

Nana Adusei-Poku

A Stake in the Unknown

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A Stake in the Unknown

Inaugural lecture

Nana Adusei-Poku

18 November 2014

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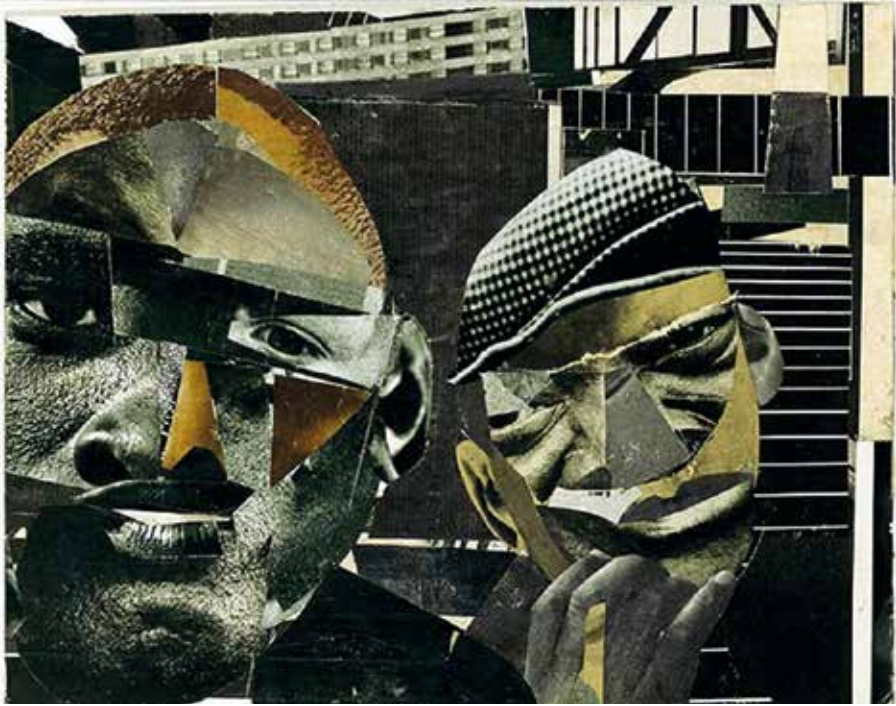
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A Stake in the Unknown

I will now take you on a journey through the past and the present, a journey which I hope will also show us that the past is much more present than one might think. This journey starts by focusing on the ways in which Black artists and intellectuals have described and challenged the socio-economic and socio-political conditions with which they have been, and still are, confronted. I have to emphasise at this point that I am not presenting Black artists and thinkers as a homogeneous group, or claiming that there is some specific essence of “Blackness” to be found in either the artworks or the artists themselves.¹ What I must stress, however, is that the challenges faced by Black² people within a white Western society are not the same as those faced by white people; that these challenges have been the subject of a great deal of debate amongst Black writers, philosophers, artists, activists, musicians, etc.; and that this debate has always had a quite distinct character, despite the wide variety of voices involved. Any discussion of diversity must start with the acknowledgement and respect of these differences as well as their consequences on a structural and personal level, a point which has been stressed by Black artists of all recent generations.

1 This methodology is crucial in understanding the multiplicity of perspectives of Black individuals. The art historian Darby English introduced this concept when he wrote: “It is now less convincing than ever to speak of Black artists as if they share an enterprise. The work of Black artists for whom questions of culture are a subject but visualizing or representing race/identity is not an end obligates us to displace race from its central location in our interpretations of this work. More, it recommends a turn toward the subjective demands that artists place on the multiple categories they occupy, and that we grant this multiplicity right of place in our methodologies.” (English 2007, 12)

2 I write “Black” with a capital B because this term addresses first and foremost political and historical dimensions of the concept of Blackness, and relates only indirectly to skin complexion. The term “white”, in contrast, is not capitalised, since this would obscure the use of the term “Black” as an act of political empowerment and as a socio-political construct.



Romare Bearden 1964. *Pittsburgh Memory*.

Collage of printed papers with graphite on cardboard.

Collection of halley k harrisburg and Michael Rosenfeld, New York.

© Romare Bearden Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, N.Y.

[1]

For example, the visual artist Romare Bearden (see Image 1) formulated this notion much more eloquently than I ever could when he wrote: "I believe there is an aesthetic that informs the art works of black peoples [...] since aesthetic formulations derive from cultural responses not from inherent racial endowments." (Bearden 1974, 189) Thus, if there is no specific essence of Blackness, or as Bearden puts it, no "inherent racial endowments", many of these aesthetics and artworks should instead be understood as a social commentary and a critical reflection on the society in which the artists live - so why not have a closer look, and allow these critiques to be heard?

PART ONE

Time to exit the status quo

Our journey begins in a neighbourhood of New York City called Harlem, which was colonised by Dutch settlers in the early 17th century and named after their hometown of Haarlem in Holland. (Mallory 2011, 7-8) (see Image 2) Here as elsewhere, the land was not heroically “discovered” as some historians claim; rather, it was taken from the Native Americans who already lived there, and who were brutally occupied, exploited as labour force, or simply killed by the Dutch settlers. (Slotkin 1973; Romney 2014)



Jean Leon Gerome Ferris, *The Fall of New Amsterdam*, 1932. Oil on Canvas

[2]



[3]

Studio Museum Freestyle Catalogue Cover, 2001

Without going any further into the violent history of the Dutch settlements and presence in North America, (Slotkin 1973; Romney 2014).³ I believe this is a good starting point in stressing that the histories which I will be addressing in this paper are as entangled and as hybrid as are our identities; in other words, the topics which I will be addressing here concern us all.⁴ And so, my example begins at the Studio Museum in Harlem, where the curator Thelma Golden and the painter Glenn Ligon coined the term “post-black” in the context of a 2001 exhibition titled *Freestyle* (see Image 3).

“Post-black” is an attempt to describe a younger generation of artists, who are not concerned with discussions of race or identity, but nevertheless draw on the history and the artistic styles of their predecessors, while reintroducing styles which had been neglected during the 1990s. (Bey 2004) What is important to highlight here is that “post-black” is not the same as “post-racial”,⁵ nor can it be compared to the trendy and inadequate term “New Black”. I will return to the term “post-black” later in this text, in the conclusion of the first part. For now I wish to focus on one artwork in particular from this exhibition, which has continued to fascinate me ever since I first encountered it: *Mark Bradford's Enter and Exit the New Negro*.⁶ (see Image 4) I will engage only briefly with the artwork itself, which invites a much longer discussion, one that would lead us away from my key argument. Still, I will describe here formally what I see in the painting.⁷

3 Also, I am not claiming that this falsely positive narrative exists only in Holland; it is part of a broader and ongoing North American mythology which denies its own brutal history. See for example (Shorto 2004).

