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Research Article

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Afroeuropean Modes of Self-Making: Afro-Dutch and Afro-Italian Projects Compared

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Abstract: This article contributes to scholarship on Afroeurope by investigating the intersection of blackness, Africanness, and Europeanness in everyday discourses and social practices in the Netherlands and Italy. We examine how young African-descended Europeans are forging new ways of being both African and European through practices of self-making, which should be understood against both the historical background of colonialism and the contemporary politics of othering. Such practices take on an urgency for these youth, often encompassing a reinvention of Africanness and/or blackness as well as a challenge to dominant, exclusionary understandings of Europeanness. Comparing Afro-Dutch and Afro-Italian modes of self-making, centred on African heritage and roots, we discuss: 1) the emergence of a transnational, Afroeuropean imaginary, distinguished from both white Europe and African-American formations; and 2) the diversity of Afroeuropean modes of self-making, all rooted in distinct histories of colonialism, slavery, and immigration, and influenced by global formations of Africanness and blackness. These new Afro and African identities advanced by young Europeans do not turn away from Europeanness (as dominant identity models would assume: the more African, the less European), nor simply add to Europeanness ("multicultural" identities), nor even mix with Europeanness ("hybrid" identities), but are in and of themselves European.

Keywords: Afroeuropean self-making, Afro-Dutch, Afro-Italian, Africanness, Europeanness, blackness

Introduction

Across Europe today, two major tendencies regarding belonging and identity seem to hold each other in a contradictory embrace. On the one hand, anxieties run wild around national and European identities, which are perceived by many to be threatened by ethnic and religious diversity. Ethnocultural nationalism and racialised xenophobia are resurgent as trans-European phenomena. On the other hand, another Europe is increasingly coming into view: a Europe that is culturally and racially plural and hybrid. This has always been the reality, as Europe is constituted by long histories of empire and migration, but it has hardly been part of established notions about who or what is "really European." With new generations of postcolonial and postmigrant Europeans growing in numbers and in vocality, however, we witness an alternative "Europeanization from below" (El-Tayeb): a bottom-up emergence of new, inclusive formulations of European belonging. Disrupting postcolonial amnesia and asserting hyphenated identities, they are redefining the idea of "Europe." We see this in recent concepts like Afroeurope(an), Afropea(n), and Black Europe(an), and, outside academia, in African-descended Europeans' vernacular projects of identity, self-

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making, and social-cultural critique.1

The current emergence of an Afroeuropean imaginary is particularly interesting in light of the historical relationship between Africa and Europe, which is characterized by a paradox of deep entanglement and imagined opposition: four centuries of trade in goods and human beings, colonial domination, and postcolonial/neocolonial involvement have not only "Europeanized" Africa but also "Africanized" Europe to an extent that is seldom recognized. Europe's population of African descent is perhaps the most visible legacy of this history. Alongside the incorporation of Africa(ns) into the formation of Europe—economically, culturally, demographically—was the colonisers' invention of Africa as Europe's Other (Mudimbe). Throughout the ages, conquering Western narratives produced accounts of Africans as essentially different from and ultimately inferior to Europeans (cf. Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*). These narratives continue to resonate today. Dominant European discourses still largely imagine Africa and "the African" as everything that Europe and "the European" is not.

How should we understand Afroeuropean projects of reimagining Europe, especially in light of the dominant processes of culturalization and racialization of European belonging? What responses does this combination of racial Europeanization (Goldberg) and African othering evoke in those who consider themselves both European *and* African? These questions are particularly urgent for young people born and raised in Europe, who grow up being taught, in implicit and explicit ways, that they are not "real" Europeans, that they do not really belong. While Western European societies tout the authenticity of selfhood—"be yourself!"—they leave black and brown youth very little space for realising their multiple and complementary identities. Unable to fully identify with national models, which increasingly define belonging in ethnoracial terms, nor with African-American models, which leave no space for Europe's specific histories and diversities, young Europeans of African descent are creating continental networks to analyse and compare their experiences (Fila-Bakabadio) and discuss questions of identity and belonging.

These questions relate to a body of literature on the politics and aesthetics of cultural identity formation among African diasporic subjects that is too rich to address here in any depth (see, e.g. Campt; Hine et al.; El-Tayeb; Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*; López; Nassy Brown). But we do wish to emphasise that African diasporic identities have predominantly been discussed from Black Atlantic, Anglophone perspectives. Newer diasporas of more recent African postmigrants in continental Europe have received relatively little scholarly attention. The communities founded by African migrants arriving in Europe since the end of the Cold War have by now become a major constituent of Afro-Europe. The dominance of earlier Afro-Caribbean migrant communities has given way to a strong African presence in cities like London and Amsterdam, as well as significant communities of African postmigrants in cities that have not been home to a previous Black Atlantic diaspora, like Milan, Hamburg, and Stockholm. This raises questions regarding the specific relational dynamics and multiplicity of diasporic identifications in particular cities, and the generational shifts taking place as younger people explore their identities as both European and African.

