The Black, Migrant & Refugee Women’s Movement in the Netherlands

Standing at the Crossroads

A renewed interest in Black feminism in the Netherlands has surfaced recently. This interest goes hand in hand with a recurrence of feminism and the Dutch ‘Black Pete is Racism’ campaign, which now has evolved into a second wave anti-racist movement. These unique dynamics give space to a revaluation of the Black, Migrant, Refugee (BMR) women’s movement in a Dutch context.

In this article I want to concentrate on Dutch Black feminists and feminists of colour and position them as the Dutch intellectuals, organisers, and activists who, as a movement and as individuals, have been the key to developing an intersectional theory and praxis.

Early on, these feminists developed the inclusive term Black, Migrant, Refugee women’s movement (BMR) to encompass and celebrate the very diverse backgrounds of the women involved. They placed the politics of difference at the heart of their collective endeavour.

Moreover, they took issue as well with existing uneven power relations that were often very real in their lives, as they regularly got the short end of the stick. As such, it was Black women and women of colour who stood at the front line of an intersectional agenda.

These women, in their turn, have inspired current young generations who strive for an anti-racist, just, and inclusive society, and who are critical of patriarchal and neo-liberal structures that maintain whiteness as the norm.

Despite these events, or maybe rather because of them, Black feminists (and Black female artists and writers for that matter) have been grossly neglected in mainstream Dutch society until recently, especially within academia and the media. A prominent feminist scholar like Gloria Wekker (b. 1950), now Professor Emeritus of Gender and Sexuality, had relatively few Dutch media appearances up until 2016.

If not ignored, BMR women are often ridiculed for being too outspoken on race matters or feminist issues. The cases of Philomena Essed1 (and her academic work on everyday racism), Anousha Nzume2 (and her outspokenness on the book and movie Alleen maar nette mensen from 2008, which depicts a Black woman in a very stereotypical manner), Khadija Arib (whose election of chair of Parliament was preceded by all kinds of islamophobic rhetoric) or Sylvana Simons (and her political aspirations in 2016 while being anti-Black Pete and publicly calling out white men and their racist behaviour), provide us with great examples of this automatic reflex of ridicule within Dutch academia, traditional mainstream but also social media, and the political arena.

Despite the animosity, threats, and ridicule these women have endured, their legacy and body of knowledge have been rediscovered by the current wave of feminists and anti-racist activists, curators, and artists. Their legacy has been given a renewed relevance and moreover: these women finally get acknowledgement for their work and ideas.

In this article I want to focus on several questions: why has the work of BMR feminists stayed mostly invisible and why has it been acknowledged only recently? And who are these women and why did they organise themselves the way they did?

In the first section I will concentrate on the development of the Black into the BMR women’s movement from the 1970s up to now, by describing their collective voice and looking at several individual women, who have worked in a transnational European/international context.

Secondly, I will try to analyse why these women often stayed invisible within Dutch mainstream media and academia. And finally I will connect current developments in the Netherlands and the modern-day feminist and anti-racist movements in the Netherlands, to their legacy, and how that legacy lives on.

I will make use of an intersectional analysis, which is both a feminist concept and methodological tool. Intersectionality refers to categories of difference that can be embodied simultaneously (race, class, gender, sexuality, level of abledness) and how these categories interact with each other on an individual, institutional, and symbolic level. Using an intersectional lens, this means being aware of how social categories of difference are interde-
pendent and interrelated: they interact, like an intersection or crossroads.

The outcomes of these interactions create different power positions, which means we all inhabit different levels of privilege and discrimination. Thus, intersectionality lays bare the hierarchies and power structures that exist between social categories (which does not mean that these are fixed: they work in context).

How did it start? Politically Black

The start of Dutch mainstream second wave feminism is usually connected to Joke Smit’s 1967 essay ‘Het onbehagen bij de vrouw’ (The discontentment of women). The Dutch rise of Black feminism followed in the late 1970s and culminated in the early 1980s. Curiously enough, this is sometimes perceived as a late start, both in the Netherlands and internationally, but we have to bear in mind that women from postcolonial communities only arrived in the Netherlands in the second half of the 20th century. Women from the Indo-European community, Moluccan, Papuan, and Dutch Caribbean (Surinamese and Antillean) communities, who had migrated from the (former) Dutch colonies from the 1950s onwards, started to organise, often using the term ‘Black’ as a political and relational term. The term Black referred to (a) solidarity among non-white women; (b) engaging in a common struggle, sharing a colonial past and being victimised by racism; and (c) critiquing the dominance of white, middle class, heterosexual norms of mainstream feminists.