4 For further reading on the topics of hybridity, entangled histories and cultural identity, I recommend (Bhabha 1994; Hall 1997a; Conrad and Randeria 2002; Stam and Shohat 2012).

5 “Post-racial” has been a particularly trendy concept since the US first elected a Black president in 2008. However, the US is by no means a post-racial (and thus post-racist) society; consider for example the recent police killings of unarmed Black youth in Ferguson, Missouri and Los Angeles. For another example of history repeating itself, this time in the Dutch context, see the arguments on an epistemic level for perpetuating the ubiquitous blackfaced folklore character Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) as part of the popular annual celebration of St. Nicholas.

6 For further reading on Bradford see (Siegel 2010; Bedford 2010; Storr 2010; Bradford 2010; Selman 2001).

7 Since it would be impossible to do this artwork any justice here, I would recommend for a more in-depth reading (Adusei-Poku 2012a).



Mark Bradford, *Enter and Exit the New Negro*, 2000.
 Photomechanical reproductions, acrylic gel medium,
 permanent-wave end papers, and additional mixed
 media, 108 x 96 inches (274.3 x 243.8 cm).

© Mark Bradford; courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.,
 New York.

[4]

Enter and Exit the New Negro can be read at first glance as a modern painting. A somewhat irregular yet basically coherent grid of squares in various shades of white, grey, yellow and cream presents a rhythmic structure which invites for contemplation. The irregularity of the grid is echoed by the unpredictable shifts in its colour gradient. With a format of 2.7 x 2.4 metres, we are also dealing here with a large-scale artwork, a factor which again intensifies its meditative character. The painting hangs on the wall from small metal loops like a papyrus roll, an encoded parchment.

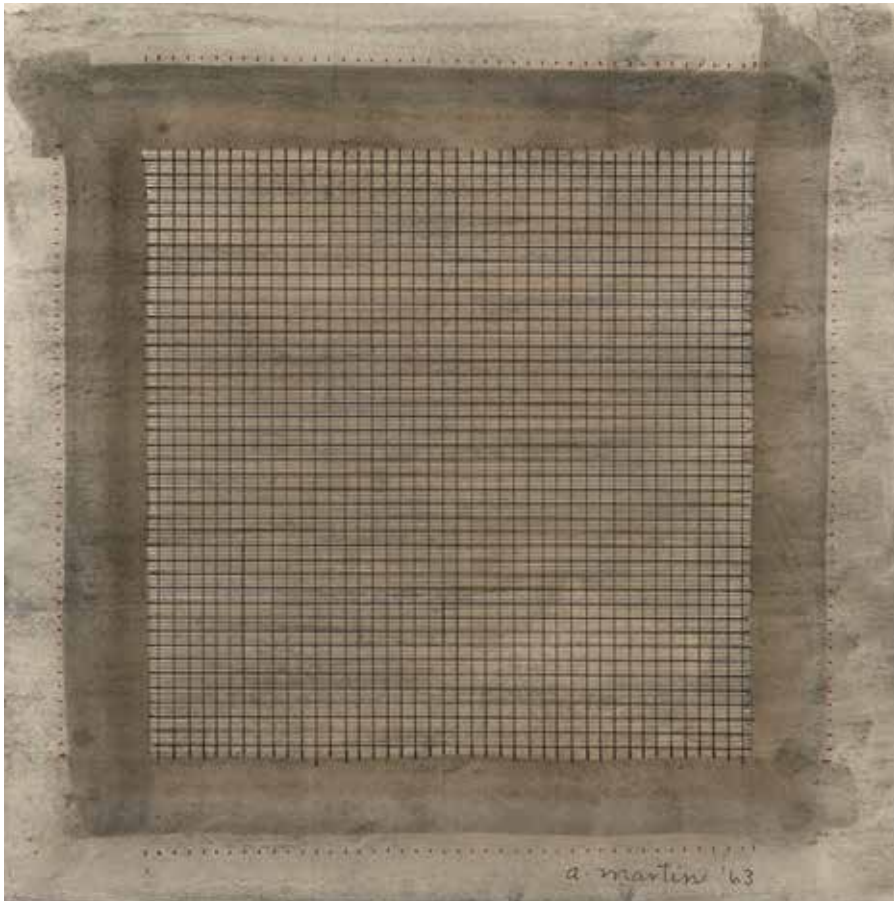
The fragility of the painting reminds one of works by Agnes Martin or Otto Piene. Particularly the structure of the painting seems to directly quote Agnes Martin, whose signature pieces consist mainly of minimalist drawings of lines and grids (see Image 5). However, Bradford avoids the linearity and rigid repetition characteristic of Martin's images, by introducing small shifts, offsets and other irregularities. He also uses materials quite different from graphite and paper, as I will explain soon in more detail. Otto Piene, well known for his use of light and fire (see Image 6), is another apparent reference here, in this case in terms of technique: upon closer inspection, one soon notices that the small squares which make up the painting are in fact translucent sheets of paper, many of them slightly burned at the edges.

Agnes Martin, Wood I, 196.

Watercolour and graphite on paper, 38.1 x 39.4 cm.

© Agnes Martin, c/o Pictoright Amsterdam 2014.

[5]





Otto Piene, *Untitled (Raster-Rauchzeichnung)*, 1959
 Soot on paper, 71 x 100 cm
 © 2014 Sperone Westwater

[6]

The juxtaposition of these edges creates a series of jagged horizontal lines, as well as more subtly suggested vertical lines, in shades of dark brown to iridescent black. The overlapping, slightly damaged translucent paper squares cover the surface of the canvas like an imperfect enamel, full of cracks and scars. Also, Bradford photographed portions of the painting and recursively inserted these images into the collage, thus further increasing the density of the grid.

Bradford, who had recently graduated from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Los Angeles, could not afford a professional canvas, so he used a bed sheet instead, which he primed with acrylic gel. Perhaps most importantly, the aforementioned translucent paper squares are in fact permanent-wave end papers, an common item used by hairdressers. These end papers provide the painting with not only a palpably material dimension, but also social connotations which are entirely context-dependent: in the African-American context, permanent-wave end papers are still widely used in applying Jheri curls or other hairstyles, whereas white - mainly female - beauty salon customers may remember them from the 1980s, when perms where much more in fashion than they are today.

This creative use of “profane” materials – the permanent-wave end papers, as well as another hair product known as “cellophane”, which is a hair colouring and glossing agent used widely in African-American hair salons – not only transgresses the traditional boundary between fine art and everyday objects, in the tradition of Marcel Duchamp (see Image 7); it also evokes social attitudes and practices of body enhancement through technology, as part of a culture of beauty but also as a form of individual expression.

