BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS. TOWARDS AN AFROPEAN DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS

by Alanna Lockward

To quote this essay*:


It is crucial to point out that even though the conceptualization of decolonial aesthetics is fairly recent, its points of departure - the epistemic shifts that have challenged coloniality in the artistic and cultural practices of the Global South - are as old as the system itself. The defiance to colonialism in Vodou dance and rituals, which in Haiti ultimately lead to the first successful slave revolution, is a splendid case-in point in this regard. What decolonial aesthetics does is to connect these legacies and its current displays to the analytical model modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. **BE.BOP 2012. Black Europe Body Politics**¹ (May 4-6. Ballhaus Naunynstrasse, Berlin) introduced² this theoretical approach to the visual arts in Europe and the African continent with a wide spectrum of screenings³.

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¹ (http://blackeuropebodypolitics.wordpress.com/)
² http://reboot.fm/2012/04/08/bebop-black-europe-body-politics/
³ See Appendix
In the process of organizing BE.BOP 2012. BLACK EUROPE BODY POLITICS, I conceptualized the diasporic as a specific approach to decolonial aesthetics with the purpose of outlining the particularities of certain continental Black European experiences. As a work-in-progress, this first conceptualization has now become “Afropean decolonial aesthetics”. What follows is a review of my arrival to this point by firstly mapping the field of diaspora aesthetics and, secondly, outlining the terminological and theoretical pertinence of the “Afropean” in relation to current analytical models of both decolonial and diaspora aesthetics.

Modernity/coloniality/decoloniality, the model or research programme inspired by the groundbreaking contribution of Peruvian sociologist and humanist, Aníbal Quijano, offers a tool to dismantle the continuities of colonialism after formal decolonisation. At the same time the programme defines modernity as a rhetoric inseparable from the logic of coloniality (Mignolo 2008), which consists of the systematic exploitation of entire populations in the name of “progress” and “civilization”. As mentioned at the beginning, the analysis and contestations over this inextricable inseparability have been part of modernity/coloniality since its very inception. This work is called “decoloniality”. In this sense, decolonial thinkers examine post-colonial studies as limited in scope since apart from omitting this inextricability, their genealogy is anchored in rather provincial theories of (post) modernity based largely on Eurocentric historical and intellectual genealogies.

There are several conceptualizations of diaspora aesthetics in post-colonial studies within what R. Radhakrishnan (1991) calls “The Age of Diaspora”. Kobena Mercer has published extensively on the subject since the eighties. Other contributions include Alexander Weheliye’s “Afro-diasporic aesthetics” (2005:324) and Krista Thompson’s “African diasporic forms” (2011:38) These theoretical approaches share a common thread with the seminal essays on diaspora and cultural representation by Stuart Hall.
They also share a dialogical stamina in their analysis. The authors systematically choose
to articulate their ideas by departing from the discussion of specific cultural practices
rather than trying to establish yet another abstract universal. In other other words, these
are situation-specific conceptualizations comme-il-faut. In the case of Thompson, the
focus is given to the social status performed in the hip-hop inspired prom rituals in The
Bahamas. Weheliye, "accompanied" by Dubois, Walter Benjamin and Ralph Elllison,
introduces “sonic Afro-modernity” as an indicator of the disjuncture between sound and
source exemplified by “Souls”.4

In Kobena Mercer’s paradigmatic reflexions on diaspora aesthetics, moving-image plays
a relevant role. Many of the works presented and discussed during BE.BOP 2012 share,
with those of early Black British filmmakers analyzed by Mercer, the confounding of
stereotypes and the displacement of common assumptions of an essentialized Black
identity. What differentiates the works of BE.BOP 2012 from those studied by Mercer is a
rather bizarre element: the fact that Black filmmakers in Britain did not have to “prove”
that colonialism and imperialism actually “happened” or, as in the case of The
Netherlands, that since “that happened so long ago they are ultimately irrelevant”.