Postcolonial women started to organise themselves, in the first decades mostly locally or via church affiliations and in 1979 the first organisation for Da Lima’s bold and timely intervention. How did it start? Politically Black

The start of Dutch mainstream second wave feminism is usually connected to Joke Smit’s 1967 essay ‘Het onbehagen bij de vrouw’ (The discontentment of women). The Dutch rise of Black feminism followed in the late 1970s and culminated in the early 1980s. Curiously enough, this is sometimes perceived as a late start, both in the Netherlands and internationally, but we have to bear in mind that women from postcolonial communities only arrived in the Netherlands in the second half of the 20th century. Women from the Indo-European community, Moluccan, Papuan, and Dutch Caribbean (Surinamese and Antillean) communities, who had migrated from the (former) Dutch colonies from the 1950s onwards, started to organise, often using the term ‘Black’ as a political and relational term. The term Black referred to (a) solidarity among non-white women; (b) engaging in a common struggle, sharing a colonial past and being victimised by racism; and (c) critiquing the dominance of white, middle class, heterosexual norms of mainstream feminists.

Black feminism started to organise, often using the term Black as a political and relational term. The term Black was picked up as a common term used within the feminist movement (albeit for a relatively short time, see next paragraph) and pushed by Dutch feminists from the postcolonial community. In turn, they were inspired by an international trend, the usage of the term Black rose in feminist circles, notably the United States and Western Europe.

Treetje Loewenthal, Antillean-Dutch feminist activist and thinker, speaking on the Dutch situation: “It was Indo-European women who came up with the term Black. I really loved that, because it showed a level of abstraction. Indo-Europeans are by default not associated with being Black.”

Da Lima’s strategic intervention in 1983 – a one-woman action with the appearance of a well-planned collective effort – was the real kick-starter for the Black women’s movement. An outburst of organising and convening ensued, which earlier happened in smaller pockets here and there. The Black women’s phone, Black women’s radio, national Black women’s days (1983-1987) and queer Black networks such as ‘Sister Outsider’, ‘Black Orchid’ and ‘Strange Fruit’ emerged in different parts of the country. The first Black women’s archive and documentation centre called Flamboyant was started in 1985 at the Singel 260 in Amsterdam. Unfortunately already at the opening, Flamboyant had to be secured because of racist threats. Despite this, the place became a real hotspot for Black women and women of colour who could convene or get information and where themes such as racism, dependency on the husband, language barriers, and issues with residence permits were not only understood but also tackled.

Meanwhile, women whose husbands and fathers mostly were labour migrants (in some cases the women and men were political refugees), mostly coming from countries around the Mediterranean, organised themselves. Already in 1975 Turkish-Dutch women, led by Maviye Karaman (b. 1949) set up the HTKB (Hollanda Türkiye Kadınlar Birliği) focusing on awareness raising and organising Turkish women. In 1982 the MVVM (Marokkaanse Vrouwen Vereniging Nederland) was founded, the first Dutch based Moroccan women’s association, co-founded by Khadija Arib (b. 1960), the current chair of Dutch Parliament. A later chair of the association, Fenna Ulichki (b. 1969), is now a seasoned politician in Amsterdam for the Green Left, making MVVM a springboard for political aspirations.

Similarly, women with a political refugee background, diverse in origin, class, and ethnic identity, started to organise one of the first National organisations called Zwaluw, which was founded in 1995.

From Black to BMR

At the end of the 1980s, the Dutch Black women’s movement evolved from Black into a Black Migrant and Refugee women’s movement, in short BMR (ZMV in Dutch) which spoke to an inclusive term/ acronym that feminist women of very diverse diasporic backgrounds came up with to tackle the diverse issues of a heterogeneous group of women. They took into account the differences within the diverse groups of Black women and women of colour, whose cultures were diverse and whose histories and identities were rooted in postcolonial, labour migrant, and political refugee migratory processes. For them or their parents, the Netherlands, the land of arrival, was quite different from what they expected. The country itself changed quite dramatically from a post-war nation in chaos in the 1940s, to an economic and culturally transformative time in the 1960s, into a rapidly secularised nation with an economic crisis in the 1970s.