Black hair has been historically stigmatised, not only aesthetically but also as a supposed indication of a lower stage of development. The notorious “pencil test” of apartheid-era South Africa exemplified this notion most dramatically: a person could be categorised into one of several conveniently discrete racial groups, simply by pushing a pencil through their hair. (Posel 2001) If the pencil stayed in place, one was classified as Black, if it moved a bit one was Coloured and if it fell out one was considered White.

So not only are two contrasting social contexts brought together symbolically on the canvas, the material itself also highlights the socio-political history of these constructed identities. Besides physically constituting the grid that spans over the canvas, the end papers also metaphorically invoke hair without actually



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1950.

Replica of 1917 original.

© Photo Felix Clay 2013, Courtesy of Barbican Art Gallery.

[7]

showing it, and particularly how hair is used to perpetuate the notion of racialised, gendered bodies.⁸ What I find remarkable here is not only the painter's use of material, abandoning the traditional paint and canvas in favour of something else, but perhaps most importantly his ability to communicate a broader social idea in the context of an abstract artwork. The possibility for a Black painter to work on this level, and to achieve this degree of acknowledgement, is truly something new within the field. Whereas Black artists have always been subject to stylistic limitations in order to fit into a preconceived idea of the "Black artist", this generation instead uses whatever means necessary to explore the issues in front of them.⁹ As I have said earlier, there is much more that could be said about this painting, however doing so would lead us away from the focus of this paper.

8 As mentioned previously in the example of South Africa, racialisation is a process in which human bodies are classified into different races, based on ideas which have been around for centuries without any scientific foundation. Race is a social category, and thus a socio-political and cultural construction; it has nothing to do with phenotypical appearance. The cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall described this as a "floating signifier" and a "discursive construct" (Hall 1997b). Conversely, the process of gendering means that human bodies are classified into specific sets and ideas of gender derived from a binary gender system - man and woman - which is intrinsically connected to social norms of reproduction and heterosexuality. The philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler introduced the term "heterosexual matrix", expanding on the concept of heteronormativity in order to describe how gender and sexuality together define exclusions and inclusions, depending on whether one does or doesn't "fit" into this dualism. Thus we are socialised into our roles not only on the basis of our biological sex, but also according to gender expectations. (Butler 2006; Butler 1993) These ideas have been further developed in queer theory; see also for example (Haraway 1990; Halberstam 1998; Halberstam 2005; Ferguson 2004; Freeman 2010; Haschemi Yekani, Michaelis and Dietze 2010; El-Tayeb 2011; Preciado 2013).

9 Regarding this argument, which is embedded in a broader discourse on diversity as well as a discussion on the topic of representation in the arts, the photographer Dawoud Bey quite convincingly argued: "The field of semiotics became a critical point of departure in art discourse. For artists of color the prevailing discourse came to center almost solely around issues of race and representation. And while these new texts did indeed do much to foreground new and previously excluded voices, I also believe they were terribly disruptive and had a deleterious effect, since they completely eliminated or ignored whole categories of art production that were still taking place among black art practitioners. It seemed that in order to create an unbroken linear progression towards the moment of multicultural postmodernity, any artists whose works that did not fit this unbroken revisionist trajectory were conveniently eliminated. [...] The move towards pluralism, contrary to what it implies, ironically only allowed for a certain kind of black art practitioner." (Bey 2004) For more information on the discourse of representation referred to by Bey in this quote, see for example (Mercer 1994; Hall 1997a)

Thus I will now return to the title *Enter and Exit the New Negro*, and once again to my initial starting point, the New York neighbourhood of Harlem. Why Harlem? The Harlem I am referring to here is not the Harlem of 17th-century white settlers, but rather the Harlem which was predominantly inhabited by those Black families who arrived between 1910 and 1930 during the first Great Migration from the Southern United States to northern cities such as Chicago and New York¹⁰ (see Image 8).



Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro, Panel No.1, 1940-41*. Casein tempera on hardboard, 30.48 x 45.72 cm. <http://www.phillipscollection.org>

[8]

The life that awaited these families was often one of poverty and outrageously high rents, as depicted by several writers in their poems and novels, as well as in visual documentations. Many of those who were already living in Harlem at the time had managed to achieve a measure of financial wealth and education, leading to the rise of the African-American middle class and establishing the infrastructure in which a new cultural movement could flourish which would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance.¹¹

The term "New Negro" in the title of Bradford's painting refers to much more than just another name for a person of African ancestry. The title recalls the Harlem Renaissance, one of the 20th century's main art movements, which involved

¹⁰ For further reading on the Great Migration see for example (Trotter 1991; Greenfield 2010).

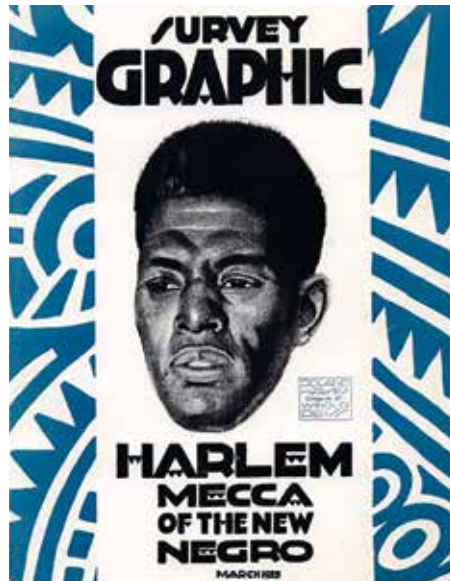
¹¹ For further reading on the Harlem Renaissance see for example (Helbling 1999; Wintz 1996; Huggins 1971; Wall 1995).

intellectuals, poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, composers, choreographers and photographers whose work not only had an direct impact on contemporary racial politics, but also influenced further developments in fine arts and literature. This high concentration of creativity within a relatively small space and time generated a great deal of thought and discussion on the subject of the identity and social position of African Americans in the aftermath of the trauma of slavery and exploitation.

The Harlem Renaissance has also been regarded as the starting point of African-American modernism, and therefore of an alternative modernity;¹² it remains to this day a point of reference in the development of contemporary Black arts. The term “New Negro” was coined in 1925 by the author and philosopher Alain Locke (see Image 9), writing in a special issue of the journal *Survey Graphic* (see Image 10) - which together with other publications such as *The Crisis and Opportunity* championed as well as documented the Harlem Renaissance.



[9] Betsy Graves Reyneau, *Alain Locke*, 1943-44. Oil on canvas.



[10] *Harlem, Mecca of the Negro*, from *Survey Graphic* magazine, 1925.

12

For a discussion of this concept of alternative modernity see (Smethurst 2011), for a discussion of modernity from postcolonial perspectives see (Gilroy 1993; Chatterjee 1997; Kaviraj 2000; Hanchard 1999; Lemke 1998; Smethurst 2011; Mercer 2012, 219-220).