We propose to approach these questions in terms of self-making and to focus on the politics and practices through which young people navigate the complex dynamics of partly overlapping, partly distinct formations of Africanness and blackness in their respective localities. Our title refers to Achille Mbembe's polemic essay "African Modes of Self-writing," in which he argues that African discourses of the self cannot be seen as separate from European colonial discourses about Africa and Africans, but rather as deeply entangled with them. Instead of radically rejecting colonial assumptions, many African writers drew their fundamental categories from the Western myths they claimed to oppose, foremost the racial difference between "blacks" and "whites" (Mbembe 257), thus making Africanness conterminous with blackness. While the controversy Mbembe's essay sparked falls beyond the limited scope of this article, what we take from his essay for our purpose here is the idea of Africanness as a relational *project* rather than a primordiality, an effort to forge a way forward that is rooted in multiple, sometimes contradictory, genealogies. Moving

¹ There are multiple, cross-cutting terms of self-identification in circulation and the definition, scope, and even relevance of each of them is highly debated. It is important to recognise that all such terms are situational and relational, and thus embedded in power structures and that the terms we as scholars use are part of this politics of naming, which, we argue, is also a politics of world-making. Our practical choice for "Afroeuropean" is decidedly not meant to endorse one term over others, and might very well be contested by some of our research participants.

from self-writing to self-making, we are interested also in aesthetic forms—embodied practices, bodily fashions, popular culture—through which people shape their sense of being and belonging. In the diasporic context of Europe, not only does African self-making take on a specific urgency, as Africanness is taken as problematic, but Europeanness also emerges as a project: one of making "Europe otherwise" (Gilroy, "Europe Otherwise").

Our task, then, is to analyse contemporary modes of Afroeuropean self-making in relation to both the multiple histories of imagining Africanness, blackness, and Europeanness, and the local particularities of the settings in/from which these imaginings are addressed, disrupted, and/or reproduced. We take blackness, Africanness, and Europeanness as categories of practice, focusing on their social life in relational contexts and examining their circulation, intersection, and empirical use in practices of self-making among young generations of Afroeuropeans. We base our discussion here on research materials gathered through ethnographic methods (participant observation of key events and everyday contexts, interviews and informal talks with relevant actors) and combine these with analysis of cultural products as well as public discourses. We also bring our previous research on Afro-Dutch (De Witte, "Heritage, Blackness, and Afro-Cool") and Afro-Italian (Scarabello) formations into comparative focus. Both in Italy and the Netherlands, the question of being African and being Italian/Dutch/European is a hot topic for debate and cultural production among young citizens of African descent, but we also note important distinctions.

We provide a bit of background by first sketching the histories and composition of the African diasporas in the Netherlands and Italy respectively. Thereafter we discuss examples of Afroeuropean self-making from each of our respective field sites. Focusing our comparison on Afro-Italian and Afro-Dutch projects centred on African heritage and roots, we detail 1) the current emergence of a transnational, Afroeuropean imaginary, vis-à-vis both white Europe and African-American formations; and 2) the diversity of Afroeuropean modes of self-making, rooted in specific national histories of colonialism, slavery, and immigration and in presentday African diasporic compositions. Afroeuropean self-making, we argue, must be understood against both the historical background of colonialism and the contemporary politics of othering, both of which they seek to undo in a move of self-definition, but which they also perpetuate in some respects.

African Diasporas in the Netherlands and Italy

With different colonial and postcolonial histories, differently composed African diasporas, and different (geographical) positions with regard to contemporary African migration to Europe, Italy and the Netherlands are well suited to study the circulations between key localities through which Afroeurope takes shape.

The Dutch African diaspora is highly diverse, constituted by different historical currents. The oldest African-descended population in the Netherlands results from the Netherlands' participation in the transatlantic slave trade and its colonial rule in Suriname, the Dutch Antilles, and Aruba. After the end of slavery in 1863, colonial authorities promoted the assimilation of the black population into Dutch culture, mainly through the colonial education system. Small numbers of Surinamese and Antilleans began to come to the Netherlands to study in the 1920s, and from 1965 onwards larger numbers of people from all socioeconomic ranks came to find jobs.² This, then, is a "double diaspora" constituted by enslavement from Africa to the Caribbean and later migration to the Dutch "motherland" during colonial and postcolonial times. While their belonging to—and in most cases, their citizenship of—the Netherlands is thus rooted in centuries of colonial history, Dutch postcolonial amnesia (Wekker) and phenotypic othering have made their blackness a marker of non-belonging.

