-up of Dutch or Dutch-based performers – musicians, singers and spoken word artists – tracing their connection to Africa via a variety of backgrounds: Suriname, Curacao, Eritrea, Ghana, Senegal, and the US. Spoken word performances alluded to histories of struggle and overcoming. There were songs of protest and empowerment, “traditional African” drumming, and “black” music styles such as soul, funk, and hip hop. The “new African market” hosted a variety of “young black designers and entrepreneurs”. There were stands with African-inspired fashion and accessories, “Africa Is The Future” T-shirts and hoodies, Reggae paraphernalia, African arts and crafts, Caribbean sandwiches and African juices (baobab and bissap), African literature, and a Suriname estate agent. Overall, the festival presented a version of Pan-Africanism that hinged on the idea of “the black family” fused with a celebration of Afro-cool styling and creative production. Africa was “a place that we call home; a place where we connect, enjoy the beauty, share the passion for art, and create”.

Of course, the very idea of African Homecoming leans heavily on Afro-America, including its particular discourses of black kinship. As Katharina Schramm has pointed out in her book *African Homecoming* (2010), the practice of African American homecoming in Ghana occurred in a field of contestation. Behind the shared Pan-Africanist rhetoric of the African family, tensions and misunderstandings arose between Ghanaian and diasporic actors that were related to disparities with respect to commemoration, cultural intimacy, and political participation. Schramm’s analysis of the biannual cultural festival PANAFEST for instance (ch. 8) shows how claims to a common “African heritage” and to “uniting the African family” were contradicted by the practical and financial execution of the festival. Focusing on tourists as the major patrons, PANAFEST ’99 excluded a large portion of the local Ghanaian population and marked the African American visitors and the (white) European

visitors alike as wealthy strangers from a different world. Obviously, a homecoming festival in Amsterdam is something of quite a different order, but here too, there were subtle ambiguities underlying the project of “reconstituting the black family”.

In her blog post about the event, Ghanaian-Dutch fashion blogger Augustina Austin revelled about the African designs made by Afro-Surinamese women designers, among whom Naomi Spieker (of the Nomi by Naomi label), who incorporates African wax prints in her “street vibe” designs of jeans, sweaters, blouses, tops and hooded scarfs, and Poema Jones, who designs “bold and strong” accessories “from an Afrocentric perspective”.¹⁸ “The designers I had a chance to connect to”, Augustina writes, “are black Surinamese, yet they create a fashion so African. It’s interesting, because what could have scattered black people, might be bringing them back together”. Indeed, fashion seems to be a fruitful meeting point where young Africans and Afro-Caribbeans cultivate a new, shared African identity. Much of the fashion and accessory designs on display at the African Homecoming were quite similar in style to those encountered at the Kente Festival: marked by a creative, playful incorporation of selected elements of visual languages found in various ethnic traditions – Akan adinkra symbols, kente cloth, Fulani gold earrings, Masai beadwork, West African wax print and headwraps – into contemporary hip design as easily identifiable signifiers of a generic Africanness.¹⁹ It is a style, as Poema Jones markets her designs, “that will appeal to man & woman who feel the need to express their roots in a cool & stylish way”.²⁰ Among the audience too, an individualized, creative aesthetics of Afro-cool was popular.

A major difference with the Kente festival, however, was the strong discourse of blackness encountered here, which framed such styling practices in a much more politicized language. Augustina subtly expressed her reservations about this discourse. Even if she reproduced the “black” framing in writing that “African Homecoming is an event for any black person ... because at the end of the day: Black is African”, she also distanced herself from it with

18 <http://abinaonline.com/pan-africanism-and-an-african-homecoming-in-amsterdam/>, last accessed 20 August, 2014.

19 Widely recognized as typically “African”, wax print cloth is the outcome of a thoroughly globalized history of trade and creative exchange connecting Europe, Africa, and the Far East. Its origins date back to early nineteenth-century Dutch and English textile companies that started to produce factory-made versions of Javanese batiks for West and Central African markets (Gott 2010: 15–16). Today, African wax print cloth is still produced in Europe, but also in West Africa, and, more recently, China.