In this particular issue of the magazine, titled *Harlem, Mecca of the New Negro*, Locke described the “New Negro” in contrast to the “Old Negro”.¹³ He made two important observations; first of all, that the term “Negro” should be understood as a formula, an imposed myth, rather than a term to designate a human being. And secondly, that this is an idea which has been passed down from generation to generation. The “Negro” was thus traditionally:

“[...] a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be ‘kept down,’ or ‘in his place,’ or ‘helped up,’ to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. The thinking Negro even has been induced to share this same general attitude, to focus his attention on controversial issues, to see himself in the distorted perspective of a social problem. His shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality.” (Locke 1925, 631)

In other words, Locke believed that a previous generation of Black intellectuals – such as W.E.B. Du Bois (see Image 11), who critically analysed the popular concept of “the color line” – were too much invested in perpetuating Black stereotypes, rather than moving on and embracing the possibilities offered by the modern age.



Although Locke does not use here the word “slave”, a term designating one who is in fact an object, with no human rights, at best an eternal child, the above quotation clearly shows that he perceives the “Old Negro” within the paradigm of the slave, in this case more specifically a slave in the mind. In contrast, the term “New Negro” is meant to highlight the possibility of abandoning these old restrictions, and to identify instead with the new opportunities made available to the population who had migrated from the Southern United States toward the metropolitan areas in the north.

[11] Cornelius Marion (C.M.) Battey, *W.E.B Du Bois*, 1918.

13 Gabriele Dietze refers to the earlier use of the term by Booker T. Washington (See Dietze 2012 179 FN 9). Similarly, Martha Jane Nadell recalls that only 19 years earlier, Washington or W.E.B. Du Bois represented “New Negroes”, whereas Locke now saw them, in a rather generational perspective, as what he considered the “sentimental” “Old Negro” (see Nadell 2004, 11).

The concept of the “New Negro” thus includes a set of positive emancipatory self-attributions which Locke sees as non-sentimental, and in particular not focused on denouncing social injustices. (Locke 1925, 632) Instead, the emphasis is on the intellectual capabilities of the “New Negro” – including the turn towards the sciences, as well as the arts as an open space of expression. Within this concept, previous grotesque and offensive caricatures are replaced by positive self-representations. To summarise, Locke describes a person who is aware of his humanity and his intellectual creativity, and uses these capacities productively, in order to move beyond older notions which he perceived as sentimental. However, the emancipation of the Black man as described here by Locke is – as suggested by the androcentric wording – by definition a male liberation struggle, in which the position of Black women is either marginalised or equated to notions of sentimentality and irrationality.¹⁴ Here too, Black women remain the ultimate other, still invisible, again disempowered and without agency.¹⁵ It is also worth noting that Black gays and lesbians played an important role in the Harlem Renaissance, at a time when the issue of homosexuality could not be addressed openly. This was beautifully depicted by the British artist Isaac Julien in his film *Looking for Langston*. (see Image 12&13)¹⁶



[12] Isaac Julien, *Looking for Langston*, video still 7, 1989. Black-and-white film.



[13] Sunil Gupta, *Looking for Langston*, Auteur Mise en Scene No.2, 1989.

14 The gendered and heteronormative dimension of the idea of Blackness as a predominantly masculine and heterosexual project has since been addressed, for example by Gabriele Dietze (Dietze 2013). Michelle Wright also described this dynamic in her analysis of texts by leading Black intellectuals (such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Amiri Baraka, Eldridge Cleaver, Alain Locke): “[...] their (re) construction of a gendered agency in nationalist discourse disabled the possibility of a Black female subject at the same time that it enabled the Black male subject who, like his white male counterpart, comes into being through the denial of another’s subjectivity – in this case, Black women.” (Wright 2004, 132)

15 Returning to the artist Mark Bradford (*Enter and Exit the New Negro*), it is important to note that an important source of inspiration in his work, besides the social dimensions mentioned earlier, is the representation of women in public media. This interest can already be seen in an early (2002) collage painting called *Strawberry*, which featured the use of permanent-wave end papers as well as cut-out magazine advertisements. The multiple layers of identity (gender, race, sexuality, class) are already introduced in the title of the painting, which refers to a local (South Central L.A.) term for a woman who is a sex worker and a crack addict.

16 See also (Schwarz 2003; Herring 2007; Vogel 2009)

The artists of the Harlem Renaissance – authors and poets such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright (see Image 14), Zora Neale Hurston (see Image 15), Ralph Ellison (see Image 16) and Jessie Redmon Fauset (editor of the magazine *The Crisis*, briefly mentioned earlier in this text- see Image 17), as well as visual artists such as Jacob Lawrence, Lois Mailou Jones, Augusta Savage, Romare Bearden (quoted at the very beginning of this text), and the seldom mentioned abstract expressionist Norman Lewis (see Image 18) – were influential far beyond their own disciplines, as they not only addressed the condition of being Black within a segregated society, but also proposed a creative identity as well as a constant re-examination of what it meant to be of African ancestry in a “post-slavery” society.



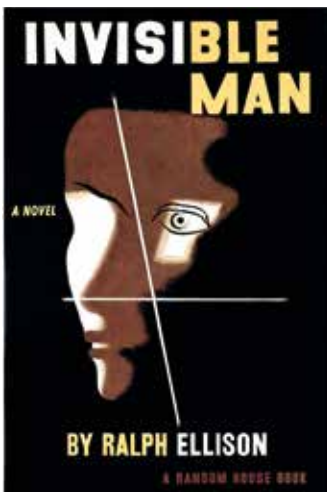
Carl van Vechten, [14]
Portrait of Richard Wright.



Carl Van Vechten, Zora [15]
Neale Hurston, 1938.
Silver gelatin print.



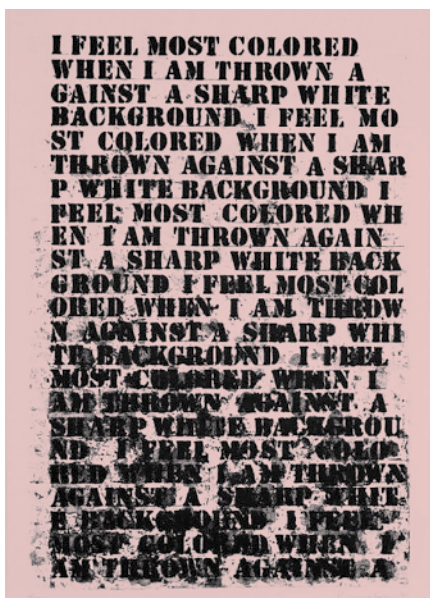
Jessie Redmon Fauset. [16]



Front cover art for the book, [17]
Invisible Man. written by
Ralph Ellison, 1952.