"Guest worker" recruitment programs since the 1960s, designed—by employers and later the government-to make up for the post-WWII labour shortage, account for today's large population of Moroccan-Dutch. Despite their roots on the African continent, Moroccan-Dutch are not usually identified as "African," nor do they self-identify as such. Some projects of African self-making, however, as we will discuss below, explicitly include Moroccan-Dutch and Moroccan heritage so as to problematize the

² Most Surinamese migrants came to the Netherlands around Suriname's independence in 1975.

dominant reduction of "African" to sub-Saharan African or black (cf. Zeleza), and some Moroccan-Dutch, most of whom are of Amazigh origin, are becoming interested in their "African roots." Substantial sub-Saharan African migration to the Netherlands started in the 1980s, driven by political and economic crises in many African countries, and has followed patterns other than colonially or institutionally established ones. These more recent African immigrants include Somalis, Cape Verdeans, Ghanaians, Ethiopians, and Eritreans, who have arrived through legal and illegalised routes and who have no direct colonial history with the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, the focus of this article, Ghanaians form a major group, with a second generation now in their twenties.

Not only are Dutch African diasporas highly diverse in African origins and migration patterns, these African-descended groups are also differently positioned with regard to questions of belonging, identity, and citizenship in the Netherlands. And yet new collective identifications are forming around notions of Africanness and blackness and terms like "Afro-Dutch." Young people's interest in their African roots and self-definition come in response, at least partly, to shared experiences of racialised othering. Although the Netherlands gained European fame for its multiculturalism, a colonial structure that defines Dutchness as white and that externalises blackness is deeply embedded in the Dutch cultural archive (Wekker). Today's "postmulticultural" climate is characterised by a return to ethnonationalism, with right-wing populism anti-immigrant sentiment rising in the country. In this context, Dutch youth of African descent face recurrent questioning of their Dutch identity.

Italy has more recently become a destination country, like other Southern European nations. Migrations from Africa to Italy started in the 1970s, with the arrival of small groups mostly from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Cape Verde, Egypt, and Morocco. These migration flows resulted in part from the geographical proximity of North Africa to Southern Europe and from the colonial links of some East African countries. Small numbers of students also arrived thanks to private and public scholarships, mostly from Nigeria, Congo, and Cameroon. Massive labour and economic migration from sub-Saharan Africa started in the 1980s; in the 1990s, Senegalese, Nigerians, and Ghanaians, in particular, became more established, and these are now the largest African diasporic communities in Italy. These grew alongside the substantial Moroccan, Tunisian, and Egyptian communities. One specificity of the African presence in Italy is the high diversity in national backgrounds: this heterogeneity is due to the fact that migration flows to Italy did not follow the colonial maps—as happened in other European colonial motherlands—but rather the routes of economic projects and, to a much smaller extent, university education (Ceschi).

In the 2000s, Italy ceased to be the main destination for migrants from the former colonies, becoming instead a transition country for other European destinations. Thus, while the diasporas from the former colonies have the most historical rooting and generational stratification in the country, they are currently smaller than other African-descended groups. Moroccans, for instance, were among the first to settle in Italy, and it became common to use the term "Moroccan" to indicate any kind of ethnic diversity (Ribeiro Corossacz). Nevertheless, in the Italian collective imaginary people of North African origin are generally "othered" not as "Africans" but as "Muslims." This emphasis on Islam shows both the self-perception of the Italian nation as homogeneously Catholic (and white) and a strong and common association between "black" and "African."

In this context, where citizenship is based on the *ius sanguinis* principle (acquired by blood/descent), phenotypical blackness can be one cultural marker that implies a common experience of alterity and a feeling of living in a "condition noire" (Ndiaye). As one of Scarabello's interviewees claimed: "They see all of us as black, thus they consider us all Africans." Whiteness has indeed constituted a form of representational cohesion in the imagination of nationhood and citizenship, due to the historical lack of a sizable black community and the forgotten history of Italian colonialism (Lombardi-Diop). The hypervisibility of the black body and related exclusionary practices are also connected to a representation of Africa and Africans as emblems of subalternity, one that still resonates in everyday racialization practices and in violent populist discourses (and practices) against sub-Saharan irregular migrants crossing the Mediterranean. The current revival of the "Afro" prefix in youth self-identification categories and self-making projects demonstrates the power of defining their own identities and belongings, and of positioning themselves in relation to Italian nationhood as well as to the larger African and Black diaspora in Europe and beyond.