In short, BMR women, existing of two generations, had to deal with dissimilar issues and
were organising and expressing themselves in quite diverse ways. But one central issue was shared: the struggle against racism and its connection to gender.

As such, the term BMR feminism was a clear intersectional intervention, a powerful endeavour of complex self-representation that preceded the coinage of the term intersectionality in 1989 by US Professor of Law Kimberlé Crenshaw. Over the years, a small number of books and articles has been published, focusing on the BMR women’s movement, such as Met een hand kan je niet klappen (‘You can’t clap with one hand’, 1988) and Daar hoor ik ook bij (‘I belong there too’, 1990) and Caleidoscopische Visies. De Zwarte, Migranten – en Vluchtelingenbeweging in Nederland (‘Caleidoscopic Visions. The Black, Migrant and Refugee Women’s Movement in the Netherlands’, 2001).

Caleidoscopische Visies marked 25 years of the Dutch BMR women’s movement in and introduced the term intersectionality in the Netherlands. It was co-edited by Gloria Wekker, Maayke Botman, and myself. For me it was about materialising an aspiration: to produce a book I wanted to read but wasn’t there yet.

The basis for the book was formed after a six-month examination into the archive of the Dutch women’s archive, in Amsterdam (Atria). Many issues we tackled in the book – both the whiteness of the Dutch women’s movement and the systemic exclusion of refugee women – are relevant to this day. The end product is textual: regrettably we could not cover it, but now social media provides us with low-to-no-cost and unprecedented means for displaying these works.

Archives like Atria, the Institute of Social History and ILHIA (LGBT heritage) are an integral yet hidden part of our collective memory as social movements, even for those of us involved in anti-racist and feminist work. We need to spend more time in those archives. The current reappraisal of the archive in feminist and LGBT activist and academic circles is apt and speaks to the renewed focus on knowledge production from hitherto marginalised voices.

### Say their names

Who were those women that pushed the agenda and made waves? Many women were simultaneously artists, activists, lobbyists, thinkers. Some transformed into politicians, policy makers or consultants. Very few of them gained permanent positions within academia such as Philomena Essed, Gloria Wekker and Pamela Pattynama. Others took on academia: Troetje Loewenthal wrote a ground-breaking piece in 1984, ‘De witte toren van Vrouwenstudies’ (The White tower of Women’s Studies) in which she criticises both the whiteness of the Dutch women’s movement and the systemic exclusion of Black women within Women’s Studies in the Netherlands.

Before Black feminism was prominent in the Netherlands, Claudette van Trikt (b. 1948) was already an active, albeit short-time member of cutting edge feminist group Dolle Mina, founded in December 1969. Born in Aruba in the forties, Van Trikt came to Amsterdam in 1966 to study. Because of her skin colour, she stood out at the University of Amsterdam. Starting out as a timid student she did a BA in Mathematics and MA in non-Western sociology.

She remembers a docent who found it strange that she studied math (“Only ugly girls do math, why not art history?”) but also recalls the famous Dutch leftist intellectual Anton Constandse (1899-1985) who invited her to come and speak in class about her activist activities. Right away she mingled the story of Dolle Mina with the position of Caribbean women.

Van Trikt explains, “I was asked to join Dolle Mina because I had The Second Sex on my bookshelf, that’s how I got involved. Most women were students and I was the only woman of colour in Dolle Mina.”

In 1980 Van Trikt became a lecturer herself in Driebergen, at the famous university of applied science, De Horst, a progressive, left-wing hub. She started to teach ‘Black Sociology’ in the 1980s and over the years she used work by Nawal El Sadaawi, Fatima Mermis-sih, Philomena Essed, and Paulo Freire. Her students were ethnically mixed and found her course to be a revelation.