Ingrid Mwangi Robert Hutter
Wild At Heart, 1998, Performance, Single-Channel Video, 1:30, Sound
Courtesy of the Artist and Art Labour Archives

The contribution of Afropean decolonial aesthetics to current conceptualizations of
diaspora aesthetics is to illuminate the way in which diaspora creators address the
occlusions concealed by modernity that hide the dirty job of colonality. In this sense, we

4 “When Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 2; emphasis mine) first introduces the “Sorrow Songs”
in the “Forethought,” he links them directly to the souls of black folk: “Before each chapter, as
now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs—some echo of haunting melody from the only
American music, which welled up from black souls in the dark past.” Moreover, in the
“Afterthought” to Souls, Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 217) asks his readers to “Hear [his] cry,” and
the best way to hear the souls of black folk, as Du Bois remarks at the end of chapter 1 (“Of
Our Spiritual Strivings”), is to is to listen to the “Sorrow Songs.” Du Bois ([1903] 1989: 12)
does not ask his readers to view or see the souls of black folk, but instead he writes so “that
men may listen to the souls of black folk.”
address our presence in what Quinsy Gario has described as “modern art plantations” and I paraphrase as “the art plantations of modernity” - as neither tangential or incidental. It is indeed in this globally inescapable plantation system mentality, superbly argued by Antonio Benítez Rojo in La Isla que se Repite (The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective, 1998), that certain artists from the Caribbean and other Black diasporas have chosen to challenge its coloniality of knowledge and being and to create the possibilities of sensing that strip the hegemonic “supremacy” of modernity. The video-collage “Other” by Aboriginal-Australian artist, Tracey Moffatt is a masterpiece in this regard.

Tracey Moffatt, Other, 2009. 7:00, sound, 2009
Courtesy of the artist and The Momentum Collection

Afropean decolonial aesthetics assumes the Caribbean diaspora as organically implied in Black and/or African diaspora in Europe following the predicaments of Stuart Hall and so many others. There is a vast global bibliography on diaspora studies and, particularly in Europe, situation-specific re-semantizations of the term are mushrooming all over the place. For the sake of clarity, I will quote the definition of Agustín Lao Montes of an African Diaspora since it feels closer to my own experience as a member of the Caribbean Diaspora:

5 “So let’s say goodbye, to easy and comfortable generalizations lain to rest among the ashes of the suspension of disbelief. We are the invaders and squatters of the modern art plantations that drive us to and beyond the brink of sanity and the sanitarium and the sanitized.” (Gario 2012)

6 “[...] our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This ‘oneness’, underlying all the other, more superficial differences, is the truth, the essence, of ‘Caribbeanness’, of the black experience. It is this identity which a Caribbean or black diaspora must discover, excavate, bring to light and express through cinematic representation.” Hall 1989:223
“If the world-historical field that we now call the African diaspora, as a condition of dispersal and as a process of displacement is founded on forms of violence and terror that are central to modernity, it also signifies a cosmopolitan project of articulating the diverse histories of African peoples while creating translocal intellectual/cultural currents and political movements.” (Lao Montes 2007:55).

The decolonial in aesthetics substantiates the notion that we are and always have been part of modernity. This is why our strategies of re-existence (Albán Achinte 2010:20) are analyzed as an integral part of modernity; instead of defining ourselves as "other modernities", we call ourselves “decolonized coloniality”.

The following quote by Stuart Hall is illustrative of a key contestation of decolonial thinking and aesthetics with respect to post-colonial and cultural studies:

“Thinking about my own sense of identity, I realize that it has always depended on the fact of being a migrant, on the difference from the rest of you. So one of the fascinating things about this discussion is to find myself centered at last. Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed, I become centered. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be the representative modern experience! This is "coming home" with a vengeance!” (Stuart Hall in Mercer 2005:316)

From the decolonial perspective, we have never abandoned "home" (coloniality). The process of decolonization of our minds involves a realization of this fact. We have always been here as the hidden side of modernity, therefore our presence is self-explanatory. Self-agency, on the other hand, is something that decolonial thinking and doing shares with Hall’s dictum, since ultimately our recognition in the mirroring mirages of modernity unites us in solidarity. Furthermore, Afropean decolonial aesthetics embraces Hall’s “burden of representation” as a most welcomed gift: the gift of self-awareness, the gift of mental, sensing and aesthetics decolonization. As in Hall’s predicament, during BE.BOP 2012, we became centered in our own experiences within a pan-European context. We talked between ourselves, to ourselves, about ourselves, it was a banquet of identities. The so-called “post-racial”, “post-identity” or “post-Black” eras were oxymorons in our vocabulary.
The pervasive colonial amnesia in Germany and Scandinavian countries skilfully illustrates a Pan-European denial scenario. The systematic involvement in the financial network of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and later in the Berlin-Africa Conference (1884-1885), are just two examples.

Since artists in different European locations thoroughly engage with these historical vacuums, my choice to connect their commonalities, and my own curatorial praxis, as an Afropean decolonial aesthetics responds to what Erna Brodber has described as the “Continent of Black Consciousness” but from the situation of living in Europe and not the Caribbean. Therefore, the particularization of “Afropean” is meant to signal the emergence of Black Consciousness in Europe from a Pan-Africanist perspective.