Dutch Projects of African Self-Making: Afro-Caribbean-African Dialogues

Over the past few years, numerous projects of African self-making have been initiated in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, examples range from the Untold Empowerment African dance and theatre group, the African Homecoming Festival, and the Ghanaian Kente Festival (De Witte, "Heritage, Blackness, and Afro-Cool") to new, African-inspired fashion labels, club concepts, and multimedia projects. Here, we discuss two projects that share an explicit embrace of African self-identification, an emphasis on (youth) empowerment, and a focus on debate, research, and cultural performance as ways to reach this. Yet, as we shall see, the projects an Afro-Caribbean-Dutch initiative and a Ghanaian-Dutch one—also differ significantly in their modes of African self-making.

Call Me African!

Call Me African! is a project that was initiated in 2016 by a woman of mixed Surinamese-Dutch descent. With events that combine panel discussions about "our African identity" with dance performances, music, documentary films, and food, it speaks to a broader Afro-Caribbean-Dutch interest in African roots and heritage that has been on the rise over the past years. This interest finds expression in practices as varied as wearing "African" fashion and hairstyles, dancing to African music (De Witte, "From Bokoe Bullying to Afrobeats"), and DNA research. But seldom does African self-definition seem as definitive as in the case of Call Me African! This demand—emblazoned on flyers (fig. 1), a Facebook page, T-shirts, and other materials—is presented in the Pan-African colours of black, green, and red. It is also accompanied by quotes from Ghana's first president and Pan-Africanist leader Kwame Nkrumah ("All people of African descent, whether they live in North or South America, the Caribbean or any other part of the world, are Africans and belong to the African nation") and by Jamaican reggae musician Peter Tosh ("No matter where you come from / As long as you're a black man / You're an African"). At the kick-off event at the 2016 Kwaku Festival in Amsterdam Southeast, a street dance performance inserted such Pan-Africanist discourse into a local politics of naming. Dressed in black-and-green Call Me African! T-shirts, three dancers held up signs with the words "Bokoe" (a Surinamese curse name for Africans, see below), "Neger" (Dutch for negro), and "Nigger" and then flipped the signs around to show the Call Me African! logo. This was an explicit demand for self-definition in a context of being defined in derogatory terms by others.

Call Me African! does not, however, answer the question of African identity as conclusively as it seems. In fact, introducing the first dialogue event, the host asked: "How African are we really?" In response to Tosh's song, she said that the idea of being African is hard to accept for many black (read: Afro-Caribbean) people in Amsterdam, and thus up for debate. She explained:

Centuries of colonialism and slavery have resulted in the fact that Africans from Africa and Africans from the diaspora do not always harmoniously live together as kin. Surinamese, Antilleans, and Dominicans with African roots do not automatically feel connected to Ghanaians, Nigerians, and others with more recent roots in the African continent. And vice versa.

So, while the project strongly echoes a Pan-Africanist discourse of black kinship and unity, it does not take this as an automatic inheritance, but as something to be accomplished: a project of undoing the separation done by the violence of history and reuniting in the face of Dutch racism. This is first of all an Afro-Caribbean-Dutch desire (more marked in the Netherlands indeed than in the Caribbean), and is directed at so-called continental Africans. These include the many first- and second-generation African (post)migrants living in the same neighbourhood, with whom, some of the participants acknowledged, it is not always easy to connect. To explore and experience a shared Africanness, Call Me African! organises dialogues about the differences and similarities between "diasporic" and "continental" Africans, interspersed with performances of music and dance.

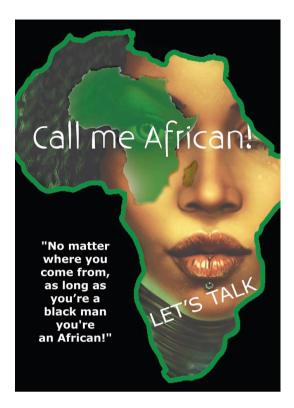


Figure 1. Call me African! flyer.

On November 16, 2016, De Witte attended the second Call Me African! event, held in a community centre in Amsterdam Southeast. The event attracted a mostly Surinamese-Dutch audience, many of whom in their twenties, some Curaçaoan-Dutch, and two West African-Dutch young men who had been invited as speakers. The dress difference between "diasporans" and "continentals" was remarkable, with the former sporting Afrocentric print dresses, large Africa-shaped earrings, afros and other natural hairstyles, and Black Power iconography (the raised black fist, black berets), and the latter dressed in plain trousers and shirts. The event started with presentations about three countries, to "get to know each other": Suriname (presented by the founder of Call Me African!), Sierra Leone (presented by a Dutch-born young man of Sierra-Leonean-Guinean parents), and Curação (presented by a Curaçãoan-Dutch young man). Topics included Surinamese cultural and religious plurality, anti-colonial resistance in Sierra Leone, and the differences among the Dutch Caribbean Islands, but the main interest was in the various Caribbean cultural practices that, as "African survivals," link Afro-Caribbean people to Africa. Not only was knowledge exchanged about such practices but they were also mobilised as material-aesthetic connections to Africa, with a strong sensorial and emotional impact.