20 <http://www.poemajones-webshop.com/>

a disclaimer: “I rather use the word Brown, but I’m sure you get what I am saying,” thus using a term more “neutral” than the politicized “black”. Reservations about the incorporation of Africanness in a dominant, transatlantic narrative of blackness were expressed more explicitly during the evening debate, when a Ghanaian-Dutch speaker remarked that to Ghanaians there is very little difference between white Westerners and African Americans or black Europeans.²¹ In a similar vein, a Surinamese-Dutch discussant argued that the event’s focus on “African Homecoming” failed to address the wide gap between “our geographical location, historical background, and class privilege” as Europeans and “asylum seekers from countries in Africa risking life and limb to get to European soil”. Following up on the debate, an Antillean-Dutch blogger wrote that “the ‘Africa’ in these narratives [of ‘African Homecoming’] is also a particular construction of Africa, as sub-Saharan, Black, and mostly West-African. There was talk of solidarity with ‘Africans,’ however, I doubt people were talking about solidarity with Moroccans, Egyptians, Algerians, Libyans, Tunisians who are all equally African”.

In these various cultural activities by and for Africa-descended youth, the language of “where you are coming from” and “African roots” is strong. But what is African, who should be included in the category of African, and indeed, where the boundaries of Africa lie are questions that raise disagreement and debate. Connections between Africa, race, heritage, and culture are made and unmade in multiple ways. It is in that sense that Africanness is a project rather than a primordiality (cf. Palmié 2007), as much about becoming as about “coming from”.

Conclusion

Setting out from a sense of wonder about the recent emergence of “Afro-Dutch” as an overarching identity label among young Dutch people of a variety of backgrounds, in this article I have explored the multiple ways in which people engage with this “Afro” part of who they feel they are. A young generation of “new Dutch” is growing up, who are not defined by so-called ethnic identities, but actively and creatively shape who they are and want to become, combining a variety of cultural resources from Europe, America, and Africa. Tracing their roots to Africa via different routes, Afro-Dutch youth

21 Unfortunately I was not able to attend this debate, but after the event it was summarized and continued online.

design and debate “being African” in ways that transcend (or complement) earlier generations’ identifications and seriously problematize any taken-for-granted notions of “the African diaspora”. As I have shown, such new Afro-Dutch identities are formed in a plural political and aesthetic field, which is marked as much by racialized power structures as by neo-liberal dynamics of marketing and commodification. Manifesting in, for example, media initiatives, performing arts, music, cultural festivals and bodily fashions, the current trend towards Africanness is characterized by an aesthetic emphasis on African styles. It entails a reinvention of “African culture” both as a source of Afropolitan pleasure and (individualized) self-expression, and as a source of (collective) black empowerment in a context marked by racism, inequality, and exclusion.

With its multiple genealogies and histories, the idea of Africa (Mudimbe 1994) – and, for that matter, Africanness – is of course extremely complicated. The key concern in this article has been to see what happens in practice when these genealogies come together in a local setting as young people explore their commonalities as descendants of Africa. Approaching Africanness as a *process of becoming* and a *practice of self-styling*, I have discerned three prominent discursive and stylistic tropes with regard to their framing and designing of Africanness: “African heritage”, “blackness” and “Afro-cool”. What the examples of the Afro-Caribbean dance group Untold Empowerment, the Ghanaian Kente Festival, and the African Homecoming Festival have shown is that these tropes get mobilized and fleshed out, joined, and disjointed in quite different ways.

For Untold, African heritage denotes the culture that diasporic Africans were severed from when they were taken away from their continent as slaves, and the culture that was suppressed during the period of slavery. This directs the interest in Africa towards the pre-modern past, to so-called “traditional” dances and costumes, and to “African survivals” on the other side of the Atlantic, in particular Suriname. The staging of this heritage serves to disseminate knowledge about and recognition of this often silenced part of Dutch history. For the dancers and actors themselves, learning and embodying this heritage through dance is a way of strengthening their self-esteem as black youth. The case of the Kente Festival showed that the initiators of the event – first-generation migrants – framed kente cloth within a national framework of Ghanaian cultural heritage. As the Ghanaian youth took charge for the 2013 edition, the festival shifted towards a celebration of heritage as incorporated into Afropolitan fashion styles, a shift that parallels developments in urban Ghana (De Witte and Meyer 2012). The African heritage encountered at the African Homecoming festival was framed as “the legacy of the black people”. Its vision of

a Pan-Africanist revival was strongly inspired by the historical experiences and struggles of black people in the Americas, and in particular, the United States.