During **BE.BOP 2012**, our multiple dialogues were focused on the works of artists, thinkers and activists inhabiting the Continent of Black Consciousness in Africa (Simmi Dullay), the Caribbean and African Diaspora in Europe (Teresa María Díaz Nerio, Jeannette Ehlers, Quinsey Gario, Ylva Habel, Grada Kilomba, Adetoun Küppers Adebisi, Michael Küppers Adebisi, Ingrid Mwangi Robert Hutter, David Olusoga, Minna Salami, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Robbie Shilliam, Jean-Marie Teno and Emeka Udemba) and Australia (Tracey Moffatt and Sumugan Sivanesan).

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7 Special thanks to Robbie Shilliam for introducing me to this wonderful author and thinker, and also for his invaluable insights for this essay.
8 Edna Brodber’s poetic contribution in her novel “Louisiana” is based on Marcus Garvey’s Pan Africanism: “Africa for the Africans in Africa and Beyond”.

The decolonial in Afropean decolonial aesthetics acknowledges our common struggle against coloniliality materialized in chilling examples of systematic racialization and prosecution of people of African descent in Europe, which will be discussed further on. Together in this journey of mind and sensing decolonization, we are not only demanding retribution from the colonial legacies in Africa we are also outlining the continuities of these legacies in coloniality, that is colonialism without colonies.

European coloniliality is chillingly present in a brand new institution: Frontex\(^9\), an external and internal borders programme, founded in 2005, with the fastest growing budget in the European Union. A European Union that was first known and conceptualized as inseparable from (the exploitation of) Africa and therefore named by its founders as “Eurafrica” (Hansen and Jonsson 2011). Indeed, there are irrefutable historical continuities between the Berlin-Africa Conference (1884-1885), the original Eurafrica (European Union) project and current interventionist “mappings” of migration routes in the African Continent. This border externalization “initiative” could be defined as a de facto “cartographic war” against Africa and adds ups to the relevance of “Afropean” as a translating tool of current entanglements of coloniality in Europe. “Afropean” announces these realities and goes beyond mere reflection by inverting the order of its two components. They say “Eurafrica” and I say “Afropean”, from our own community tale\(^10\)

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\(^10\) “...Mammy would not tell the president nor his men her tale for it was not hers; she was no hero. It was a tale of cooperative action; it was a community tale. We made it happen”. (Brodner 1994:161)
Paradoxically, the African presence in Europe is older than in the Americas. The (still contested) 800 years of African occupation of the Iberian Peninsula is a case in point. And Nègritude, the epigram that contributed to the liberation of the African continent in the so called “Short Century”, was invented in Paris in the 1930’s where also one of five European Pan-African Congress were held (the original Pan-African conference took place in London, in 1900).

Furthermore, BE.BOP 2013, entitled “Decolonizing the Cold War” \(^{11}\), will be dedicated to exposing how the Black Body as a space of dignity, power and beauty permeated the radical imagination of artists and thinkers in Europe beyond racial divides. We will be talking about the legacies of Angela Davis, a former student of Herbert Marcuse, and Richard Wright, who first published “Black Power” in London, inspired by Pan-Africans such as George Pademore and Kwame Nkrumah.

Another ground for the pertinence of “Afropean” in relation to diaspora aesthetics and diaspora studies in general is that, unlike in the USA, the UK, the Caribbean and Latin America, the Black Diaspora in continental Europe cannot comfort itself with being an accepted community within the nation at large, albeit a pathologized one. In fact, against all odds the very notion of a Black or Afro- community - even if "new" or "recent" is disavowed in much of continental Europe. In this regard, the “Afropean” contributes to give a particular resonance with respect to Diaspora Aesthetics, insofar its variables accentuate its nuances vis-à-vis hegemonic US-focused academic discourses, and also in relation to Black British cultural studies \(à la\) Hall.

Likewise with regards to its demarcation within Diaspora Studies, “Afropean” (in relation to Decolonial Aesthetics) clarifies the particular challenge of establishing the fact that colonialism actually did happen in the first place. In the Americas (where the term

\(^{11}\) http://decolonizingthecoldwar.wordpress.com/
“decolonial aesthetics” was coined) this is self-explanatory to the point of absurdity; however in our European realities it is absolutely the opposite. “Afropean” is meant to optimize the dialogical understanding between two processes of mental decolonization with common objectives and a shared African and European colonialist legacy, but very different canonical historiographies. As previously argued, the systematic historical erasure of colonial legacies after the Berlin-Africa Conference (1884-1884) is exemplary of this situation. To give a revealing example, there are no monuments in Berlin that commemorate this outlandish event.