Norman Lewis, *From the Willard Gallery Archives.* [18]
Collection of Kenkeleba House. 18,7 x 21 cm.
© The Estate of Norman W. Lewis, Courtesy of Iandor
Fine Arts, New Jersey.



Glenn Ligon, Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Trown Against a Sharp White Background), 90-91. Oil stick, gesso and graphite on wood panel, 203.2 x 76.2 cm.
© Courtesy Glenn Ligon

This complex connection to identity politics, besides of course the aesthetic quality of the artistic output, is why the Harlem Renaissance has remained a source of inspiration for contemporary Black artists, allowing them to reflect upon their current condition while offering them a point of entry towards a discussion of how they are connected to their own history. For example, the painter Glenn Ligon (born in 1960) created a series of “self-portraits” – quotations from iconic texts of the Harlem Renaissance, painted on doors and repeated over and over, the words becoming increasingly blurred and illegible, so that they take on new meanings once we embrace their materiality and their re-contextualisation as a self-portrait (see Image 19).

I could continue here with a genealogy of African-American art and artists, from Beauford Delaney and Aaron Douglas to conceptual artists such as Adrian Piper (see Image 20), David Hammons (see Image 21), Carrie Mae Weems (see Image 22), Lorna Simpson (see Image 23), Richard J. Powell, Carl Pope and Charles Gaines (see Image 24), or writers such as Amiri Baraka and Toni Morrison, all of whom emerged or were creatively active in the period known as the Black Arts Movement, which is closely linked to the development of conceptual art - however I don't have enough space to do so in this context.

Because what is of greater importance here is something else, which I already addressed in my choice of Mark Bradford's piece as a point of entry into this discussion.¹⁷

17

For further reading on this subject, see (Powell and Bailey 1997; Smethurst 2005; Baigell 2001; Bearden and Henderson 1993; Lewis 1990).



Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being*, 1973. [20]
Video, 8 minutes.
© 2011 Elizabeth Dee.



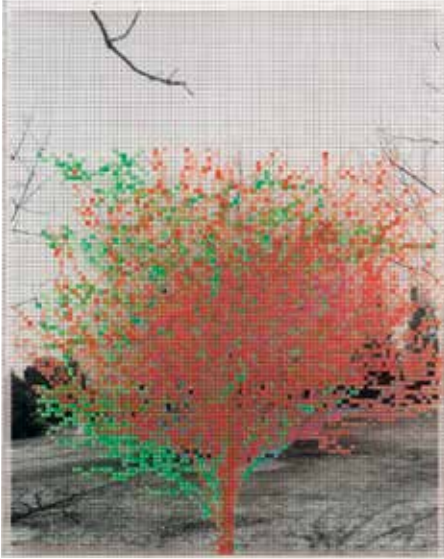
David Hammons and his work in the [21]
exhibition *Three Graphic Artists*, 1971.



[22]
Carrie Mae Weems *Untitled*
(*Woman with friends*), 1990.
silver print, 28 1/4 x 28 1/4 inches.
Inventory #CMW90.007.
©Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy
of the artist and Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York.



Lorna Simpson, *Stereo Styles*, 1988. [23]
10 Polaroid prints, 10 engraved plastic plaques, photographs 35 x 31 inches each,
plaques 3 x 6 inches each, 66 x 116 inches overall.
©Lorna Simpson.



[24]

Charles Gaines, *Numbers & Trees VI, Landscape, #4, 1989*.
Acrylic sheet, acrylic paint, watercolour,
silkscreen, photograph, 118.4 x 98.1 cm.
©Hammer Museum, Los Angeles.

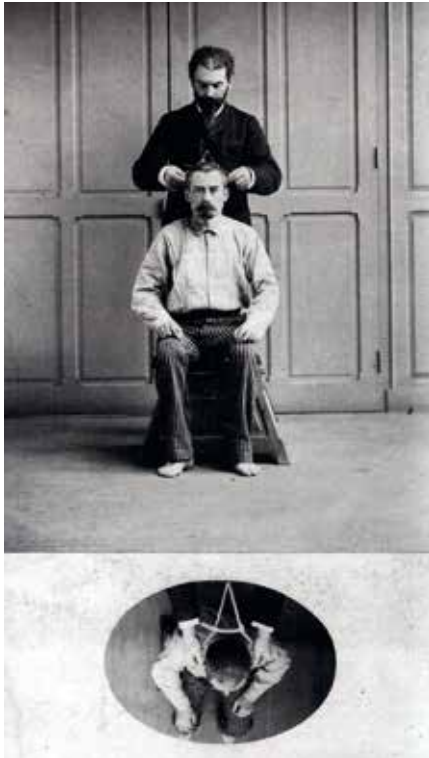
Now that I have provided a basic introduction to these terms and their context, what does it actually mean to *Enter and Exit the New Negro*? The entire history of Black liberation and emancipation?

Mark Bradford, interviewed in a short film, summarised his motivation for the title as follows:

"So I was thinking of the New Negro and I thought well ok the New Negro: I am a *New Negro*. So he has to enter and then exit for new possibilities, because if you just enter that means you are part of the status quo you are part of a set of conditions, but if you enter and then choose to exit you open up the possibilities for something else, that you don't know. And the show was in Harlem and the history of Harlem and the Studio Museum so I suppose I was putting down some type of stake in the unknown."
(Bradford 2010)

This quotation has fascinated me for some time, because it describes a moment of becoming, or in other words, of entering another state of mind. One thing education can do for us is to teach us critical thinking; on a very simple level this can mean that besides learning about the history, cultural values and traditions of the country one grew up in, one can also learn - in a good school, and particularly with a good teacher - to question what one has learned altogether. Once you reach that level of education, in which you start to critically reflect upon what you have been taught, to reflect upon education itself, then something new begins: a quest for knowledge and understanding, which will remain with some of us for the rest of our lives.

But when a Bachelor-level student, after learning about the history of racial typologies and anthropometry (a form of visual racialisation invented by the French photographer and anthropologist Alphonse Bertillon (see Images 25&26), and which can be considered as a precursor of today's biometric passport picture) asks me why she should be critical - I feel like I have failed as an educator. What should we do with a generation that seems only interested in financial gain, that doesn't question its own value systems, that is apparently indifferent to the necessity of critical thinking?



Séance de mensuration: mensuration du crâne, face et plongée, 1890. Photographs pasted on cardboard, albumin print, 28.5 x 22 cm.

[25]



Tableau synoptique des traits physiologiques pour servir à l'étude du "portrait parlé", 1909. Gelatin silver print, 39.4 x 29.5 cm.