This was most clearly so with a Surinamese maroon dance performance and the Q&A with the dancer afterwards, which turned into a sort of comparative study of heritage. After her performance, the dancer, a young Surinamese-Dutch woman, told the audience how, after years of practising Western classical ballet, she had discovered "her own dances" at her great-grandmother's birthday party in rural Suriname. "Awassa," she explained, "is a dance that is still being danced by various Afro-Surinamese groups in the hinterlands of Suriname. This area is said to be the best conserved piece of Africa outside Africa." This statement evoked loud applause from the audience. She continued: "This is one of the dance styles, but also how they farm their kostgrondjes [small, hand-farmed slash-and-burn fields in the forest], how they make cassava bread, the initiation rites they do when men and women reach adulthood—all of that just comes straight out of Africa."

During the Q&A, audience members suggested various possible origins of the awassa dance: Gambian mbalax, Congolese and Angolan traditions, and the Ewe and the Fanti tribes in Ghana. Then, a young man who had been listening quietly asked for the microphone and said: "the dance that you were just doing, I recognise that. I am from the Asante tribe, and we have exactly the same style, the same dress, the same movements. It is called 'adowa.' It's a ceremonial dance. It was deep inside me, but now that I see it again I recognise it, you know." As his soft voice started trembling, the audience burst into applause. It was a very powerful moment. The dancer responded hesitantly, saying that she had been to Ghana recently, but nobody there had been able to recognise her dance. Ignoring this remark, the host turned to the Asante man, probing: "I want to ask you something because I can hear it in your voice—when you see this, and you feel the energy, what does that do to you?" And he answered, "it makes me emotional. Why? Because for a long time I have been turning my back on this kind of thing.... But when I saw that, I thought 'Wow! This is us!" Warm applause and sounds of appreciation and awe followed.

The effort here to rebuild an Afro-Caribbean-African connection and recreate an "us" around shared African roots happened not only through the exchange of knowledge and information but also through the affective power of aesthetic recognition. The sense of African unity and pride thus produced was directed not only at white hegemonic devaluations of Africanness/blackness but also at the reluctance of (some) Surinamese to acknowledge their African roots, as well as at "continental" Africans "turning their back on this kind of thing"—all attitudes rooted in old colonial hierarchies of value. The dominant mode of African self-making encountered here was one of historical roots, black kinship, and a turn to pre-slavery Africa for identity resources. Strikingly, the two West African-Dutch young men were embraced as "continental Africans" in an Afro-Caribbean project that centred on an African cultural past, and that made them representatives of "diasporans" historic origins and sources of knowledge about "African tradition." This left them little space for their own experiences as European Africans.

Citizens of Alkebulan

Citizens of Alkebulan is a multimedia project initiated by two young Ghanaian-Dutch women dedicated to changing the dominant image of Africa and its citizens by creating a network of "African creatives" in music, art, fashion, and culture. Showcasing "the beauty, diversity and riches of Africa's cultural heritage, Alkebulan stands for a self-confident Africa that will not settle for being just a charity case," its website states. It is part of a broader, recently emerging movement of African pride among second-generation African postmigrants that thrives on the circulation and popularity of contemporary African popular culture across Europe. Like Call Me African!, the name of the project—Citizens of Alkebulan—voices a direct demand for self-naming. Alkebulan, according to the founders, is "the name our ancestors gave to Africa before it was called Africa by the Europeans. The name Alkebulan symbolises going back to our roots." Interestingly, for Alkebulan, resisting European definitions of Africa implies a deliberate inclusion of North Africa, and people of North African descent, in the project and network. The often taken-for-granted distinction between "black Africans" and "North Africans," "Alkebulians" say, is a European invention based on a misleading fiction of race that disregards centuries of connection, exchange, and mixture among people across the Sahara, facilitated by ancient trade networks. Alkebulan's "African diaspora," then, encompasses people with roots all over the continent and routes that include both recent histories of Africa-Europe migration and much older histories of enslavement and transatlantic crossings. Among their network, then, are Moroccan-Dutch, Somali-Dutch, Ghanaian-Dutch, Ghanaian-Belgian, and Afro-Caribbean-Dutch creatives. United as Citizens of Alkebulan, they mobilise African cultural creativity—music, arts, fashion, storytelling, poetry—to challenge common stereotypes about Africa and Africans.