Additionally, “Afropean” is also aimed at expanding awareness on the alarmingly growing Afrophobia of continental Europe.

As Quinsy Gario so cheerfully exposes in his performance-campaign, Zwarte Piet is Racism, a demeaning caricature of Blackness is valued as an unchangeable “innocent” cultural heritage in the Netherlands utterly “unrelated” to colonialism, which, as we know, “happened too long ago to even matter anymore”. Blackface is also institutionalized in Germany as a “respectable” theatrical tradition. The infamous Swedish cake and countless alarming examples on racial profiling, police harassment and random murders of African immigrants in Greece are just the tip of the iceberg.

Adding to these symptomatic examples, I must admit that in spite of consistently trained political awareness, the hate-speech and prosecution of Somali communities in Sweden, the deaths under police custody in Germany, the legal prescription of “Anti-white” racism in France, the kidnapping of legal residency documents to Afro-Spanish citizens by the

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12 http://zwartepietisracisme.tumblr.com/
13 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/04/17/lena-adelsohn-liljeroth-cake_n_1431544.html#s877964
police and a long list of unthinkable acts, still take many of us by surprise. Black Europe and the African diaspora are indeed living extremely dangerous moments of coloniality and need as much solidarity as we can humanly get.

The pertinence of Afropean decolonial aesthetics in relation to current debates on identity issues in Black Diaspora exhibition strategies is sustained by a revealing statement of curator and writer Simon Njami:

"It has always been a matter of regret to me that the history of certain parts of the Caribbean has been obscured. That is not just the fault of the whites. Both whites and blacks have adopted a fairly ambiguous attitude to this topic. I can quote Césaire from memory who said, in talking of the Caribbean, that its people would never be capable of transforming their situation until they had admitted all aspects of their history. What does this history consist of? Slavery, of course, and Africa. But every time I visit the region I am struck by the glaring omission of that continent in artistic debates. It is not a question of agitating on behalf of the Negroes, i.e. Africans, as in the early days of Négritude. Rather it is about incorporating the developments in the African continent as an integral part of their own history. There are few links, few projects aimed at bringing these two parts of the world closer together even though that might be where the future lies. We are told that history is written by the victors. But are we still tackling the debate in terms of conquerors and the conquered?" (Simon Njami interviewed by Jocelyn Valton 2012:139).

How does this particular quote reveal certain key contestations of decolonial aesthetics and how does Afropean decolonial aesthetics challenge its presuppositions? Do we need to nurture the widely theorized Caribbean Caliban (Fernández Retamar 2000) approach using the analytical model modernity/coloniality/decoloniality as a tool to question the coloniality of aesthetics? Should we instead speak of the aesthetics of coloniality as an aspect of the coloniality of knowledge and being? Should we focus our energy entirely on the strategies of re-existence of what artistic practices are doing today in modernity’s art plantations? Or should we do all of that at the same time?

One can think of many ways to deliver a very simple response to the first part of Njami's quote, which could be resumed as: The fact that you have not read, seen or heard about something does not necessarily mean that it does or did not happen. It is indeed the inevitability of misinformation or disinformation among the different contexts of the Black, African and Caribbean Diasporas that demand from those of us engaged in its conceptualization, both as theoreticians and as facilitators, to actively pursue the filling of those gaps and not to simply expose or complain about them. The second part of this symptomatic statement by Njami in relation to "tackling the debate in terms of conquerors and the conquered" is lapidary. Indeed, for Decolonial Aesthetics it is a matter of principle, in its most literal meaning, that is as departure point, to systematically
unveil the rhetoric of the conquerors (European modernity = civilization) in the logic of coloniality (any art produced elsewhere outside Europe is = “primitive” or just a mimicry of the “universal” essence of European art).

Obviously, Simon Njami is unaware of how the imperial imagination persists on portraying his presence as Diaspora thinker in the art plantations of modernity. As a reference from the inexhaustible list of coloniality, I offer him the following quote by Documenta 12 co-curator, Roger Buergel:

“The rainy summer was responsible for taking away the excitement of Documenta 12 that finished last Sunday, according to exhibition director, Roger Buergel: The life outside the exhibition halls could not flourish. This meant that the ideal atmosphere, the liveliness could not be nurtured. The arts need warmth: “This is why Greece is the origin of civilization and Africa that of mankind.” (Der Tagesspiegel, 24.09.07. p 25).