[26]

The above quotation by Mark Bradford can also be understood as a critical comment on how one can get stuck in the identity consciousness one ascribes to oneself - it can become a comfort zone, but it is a comfort zone that is static. The generation of artists who have been called "post-black" did not only claim the space to be an artist; they also redefined and opened up questions beyond the dualism of Black and white, though their main reference point remains Black art and culture. (Golden 2001)



[27]

Hank Willis Thomas After Identity, What?, 2012. Aluminum letters on wood and inkjet print. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of Hank Willis Thomas and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Consider for example Hank Willis Thomas, whose work focuses on the construct of Blackness – or the “economy of Blackness”¹⁸ – and who uses the visual language of advertisements in order to call attention to the historical connections between contemporary consumer society and exploitation (see Image 27).

Other examples which are relevant here include Mickalene Thomas, who examines the traditional Western art canon through collages focusing on the Black female body,¹⁹ and Leslie Hewitt, who uses conceptual photography in order to explore the ephemeral nature of Blackness and time.²⁰ Besides the construct of Blackness, artists of this generation also openly discuss issues of gender, class and sexuality, examining the multi-dimensionalities of being in this world. Once one has opened oneself to this notion of the unknown and the opaque, there is a space in which new dialogues and perspectives may emerge. In order to reach that stage however, one first has to enter that area of consciousness which is also

informed by one’s history. One of the key reasons why I am citing examples from the African-American context is that this context is part of the “black Atlantic” and thus the global network of the Black diaspora, as a historical development which was forced upon Black people. This is a contested framework which can be understood, according to the postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy, as an “intercultural and transnational formation” (Gilroy 1993) – a heterogeneous culture which has been a result of Western discourse since the Age of Enlightenment, based on humanist thought and its practical consequences in the justification of slavery and exploitation of people of African ancestry.

18 I am using the term “economy of Blackness” in order to include here a reflection on the broader idea of a status quo of objectification and commodification of the Black body which continues to this day – as a labour force to be exploited, with all the economic imbalances this implies, but also as a currency for fantasies and consumption, as exemplified by Black popular culture. For a historical perspective on race as a commodity see (McClintock 1995). I am also drawing here on what Paul Gilroy has called the “moral economy” of the “black Atlantic” (Gilroy 2010).

19 See also: (Adusei-Poku 2012b)

20 See also: (Adusei-Poku 2014)

Another reason I use these African-American examples is because Black people have never operated separately from each other; in fact, transnational connections have always generated fruitful and stimulating intellectual exchanges, across space as well as time.²¹

What I would like to emphasise through all these examples, is that these are not positions and stories that should be considered - individually or institutionally - as something detached from the context of Rotterdam for example, or from our contemporary systems of knowledge. Rotterdam, like Amsterdam, was historically an important port for the European slave trade²² and it is now a city with a significant Black presence;²³ but why is it that so many people in Holland still use the most degrading word for a Black person as if it were a normal term, without reflecting on its colonial origins? Where is the critical reflection that education can and should provide us? Are we dealing here with a collective failing?

21 For example, between the writers of the Harlem Renaissance and thinkers and later politicians of postcolonial Africa such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor (Edwards 2003); or between Black British artists and intellectuals, and African-American thinkers such as Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Cornel West, Isaac Julien, Glenn Ligon, Kobena Mercer, Sonia Boyce, etc.

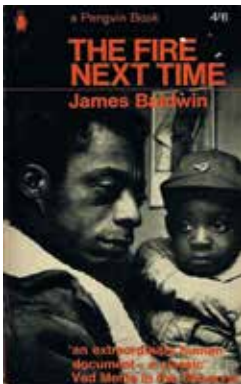
22 For a history of slavery and the slave trade in the Netherlands see (Postma 1990; Page 1997; Emmer 2006; Doortmont 2007). For the role of Rotterdam as a slave port see (Tibbles 2000).

23 See (Hine, Keaton and Small 2009; Small 2012; Essed and Hoving 2014).

PART TWO

History, “the smiler with the knife under the cloak”²⁴

“To accept one’s past – one’s history – is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.”
– James Baldwin



[28]

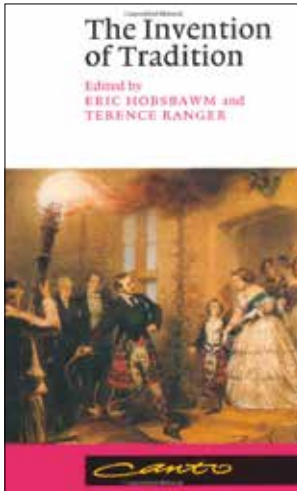
James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963.

This quote is from James Baldwin's influential book *The Fire Next Time* (1963) (see Image 28), in which the author and civil rights activist wrote of the exclusion from U.S. history of the narratives and positions of Black people. But what did he mean when he spoke of invented history, and why is this relevant to today's concept of cultural diversity?

Baldwin's idea of invented history is closely connected to a concept developed in Eric Hobsbawm's and Terence Ranger's influential book *The Invention of Tradition* (1983)

24

This famous line by Geoffrey Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*, 14th century) is quoted in Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston*. For a discussion of this quotation see Kara Keeling (2009), who connects the notion of death and post-mortem cruelty drawn upon Black queer victims of hate crimes to Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in which the author wrote: "even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" (Benjamin 1969, 255). This cruelty can be observed in the way victims of right-wing terrorism are commonly treated. For example, a migrant victim is assumed to be a drug dealer, while he is in fact a florist. (Reimann 2012) In the African-American transgender community, women who are victims of violence or even murdered do not receive adequate protection, while crimes against them are poorly investigated. (Pilkington 2014) Statistics of murder of Black people, and poor people in general, are often lacking or ignored. (Odoi 2004)



[29]

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, 1992.

(see Image 29), where the authors traced the ways in which the idea of a nation is literally invented and implemented through practices and narratives – such as a myth of origin, national holidays, national rituals, and a sense of belonging through physical resemblance to a specific phenotype. All these elements play a role in propping up a unified idea of the essence of a nation with an invented history. According to Hobsbawm, such practices not only serve to establish specific norms and values; they also create, through their cyclical repetition, a continuity with the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, 5). This also means that the perspectives of people who have been excluded or invisible from these narratives and rituals will never attain the status of “belonging” to that nation state and its history, even if the nation was built at their (or

their ancestors’) expense. In other words, Hobsbawm criticised the narrow views according to which we typically define the notion of belonging or being an insider, since these definitions are always formulated and enforced by groups which hold and maintain positions of power.

If I were to ask people how a French, Italian, German or Swedish person looks like, what do you think the answer would be? I don’t need statistics to know that most people would begin with white skin as default – or wouldn’t even mention skin colour, as it would be assumed as a given. Whiteness doesn’t even have to be specified: it is its privilege and its power to remain invisible, to be the marker rather than the marked. But is it still true that being European automatically implies being white? What does one actually see when one walks through Rotterdam, a city with residents of some 174 nationalities and probably as many languages? The notion of a homogeneous white population may still seem a reality in the wealthy neighbourhood of Kralingen, or in the archipelago of suburban villages surrounding Rotterdam. It is certainly not so in the rest of the city.