This is important, Alkebulan founder Rudy explained in an interview, because negative feelings about being African are widespread among young Africans growing up in the Netherlands. As she experienced herself, recurrent public imaginings of Africa as poor, hungry, underdeveloped, and struck by wars, dictators, and diseases, and of pitiful Africans in need of Western help, can have a disturbing impact on African-Dutch youth. This trope has a long genealogy in the European colonial "invention" of Africa as the "dark," "savage," and "primitive" continent. And it resurfaces today in the media and popular culture, in ignorant questions and "jokes" from non-African peers and schoolteachers about life in Africa, and in the Surinamese ethnic slur for Africans that African kids growing up around Surinamese communities

were confronted with: "bokoe," a term carrying all kind of pejorative connotations of being uncivilized, backward, wild, smelly, dirty, and ugly (De Witte, "From Bokoe Bullying to Afrobeats"). Prevalent among both "white" and "black" Dutch, then, stereotypical misrepresentations of Africa and Africans as Europe's archetypical opposite crosscut racial categories and profoundly impact the lives of young people struggling to come to terms with being both European and African. As a result, some tried to dissociate themselves from their African background in their teens, identifying with a generalised "black" community instead.



Figure 2. 'Our artists' page from Alkebulan website, www.newalkebulan.com

Born from such experiences, the Alkebulan project passionately seeks to counter negative stereotypes of Africa and show Africa as a modern, vibrant, creative, culturally rich continent. Its main aim is to provide African youngsters in the Netherlands with empowering, cool African role models to nurture their African identities and to convey a positive image of Africa to Afro-Caribbean Dutch. With an annual cultural festival and a series of evening events as well as other media outlets, Alkebulan creates a space (online and offline) for African-inspired creative production and critical debate that speaks to a young generation. Their events bring together a wide variety of musicians, writers, fashion designers, photographers, and other artists with roots in Ghana, Morocco, Somalia, and many other African countries, and feature a range of popular music, dance, and spoken word performances as well as panel discussions about hot issues concerning the African diaspora.

The first Alkebulan festival, which De Witte attended on July 10, 2016, in Amsterdam's Tolhuistuin, opened with a performance by Ghanaian-Dutch female AfroDance trio Rawhln Crew. There was a panel debate about "cultural appropriation" that stimulated the audience's passionate engagement, and stage performances by Dutch rapper and spoken word artist Akwasi and Afrobeats artist Amartey, both of Ghanaian descent; the Budapest-based Ghanaian rap duo FOKN Bois; and Malique Mohamud, a Dutch poet/comedian/musician of Somali descent. There was Kenyan and Ethiopian food, fashion by Daily Paper, an Amsterdam-based urban fashion brand that references the African heritages of its Moroccan-, Somali-, and Ghanaian-Dutch founders, and a selfie backdrop designed in colourful Ndebele wall painting style. Overall, the festival breathed an atmosphere of African pride and empowerment, and indulgence in contemporary, cool creative production. Indeed, Alkebulan creates environments "to feel African in a good way" and to connect with peers around an "aesthetics of Afro-cool" (De Witte, "Heritage, Blackness, and Afro-Cool"), allowing participants to feel the spirit of a vibrant continent as a source of empowerment. This also means a departure from their parents' ways of being African: Alkebulians and their audiences seek to invent "their own," European way of being African and to create spaces, moments, and European networks for sharing this.

Alkebulan's celebration of contemporary African cultural creativity and its image of "the modernised, wandering, global citizen who each conveys a mishmash of cultural inputs and influences from Africa" echoes Afropolitanism, and it contests the marginalisation of Africa in Eurocentric narratives. Disrupting essentialisms of race and territory, and the singularity of dominant identity categories, Alkebulan creates a world where cultural hybridity and multiplicity of being and belonging are the norm (cf. Eze). Stressing Africa's racial diversity, Alkebulan at the same time resists hegemonic formulations of blackness that are grounded in the historical moment of the Middle Passage and tend to reproduce, if unintentionally, Eurocentric notions of Africa as black.

Juxtaposing Call Me African! and Citizens of Alkebulan, we can see some striking differences and overlaps between the modes of African self-making they exemplify. Both projects place great emphasis on identity, but while Call Me African! espouses a race-based idea of Africanness, Alkebulan stresses the racial diversity of African identities. Both projects centre on "African roots," but the routes of transatlantic slavery predominate in Call Me African! while for Alkebulan more recent, Mediterranean routes and living connections with specific places in Africa prevail. Accordingly, while both projects promote "African cultural heritage," in the first case, this means "African survivals" traced to a pre-slavery past, and in the latter, it means contemporary African cultural production. Lastly, empowerment is a key aim in both projects, responding to a societal context of racial disempowerment. But while Call Me African! aims at black unity against racism, for Alkebulan a white-black dynamic intersects with a specific *African* empowerment vis-àvis both white and black (Caribbean) Dutch.