Cisca Pattipilohy (b. 1926) is 90 years old in 2016 but still active and an activist. She fled the Suharto regime in Indonesia in 1968 and came with her four children and parents to the Netherlands as political refugees. She is well-loved and respected in the different communities of which she is a part. As one of the founding mothers of Flambioyant, she became a key person and did pioneering work in documenting the BMR movement. As an informa-
Hellen Felter (b. 1944) also works from a transnational perspective. She co-founded Tiye International in 1994. Tiye purposely targets the international realm with a feminist agenda. They lobby at UN gatherings, international women’s fora and network everywhere they can. To date, Tiye International is the only BMR women’s organisation with a consultative status at the United Nations. “We kept running into each other, me, Ria Naloop, Ozden Kutluer [now Ozden Yalim, NJ] and Alem Desta. We started talking with each other about the importance of focusing on our own issues on a strategic level.” She has always kept the door open towards white women and their organisations, because she believes in strategic alliances, “but you need women and their organisations, because she ways kept the door open towards white women and her organisations, because she believes in strategic alliances, “but you need to maintain a critical relationship with white women.”

Coming to the Netherlands from Paramaribo in 1963, everything was new to her. From buying winter-clothes to getting around on your own, she did it through learning by doing. Everywhere she found help from strangers, Black and White. It has shaped the way she goes about her work. During the 2001 World Conference Against Racism in Durban (South Africa), Felter acted as the Vice President of the European Women’s Lobby (the largest umbrella of women’s associations in the European Union). Many European nations were playing hardball and against the Transatlantic Slave Trade being called a “crime against humanity” but exactly that statement made it into the final declaration. To this day, Felter is proud of her lobby-work at this vital conference. The importance of the WCAR waned due to 9/11 but has resurfaced as an important milestone and is linked to the 2015 instalment of the UN Decade for People of African Descent.

Van Trikt, Pattipilohy, and Felter, were among thousands of first generation postcolonial women who came to the Netherlands as (young) adults, having to find their way, often in difficult circumstances. They gave back to the community in different ways but always from a feminist, anti-racist, and intersectional perspective.

Invisible feats

Why are the feats of BMR women unknown? There are both internal and external reasons for it. Internally, the first thing noticeable is that the BMR women’s movement did not have the power of numbers. The groups they founded were very small and it made them organise strategically and in a focused manner. The issues and partnerships mattered, not self-importance and self-aggrandisement. Nor did they consider it a trait.

Secondly, the women often set up networks and collectives, which was common in those days within social movements. It meant that organisational structures were relatively flat (barring exceptions). Strong individual leadership was not a trait that was necessarily pushed for or found important. Personal branding, now quite common, was ‘not done’ within BMR circles at that time.

A lot of women mistrusted the media and this is no surprise if we look at how the Dutch media generally poorly treated for instance Essed’s work and herself. Others simply did not know how to enter this unknown, powerful domain that did not represent their ideas nor their beliefs or stories. They did not see their embodied selves mirrored in mainstream Dutch media. On top of that, it was quite hard for women of colour with journalistic aspirations, to build a career. The Dutch, especially those born in the 20th century, still remember a rare feat like the first BMR radio voice or the first Black news anchor. Up until recently, the Dutch media does not hold a strong track record in portraying BMR women as movers and shakers. Dutch scholar Teun van Dijk explains in *Racism and the Press* (1991) that source texts of ethnic minority groups tend to be ignored and discarded in the media.

This brings us to some of the external reasons. Despite their formidable achievements, BMR women have often stayed invisible within larger Dutch society and specific realms like the media. When they do enter the mainstream, eg. Khadija Arib, their feminist background is usually underexposed.

Another external reason is the uneasy relationship with different social movements, such as with White feminists. BMR feminists sensed a general lack of understanding. The race card was simply less important for White women or even seen as divisive. And, White women with power who became gatekeepers, did not automatically let in their BMR ‘sisters’ because they often did not consider it part of their struggle.