What does it mean, when I am at the opening of an exhibition in Utrecht, having a lovely conversation with a white, presumably Dutch, gallery owner, who notices my German accent and tells me he is “half-German”, to which I can respond “me too” – after which we go on with our conversation about the international art market and the recognition of Dutch artists within that context... You can never judge a book by its cover.

We can also question whether this claim of whiteness has ever been true at all, considering not only the number of migration movements throughout Europe but also the Black presence on the continent since the early 13th century at least. Though there were certainly not many Black people in Europe at that time, it is worth noting –

as long as we are on the subject of invented histories – how some individuals tend to remain unmentioned in the great European narrative: such as Alessandro de' Medici (1510-1537), a member of the famous Florentine aristocratic family of the same name (see Image 30); or Abram Petrovich Gannibal (1696-1781)(see Image 31), a Russian military general and nobleman; or Anton Wilhelm Amo, an 18th-century German philosopher (see Image 32); or Olaudah Equiano, an influential 18th-century author and anti-slavery activist (see Image 33); or George Bridgetower (1778-1860), a British violinist and composer (see Image 34). In other cases, unwelcome details simply remain unmentioned, such as the fact that Alexandre Dumas, author of *The Three Musketeers* (see Image 35), was Black; that Mozart had partially African ancestry (see Image 36); or that the British queen Charlotte (wife of the “mad” king George III) was also of African ancestry (see Image 37). Of course, all this was long before interracial relationships became a criminal act as a result of colonial expansion and the fear of racial mixing or “miscegenation”.



Jacopo da Pontormo, [30]
Portrait of Alessandro de' Medici, 1534-1535. Oil on panel, 97 x 79 cm.



Ludushka, Abram Gannibal [31]
bust in Petrovskoye, Ukraine, 2011.



Anton Wilhelm Amo [32]
statue at the University of Halle, Germany.



Olaudah Equiano, 1789 [33]



George Bridgetower, [34]
1800. Watercolour.



Étienne Carjat, [35]
Alexandre Dumas, 1855. Salted paper print, 247.65 x 188.91 mm.



[36]

Johann Nepomuk della Croce, Detail of portrait of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, cropped version, 1780. Oil on canvas, 140 x 168 cm.

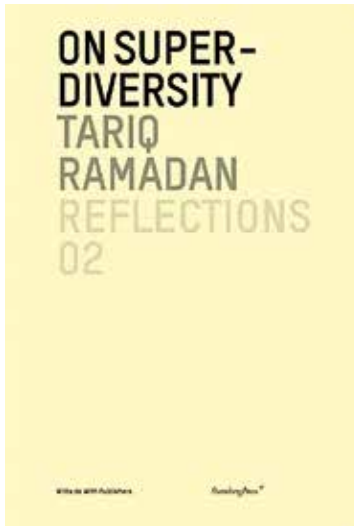


[37]

Studio of Allan Ramsay, portrait of Charlotte of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, 1762. Oil on canvas, 148 x 108 cm.

How can a designation such as “native Dutch” – linked to notions of blood and soil, with all the privileges implied – still be used in the 21st century, as such markers continue to prop up boundaries between those considered “legitimate” and those condemned to remain “illegitimate” in the place they rightfully call their home? Whose truth are we repeating when we fail to challenge such notions of belonging? What is the origin of this desire to create micro-boundaries, which end up playing out on a macro level, for example becoming a brutal truth on the shores of Lampedusa, the Italian island where thousands of African migrants drown every year? Or the thousands of victims of the Ebola virus, whose lives seem meaningless compared to that of a few white nurses? As such examples sadly demonstrate, the importance of cultural diversity reaches far beyond national borders. Yet the change must start on a micro level, with each individual.

As a result of this endless obsession with notions of purity and racial belonging, other equally important identity categories often remain unaddressed – for example gender, sexual orientation, culture, religion, disability and age. Though including these categories in discussions about belonging further complicates the picture, here too there is a pressing need to change our thinking. In an effort to address the multidimensionality of our identities, and thus the multiplicity of categories simultaneously at play, Tariq Ramadan expanded on the concept of “super-diversity” – first introduced by Steven Vertovec (2007) – which highlights the need to acknowledge differences while at the same time establishing a set of shared values which allow us to oppose exclusion and resist the “comfort zone” of a simplistic sense of belonging (Ramadan 2011). (see Image 38). Unfortunately, Ramadan’s point



[38]

Tariq Ramadan, *On Super-Diversity*, 2011.

was widely misunderstood, or simply became an empty buzzword for policy makers and politicians who had suddenly discovered that there is more to di-versity than just race.

Some theorists such as the Belgian Jan Blommaert have tried to pick up on the concept of “super-diversity”; however they have used it to refer to successive waves of migration, which again creates hierarchies between groups of migrants, rather than acknowledging the potential of the *cosmopolite* – a citizen of the world – within us all. (Blommaert 2011) Our histories are complex. They are diverse, entangled, multi-layered, and highly individual within the collective context. They cannot be approached from one single perspective.

Thus I would argue that contemporary institutions, in this case specifically art and educational institutions, are drowning (to return to Baldwin’s quote) in these invented histories, due to their narrow curricula and their static value systems. Too often they remain stuck in a single narrative of their own past and present. Many of these institutions, and more specifically their staff, are overwhelmed by the demands placed on them by the multiplicity of identity categories. How to reach audiences who have been neglected for centuries? How to cater to the expectations of these audiences when the necessary in-house expertise is so often lacking, since non-white people tend to confront existing authorities with inconvenient truths which threaten to destabilise the norm? It takes a lot of courage to speak out in such a climate. Anyone who addresses these issues is seen as overly critical, even stigmatised as a troublemaker, thus jeopardising their position within the organisation, and by extension their livelihood. And so non-white people remain underrepresented in the world of curators and teachers, if they are to be found there at all. However it is not so hard to find non-white people in positions such as museum guards, or university cleaning and facility service personnel – a fact which was brilliantly criticised by the artist Fred Wilson in his 1992 performance *My Life as a Dog*. (see Image 39- an installation that is based on the performance)²⁵

25

As an excellent example of how spaces are demarcated along racial (and gender) lines, the artist met up with a group of teachers in the lobby of the Whitney Museum in New York City, having previously agreed to give them a “guided tour” of his exhibition in the museum. He instructed them to meet him in the exhibition space upstairs, then disappeared and quickly changed into a museum guard uniform, before taking up a post at the spot where he had told the group to meet him. Nobody recognised him in his new role, and thus went on searching for the artist. As the art historian Jennifer A. González eloquently noted, the piece demonstrated “the race-specific framing effect of the museum where ‘black’ bodies are visible if they appear in works of art, or in the midst of a generally ‘white’ museum-going public, but are effectively invisible as part of the staff” as well as “the ideological structures that inform the institutional displays of art, artifacts, and people that are consequently rendered both visible and invisible.” (González 2008, 1-2)

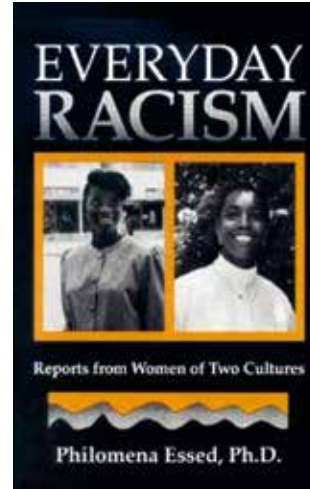
[39]



Fred Wilson, *Guarded View*, 1991. Wood, paint, steel and fabric. © Fred Wilson.