Italian Projects of African Self-Making: African and Afro-Italian **Perspectives**

In the Italian context, we witness increasing participation of Afro-descendant youth in public, artistic, and entrepreneurial life. Their projects challenge political and cultural exclusionary practices and claim recognition of their multiple belongings. Two projects—"African Summer School" and "Nappytalia"—are particularly interesting to analyse the different modes of African self-making that coexist and interact in contemporary postcolonial Italy. Both projects show how young people affirm their way of being Italian and their way of being African, mobilising different cultural and symbolic repertoires, such as Afrocentric narratives and Afro-inspired aesthetic style, and differentiating themselves from first-generation Africans.

African Summer School

African Summer School is a training school organised since 2013 by the Africasfriends Association, which is based in Verona and coordinated by Fortuna Ekutsu Mambulu, a Congolese-born young man, aged 34, who has lived in Italy since the age of 17. He graduated with a degree in economics from the University of Verona and then specialised in communications. The project, promoted as "the first training school for Afro-business and African Renaissance," offers an intensive week of lectures addressed to students on various humanities and economic subjects.

When Scarabello asked director Ekutsu Mambulu to explain why he founded the African Summer School, he replied that he had faced difficulties in finding a job in Italy, both during and after his studies. This experience caused him to realise there was an urgent need to combat stereotypes of Africans as lowskilled people, "tribal clichés" (Riccio) about the continent, and the "Afro-pessimism" he saw perpetuated by the first generation of Africans living in Italy. He considered it necessary to "talk about Africa in a different way" and give voice to Pan-African and Afrocentric intellectuals who were "rarely present in academic events in Italy and in Europe." Their perspective, he insisted, was the only one that could valorise the historical and cultural resources of the continent and thus "make Italian-born youth of African origin feel good in their skin."

Drawing attention to the positive global outcome of the heritage left by African politicians and intellectuals is crucial, Ekutsu Mambulu continued, to disrupt the neocolonial representation of Africa as "a poor and underdeveloped continent, in need of aid" and "to create bridges" between different generations and the African and European continents. The participation of young people—with or without African background—in the Summer School has been strongly encouraged as a way to promote cultural exchanges and entrepreneurial collaborations among the youth of different origins. But, Ekutsu concluded, the necessary premise for economic creativity and equal partnership is the transformation of the "cultural paradigm" on the African continent and its heritage. The reinterpretation of African history from an Afrocentric perspective, mainly based on the work of Cheick Anta Diop, has been central in the school's lectures; this approach decentres the Western interpretation of African history that youth in Italy and in France learn in school. Indeed, the increasing number of students attending the Summer School over the years demonstrates that this Afrocentric perspective meets a pervasive need of young people to research and celebrate their African roots.



Figure 3. The professors of the third edition, coming from France, Belgium and Togo (starting from the left), from the African Summer School website, www.africansummerschool.org

This approach has raised an interesting debate about the conception of African identity. Talking about "Africa" has in itself been criticised: many African-Italian youths recognise that doing so risks consolidating the Eurocentric "invention of Africa" (Mudimbe), which homogenises the specificities of the different African nations, their histories, and their diasporas. Moreover, participants noted that the Summer School's "politics of Africanity" (Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing") tend to be rigidly geographically rooted. Its Afrocentric approach focuses on black francophone heritage and experiences—as evident not only in the bibliographic references during the lectures, but also in the networks of the professors, mainly from France, Belgium, or francophone sub-Saharan African countries. This overshadows the pluralities of the experiences and heritages of the African diaspora in Italy, excluding not only North African Arabic countries but also the national, linguistic, and ethnic plurality of the black African diaspora in Italy.

At the same time, the discourses on African identity appear "continent-centred," with a particular emphasis on this during the first year of the training school. Analysing her experience in an interview with Scarabello, an Italo-Ghanaian student declared that while interacting with intellectuals and youths interested in African issues contributed to making her a "self-confident African," she also felt uncomfortable with the approach to African identity expressed by the main professor. This implied an African authenticity

that hardly fit the "everyday multiculturalism" (Colombo and Semi) embedded in daily life and multiple identifications of Afro-Italian youth. She explained, "It was difficult for him to consider me as African and Italian at the same time, as I do." She also added that the school's radical critique of NGO cooperation projects, which lecturers considered part and parcel of European neocolonial interventions on the continent, was also divisive among the multicultural audience of the training. It risked creating, as she put it, "an African despotism that is not what we, [those of us] born in Italy, want!" This was, she concluded, evidence of "the different approach between the first and second generation in Italy!"