Take the infamous statement in 2001 of Cisca Dresselhuys, chief editor of the Dutch feminist magazine *Opzij* during her March 8 interview in the *Volkskrant*: “(...) editors with head scarves are not allowed in at Opzij.” She also reiterated the invisibility of BMR feminists in an interview in Dutch daily *Trouw* (December 22, 2015) when asked to compare the current anti-racist movement with the 80s second wave of feminism. She treated the issue as if all the women were White and the BMR women’s movement had never existed. Similarly, BMR women have been at the...
forefront of the anti-racist movement in the 1980s and it seems to me that this has hardly (if at all) been acknowledged within that same movement: gender aspects were often considered unimportant, especially with men. And yet it was mostly BMR feminists who developed an understanding of Black citizenship within the context of a social movement, practicing activism and knowledge production and cultural criticism simultaneously while speaking out on racism in a Dutch context. Theirs was a movement towards more full-fledged citizenship of a powerful, pioneering kind.

It meant that BMR women were rendered invisible twice, in the mainstream feminist movement because they connected not just to gender and within the anti-racist movement because they did not just connect to race. BMR women had to deny parts of themselves and their struggles, to fit in more singular frameworks. This was of course, impossible to do, although BMR women have tried.

Furthermore, a fair amount of the BMR headliners where queer women: Julia da Lima, Gloria Wekker, Pamela Pattynama, Astrid Roemer, Tania Leon, Anne Krul, to name a few. A merger with the Dutch LGBTI movement, which has always been predominantly White and (at least in the public eye) quite male, was not easy either.

In larger society, this invisibility is triggered by the fact that BMR women’s knowledge production is seen as – in Foucault’s words – subjugated knowledge. The knowledge that BMR produced was left out, ignored, opposed, and ridiculed by the dominant culture, and rendered invisible. US-based Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins, while referring to subjugated knowledge.

In 2014, young journalist Nadia Ezzeroili exhails: “What a relief, Black feminism!” In her article Ezzeroili perceives the growth of a progressive movement, which is fighting against Black Pete and racism and for equal citizenship. She discovers Black feminism through that same movement.

Ezzeroili verbalises the feelings of a young generation of BMR mostly cultural elite: journalists, activists, artists, budding academics, who adhere to a more inclusive and anti-racist Dutch society and claim full citizenship. They are saying: we are here, get used to it! One can debate who is part of a movement and who isn’t but the fact is that the anti-Black Pete movement, which kicked off in 2011, developed into a broader second wave anti-racist movement in the Netherlands, that tackles different domains: academia, the media, heritage institutions, and public space.

The current movement starts to look for knowledge production on critical race theory and praxis and intersectional thinking. This first leads them to American thinkers and doers but finally also to Dutch feminist intellectuals, activists and writers.

While pushing for more inclusiveness and stating that racism is a Dutch problem, some of the younger generations started off by thinking they were the first in pointing that out, only to find out that BMR intersectional feminists and activists had preceded them in terms of activism, knowledge production, organising, entering the political realm and setting up places of symbolic importance like a Black archive and a slavery monument.

Has the subjugation of BMR feminist knowledge subsided? Not completely. Certain tropes are reproduced or re-activated, as soon as the oxymoronic Black female subject (re-) surfaces as an intelligent woman. For instance, on the one hand formidable intellectual writers like Wekker and Roemer get a lot of airplay and attention.

But the criticism Wekker receives, is of a particular kind: she cannot really be a scholar, as if being a Black woman and simultaneously an intellectual is an oxymoron. When she delivered her inaugural lecture regarding her instalment as full professor in 2002 at the University of Utrecht, the most often asked question is “is your assignment a real one or a politically correct one? Are you not simply a token?”

With Roemer, it’s no different. When she was awarded the PC Hooft Award in December 2015, the three mainstream newspapers responded positively to this news but the literary critics of a very popular radio-show on Saturday morning thought very differently. They were “unpleasantly surprised” by it all and didn’t understand this “politically correct choice”, one critic could only interpret it as “ideological glory”.

Conclusion

BMR feminists in the Netherlands have played a key role in thinking through race and gender relations in Dutch society but this seems to be acknowledged only recently, in part thanks to the second wave of anti-racist movement which developed an eye for their feats and mere existence. Only now do certain pockets in Dutch society seem ready to learn from these women. Their intersectional approach and placements have been key in claiming agency and developing more complex subject positions in a Dutch context. An inspiring key factor of the Dutch BMR women’s movement is that they adopted an intersectional approach right at the beginning.