[40]

Philomena Essed, *Everyday Racism*, 1990.



None of what I am saying here should be unfamiliar to anyone who works in the field and tries to bring to attention this “drowning” in history. Nor should it be unfamiliar to anyone acquainted with postmodern thinking, including feminist theory, gender theory, critical race theory or queer of colour critique, or who is engaged in identity politics and postcolonial studies. Certainly these arguments should be quite familiar to anyone who has personally been excluded, who has experienced “everyday racism”, as Philomena Essed described the practices of micro-racism experienced on a daily basis by Black people in the Netherlands (see Image 40).

Contemporary art institutions such as the Stedelijk Museum or the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, the Guggenheim in New York, or the Tate Modern in London - to name but a few - have finally begun to reflect upon their own collections in relation to their colonial histories, through exhibitions and new acquisitions, and by initiating “global arts” programmes such as the Guggenheim has done. Some art schools are following this trend by offering summer schools or Master programmes with titles such as “global curating” or “global art practice”, or Minor selections such as “global art”. But is this sudden discovery of the “global” really the best way to stimulate the necessary reflection, on a broader and deeper level, of our past, present and potential future? My critique here touches upon something very concrete: whereas these entangled histories should be considered intrinsic to every part of our lives, including education, instead they are sidelined into “special” programmes, and considered as something idiosyncratic. When an introduction into the origins of modern painting is taught without any acknowledgment whatsoever of the influence of African arts and crafts and the fascination of early modern artists with everything they considered exotic (Archer-Straw 2000), then one is in fact inventing history, making it clean and neat, not accepting it as it was but constructing it as one wishes it to be - or as one has learned it. Using Baldwin’s concept of invented history as a point of entry for the discussion

on cultural diversity may seem a surprising approach for some readers. How is this connected to the subject of cultural diversity, and more particularly the Dutch context? I would argue that this idea of history, and particularly historical reflection, is of utmost importance if we are to successfully embrace the potential offered by cultural diversity. Because a reflection upon history necessarily calls for a *critical* engagement with one's own position in the present – as a form of self-reflection, in the sense of pushing oneself out of one's own comfort zone. One of the biggest challenges for the curricula is that the gap between what students have been taught, and what they should really know about the many rich cultures their country consists of, seems almost irreparably wide. On the other hand, bringing more Black teaching staff into the schools would provide students with positive role models as well as a more enriching atmosphere. This can be achieved through staff quota and should be reflected in search committees.

If diversity is often portrayed as a problem, this is mainly because it is perceived as such by those who have never felt the need to question their own identity – in other words, the real problem here is that it is hard for some of us to face the fact that the world is not made of homogeneous entities. Workplaces in particular are certainly not homogeneous. However, most students of art education programmes in Rotterdam for example are white, though schools in Rotterdam certainly are not. If the university is not able to prepare and provide the next generation of teachers with critical self-awareness as well as a rich canon that reflects the actual population of the city, then we are condemned to go on repeating a vicious circle of disrespect, prejudices and social inequalities.

We must do everything we can to help the next generation achieve a sense of critical self-reflection and self-awareness, because whether someone works as a museum curator, an electrician or a business administrator, the fact remains that diversity is everywhere.

Academic curricula must include the knowledge and perspectives of those who have far too long been excluded, because the project of cultural diversity starts within each and every one of us. It is a plain fact that we must learn to accept our own hybridity. Most Black people do not identify with one geographical place, as I have previously explained through the concept of the Black diaspora. However, within a broader network of peoples and their histories, it is time to start considering this perspective as an enrichment rather than a problem, in order to really be able to take a *stake in the unknown*. To return once again to James Baldwin's metaphor: despite the fact that the ground of clay is cracking, and the season of drought seems to be lasting far too long, it is time to bridge the gaps, or at least work on a watering system, and to accept our past in order to be open in the present. Or, as the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes so eloquently said it:

"The past has been a mint / Of blood and sorrow. / That must not be / True of tomorrow."

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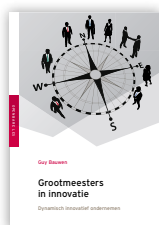
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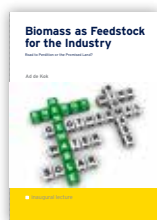
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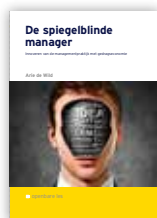
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Nana Adusei-Poku

A Stake in the Unknown



As a University of Applied Sciences located in Rotterdam, one of the most diverse cities in The Netherlands, we aspire to a diverse community, not only of students but also of faculty and staff. While diversity is portrayed by the community's national, racial, class, (dis)ability, sexual and gender identity profile, it also relates to the diversity of opinion and perspectives represented within the school. The notion of Cultural Diversity as represented through the Professorship of Applied Sciences of the same name is interested in aesthetic strategies, political action and socio-economic developments and their histories. Cultural Diversity is a contested term, often misunderstood and even more often regarded as a 'problem'.

It is thus quintessential to ask: Where does the work on Cultural Diversity start: with ourselves, or with the other? Can we find meaningful answers through researching databases? Or rather through social inquiries, and by making visible those who have been excluded from this discussion? Drawing on developments in contemporary arts, this lecture will focus through a historical perspective on knowledge from various disciplines that has been neglected in a European context, in order to use these as a starting point for a discussion on what Cultural Diversity might mean today. Embedded in a historical understanding of our current condition, the Inaugural Lecture will unfold the potential that lies within seeing diversity as a state of constant change.

Nana Adusei-Poku is Professor of Applied Sciences for Cultural Diversity at the Research Center Creating O10 of Rotterdam University of Applied Sciences in which she conducts practice-oriented research on the subject of Cultural Diversity within the arts and the City of Rotterdam. She initiates projects to raise diversity awareness on content and practice level within the school as well as with external parties in collaboration with students, tutors.

INAUGURAL LECTURE