This brings us to blackness, a dominant, but not unproblematic trope in formulations of Africanness. Both *Untold* and *African Homecoming* connect Africanness directly to “blackness”, *Untold* with its focus on empowering black youth and *African Homecoming* with its emphasis on the black family. But whereas some take the relationship between blackness and Africanness for granted, e.g. Afro-Caribbeans stating “I am black *thus* I am African” (and contradicting their parents saying “I am black, but I am *not* African”), others deliberately try to open up the boundaries of the category of African and the criteria for inclusion and question the place of blackness in formulations of Africanity (e.g. “I am African but I am not black”). At the Kente Festival blackness was not a prominent reference and it also featured white models presenting African fashion items. Ghanaian-Dutch fashion blogger Augustina preferred the word brown in response to the strong black framing of the African Homecoming festival, and a Ghanaian-Dutch participant at the debate questioned the language of black kinship altogether. This is not to say that Ghanaian and Afro-Caribbean Dutch do not convene around notions of blackness. They do, mostly so in response to racial inequalities and stereotyping in Dutch society. But in identifying as African, blackness is not an uncontested trope. The malleability of blackness, and its variable ascription to bodily features, history and cultural style, urges us to explore in greater detail when and how race becomes relevant, and how it is put to practice (cf. M’charek 2013). Here, it suffices to say that both the trope of African heritage and that of blackness seem too steeped in particular historical traditions, political traditions, and cultural traditions in different parts of global Africa to easily serve as a binding force in the forging of a shared African identity.²²

Young people of different African and black backgrounds converge more easily in a current “aesthetics of Afro-cool”, inspired by contemporary urban African fashion and music. This trend was prominently present at the Kente festival and the African Homecoming festival alike, and popular among *Untold*’s members, even if it did not fit *Untold*’s project objectives. Afro-cool is about feeling the spirit of a vibrant continent and indulging in its creativity and “fresh aesthetics”. It may flirt with the ancient and the tribal, but always with a playful and cosmopolitan twist. It is about being part of the making of something new,

22 Cf. Zeleza’s (2005) critique on the hegemony of the “Black Atlantic” paradigm in African Diaspora Studies discussed in the introduction to this issue.

of a new generation oriented towards the future – wearing “Africa is the Future” T-shirts. In that sense Afro-cool is less burdened with the different histories and genealogies that cling to the tropes of heritage and blackness. It is also about “rebranding Africa”, “refreshing the world’s view of Africa, correct misperceptions and shatter old stereotypes, by showing that what gives urban Africa its funk and vibe today is far removed from the tired and narrow clichés of safaris, traditional drums, corruption, poverty, war and disease”.

This new delight in the funk and vibe of Africa is clearly part of a broader, transnational revitalization of African culture as an Afropolitan style that connects young urban middle classes across Africa and the African diaspora and contests the marginalization of Africa in the world order. A vibrant African urban pop culture is going global and this makes being African cool and fashionable. In today’s global identity market, Africanness is becoming available as a lifestyle trend, targeted at those with a taste for African-inspired products and designed to make them feel on top of the world as Africans, proudly wearing “I am African” T-shirts. In the current neo-liberal era, “African culture” circulates easily through the circuits of the global market and at the same time is easily embodied through affective attachment (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009: 18, 28). Worn on the body and danced to the beats, Afro-Dutch comes to denote a fleeting and open, African-inspired community of style, aesthetic pleasure, and shared passion. But in its commercially driven celebration of style and aesthetics also lies the major challenge to the trend of Afro-cool: it risks being accused, and indeed gets accused, of superficiality, commerciality, and lack of political engagement and historical consciousness.²³ As a Surinamese-Dutch man at a youth debate about “roots, slavery, and international solidarity” said, “now with Afrobeats, AfroDance, Azonto ... everybody feels attracted to Africa. But only to the nice part, not to the painful part of the history.” Ironically, it is exactly this lack of historical weight that seems to make this trend most capable of providing a new, highly diverse generation of Afro-Dutch with a pivot around which to develop a shared African identity.

23 In his lecture, “I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan”, delivered at the African Studies Association UK 2012 conference, Binyavanga Wainaina fiercely criticized Afropolitanism for its crude cultural commodification, being increasingly “product driven”, design focused and “potentially funded by the West”. A heated debate followed online. See also Mbembe (2007) for a more historical take on Afropolitanism.

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