It is imperative to remind Njami that Hegel made his epistemic division of Africa (Taiwo 1997) at the same time that the first German protestant colonizing mission was established in the continent (1829). In this sense, we could interpret his Philosophy of History as a formidable public relations campaign in favour of European colonization. Walter Mignolo (2010-2012) has established the inextricable connection between Kant’s racialization discourses (Eze 1997) and its invention of aesthetics which determined that only white Europeans were capable of attempting and understanding the sublime. Hegel’s infamous dictum on the a-historical character of the African continent is in this sense a mere continuation of Kant’s “wildly” imaginative categorizations.¹⁴

¹⁴ It is common knowledge that Kant never abandoned his port city of Könisberg (not even to visit Berlin) and prepared his anthropological and aesthetics lectures from transcriptions of his interactions with seamen, as Emmanuel Chukwude Eze research establishes with rigorous accuracy. These oral registers, based on the mythologies pulling in the imaginaries of the plantation economy, are the basis of the “universal” character of European art as we know it until today. Welcome to decoloniality Simon Njami!
In Marcus Mosiah Garvey’s Pan-Africanism we are commanded to decolonize our minds. During a speech in Nova Scotia in October 1937, which was later published in his Black Man magazine, he commanded us to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery. This legendary command has been masterfully paraphrased by Bob Marley in his Redemption Song (1979). I see a compliance to Garvey’s prophecy in Afropean decolonial aesthetics. I see it in every line of my writings and in every moment of solidarity between the diasporas that I have experienced since my own mental decolonization started (Haiti 1994, to be precise). Therefore and in order to conclude by answering again the last question posed by Njami:

“... are we still tackling the debate in terms of conquerors and the conquered?”

Indeed we are, in fact this is exactly what Afropean decolonial aesthetics is about, demanding epistemic accountability and retribution from the perpetrators and current inheritors of white privilege in modernity’s art plantations while at the same time celebrating ourselves in our mutual recognitions. We are here because we have ALWAYS been here but it does not necessarily mean that we want to fit into the white Cube, we are here as Quinsy Gario tells us:

“(…) to talk
about our work
about our locations
about our bodies
about ourselves.
The selves that move
in and out of sight
between the pauses
of time and space
and beyond
the notion of what is slightly unsound.”
APPENDIX
Between 2011-2012 decolonial aesthetics in the context of BE.BOP 2012 was discussed for the first time at:

Goldsmiths University of London
http://mars.gold.ac.uk/politics/events/headline.34285.en.php
Matadero Madrid
Documenta 13
Dutch Art Institute
http://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/1635/shift-in-my-thinking
Kade Museum
Transart Institute Berlin
http://transartinstitute.wordpress.com/2011/07/
Universidad de Cádiz
http://www.anglistik.uni-muenster.de/imperia/md/content/englischesseminar/es2009/newsandannouncements/pr-e-programa_web__1_.pdf
The Bioscope Johannesburg
http://www.thebioscope.co.za/2012/04/05/black-europe-body-politics-screening-and-presentation-at-the-bioscope/
Kwa-Zulu Natal Arts Society
http://kznsagallery.co.za/events/2012/April/black_europe_body_politics_film_screening.htm
National Arts Gallery of Namibia

At the Berlin event, there were two-hours screening sessions every morning followed by roundtable discussions on Decolonial Aesthetics and Aisthesis, (Black European) citizenship, anti-Blackface activism, fashion and womanhood in Africa, the Berlin-Africa Conference, the Herero Nama Genocide and colonial amnesia in Germany and Scandinavia.

Artists, activists and scholars shared their knowledge on equal terms during the rich and diverse discussions. Film and video-art were equated in status, the industrial character of the former shared the same screening format and set-up as the later. Performance art was discussed at a post-migrant experimental theatre space. The scholarly work of theoreticians was discussed at an extra-academic space. Activists were given plenty of space to display their campaigns and spread their message. This event created a paradigm shift in decolonial sensing, thinking and doing. The many layers of this conversation are documented in the evaluations of the participants in really long essays or short and moving statements. They will be published in the next dossier of Idea. arte + societate (http://idea.ro/revista/?q=en/home)


Fernández Retamar, Roberto (2000). Todo Calibán. La Habana: Fondo Cultural del ALBA.