With their claim to agency and citizenship they were standing at a crossroads of movements, intersectional placement, diasporic experiences and transnational partnerships. Centralising them in this article, is not about ‘essentialising’ them, but about taking their positions and insights seriously and problematising their under-representation.

For BMR feminists, individual leadership was not a trait that was found important but they took the lead nonetheless. Unfortunately, their leadership roles have been negated, and their subject positions and knowledge production were considered unimportant or ridiculed. This is no coincidence: their knowledge has been subjugated and historically, Black women have been sexualised, objectified (Gilman, 1985; hooks 1992) and made invisible (Wallace, 1978). Canonized Western knowledge production is largely white and male, making it hard for society at large to shift the gaze towards more complex subject positions for Black and BMR women, let alone accept them as leaders in their fields of expertise.

Patricia Hill Collins (2009) pointed to the significance of Black feminist thought and its’ impact on the politics of knowledge production. To her, it “fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about unjust power relations by highlighting the intersecting oppressions at the heart of relations of domination” and it also “addresses ongoing epistemological debates concerning the power dynamics that underlie what counts as knowledge.”

The importance of a paradigm shift and criticizing current power dynamics, both lie at the heart of the current debate on race relations in the Dutch (and European) realm. To me, this is why BMR feminist thinking and praxis is so appealing to current
younger generations.

The fact that BMR feminism is revisited, and currently acknowledged, speaks to a sense of spiralling knowledge production and meaning making. Insights from the 1980s form the basis of knowledge production and cultural critique, but are read and interpreted by a completely different generation, with a different skill set and powerful tools to work with, such as social media. It gives hope while looking ahead into a Europe in dire circumstances. I anticipate not just the production of transformative knowledge production, inspired biographies of Dutch BMR feminists but stances. I anticipate not just the production of knowledge production and cultural consciousness, but are read and interpreted by a sense of spiralling knowledge production and meaning making.

Noten:

3. See for instance the Van Abbe exhibit on Black Feminism which opened April 16, 2016; the exhibitions of Esiri Essed in 2015.
5. Nancy Jouwe is a cultural historian and has worked more than 20 years in the NGO sec- tor. As an activist she has been involved in local and transnational squatters, queer, indigenous, and women’s movements. She currently works as a lecturer, curator and researcher on Dutch (postcolonial) history and the present.

Rosa Manus (1881-1942)
The International Life and Legacy of a Jewish Dutch Feminist
Onder redactie van Myriam Everard en Francisca de Haan
November 2016
ISBN 978 90 04 33317 8
Hardback (xxii, 473 pp., 55 illustraties)
Prijs EUR 227,50 / US$ 247
Studies in Jewish History and Culture, 32 - brill.com/sjhc

Feministe en vredestactiviste Rosa Manus was mede-oprichter van de Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF, 1915), vice-president van de International Alliance of Women for Suffrage and Equal Citizenship (IAW, 1926-1942) en eerste presidente van het International Archief voor de Vrouwenbeweging (IAV, 1935-1942). Ook speelde ze een sleutelrol in het Comité voor Vrede en Ontwaakening van de Internationale Vrouwenorganisaties en het Rassemblement Universel voor la Paix.

Vijfwintig jaar na de ontdekking van de tijdens de oorlog geroofde IAW-archieven in Moskou verschijnt nu een collectieve biografie over Rosa Manus, met bijdragen van historici Margot Bradan, Mineke Bosch, Ellen Carol DuBois, Myriam Everard, Karen Garner, Francisca de Haan, Dagmar Wemitznig en Annika Wilmers. In acht hoofdstukken, vermeerdert met 21 foto’s en 23 historische documenten met toelichting, werpt Rosa Manus (1880-1942) nieuw licht op de betekenis van Manus’ radicaal secuulere Joodse achtergrond, haar veelzijdige internationale rol en haar dood in 1942.

I have always wanted to know more about Rosa Manus ... Through this book, we learn a tremendous amount about the work of the women’s suffrage movement and the peace and disarmament movements through the 1930’s and Manus’s work in creating an international women’s archive.

—Harriet Hyman Alonso, CCNY Professor of History, on Rosa Manus (1881-1942)