Over the years, the training has continued to maintain a predominantly francophone reference network in Europe, testified to by the participation of Afro-descendant students from Belgium and the organisation, in 2016, of two trainings, in Verona and in Brussels. The training succeeded in attenuating the elements that, in the beginning, risked creating dichotomies (white/black, European born/African born), by including more than one trainer for each session, in order to guarantee balanced discussions in class and to consolidate the intergenerational alliance. The effort to bridge the gap between generations is carried on also through networking activities with a few associations in Italy, such as Redani, which is the main Pan-African association promoted by first-generation sub-Saharan professionals and intellectuals, and Arising Africans, which is a recent association created by youth who are born in or grow up in Italy, who define themselves as "Afro-Italians," to carry out activities that promote the recognition of multiple identifications. By strengthening this network, the Summer School has become a hub for people sharing the desire to "rebrand Africa" and to "empower Afro-descendant youth." In this way, the Afrocentric perspective can become "a cultural basis for unified political action" (Werbner 24) and for the construction of a "common symbolic repertoire" (Grégoire 173), one that can encompass biographical and generational differences in the local struggle against racism.

Nappytalia

Nappytalia, originally born as the Facebook page "Afro-Italian Nappy Girls" in December 2013, has become one of the most influential Italian blogs and e-commerce platforms for natural hair care products and practices. Founded by Evelyne Afaawua—an Italo-Ghanaian young woman born in France, who arrived in Italy with her parents when she was one-year-old and who grew up in both Italy and Ghana—the blog and its related activities are driven by her strong desire to highlight her Africanness and for it to be recognized as a hybrid form of Italian identity. Since its beginning, this project has combined offline and online activities through which youth support each other in the decision to "go natural." Nappytalia promotes natural hairstyles as an anti-racist practice that challenges dominant white-based aesthetic canons (Frisina and Hawthorne). It also encourages young people to research, discuss, and redefine their African roots and heritage. Indeed, as the founder claims, "what unites the followers of the page are our roots and two words: hair and Africa" (Afaawua, "Dove tutto ebbe inizio").

In March 2014 Scarabello attended Milan's first "Nappy Hour." At the start of the meeting, attended by many young women and one young man, all of various mixed-race, Latin American, Caribbean, or sub-Saharan backgrounds, Evelyne broke the ice, stating that natural hairstyles have been a way for her to "reconnect to [my] Ghanaian roots and to rediscover the Africanness that before was hidden behind something that bears no resemblance to me." She shared how difficult the choice to stop straightening her hair was, because it meant not only refusing locally dominant, white beauty standards but also "going against my family." Hair straightening should be indeed considered among the "embodied practices of beauty, transmitted in family contexts and sedimented in structures of feeling over centuries and generations" (Tate 4). As Evelyne writes in her blog, transitioning to natural hair became an affirmation of her uniqueness, making her "an Afropolitan, with a free mind, with my body and my hair!" (Afaawua, "Io chi sono?"). At that first Nappy Hour, Eveline's introduction was followed by intense and emotionally charged conversations among participants, who talked about daily hair care routines and practices and how they variously engaged with their African roots through aesthetic choices and professional endeavours,

including blogging.



Figure 4. Nappy Hour in Milan, January 2015, from the Nappytalia Facebook page

Later that evening, in a conversation with Scarabello, Sophia (pseudonym), an Italo-Dominican blogger, confirmed that for her too, the choice to "go natural" conflicted with the hairdressing practices she had learned from her mother. Her decision was motivated by her personal interest in her Afro-Dominican roots as well as by Afro-influenced fashion trends circulating globally. She said she feels very proud of her Afro-Caribbean origins, where her happy childhood memories and her Afro identity are rooted: "My country has a such a wonderful history: the history of Black Napoleon and of the most important slave revolt in the Caribbean history! And you have to know that the political division of the island—Haitian, Dominican—this makes no sense because we all feel African. We are all Africans in the end!" Sophia was also interested in the professional opportunities created by the popularity of Afro-inspired fashion among urban young people. She recently started a blog named "Afroselvaggio" (Afro-wild), "because," she declared, "for me this is it: Africa is also being a bit wild!" The title resounds with what Kobena Mercer considers a diasporic imagination of a mythological Africa, as a land of noble savagery and primitive grace. Mercer notes that ascribing "natural hair" to Africa reproduces a Western representation that has very little to do with actual hairstyling practices on the continent.

Eyram (pseudonym), an Italo-Ghanaian woman and administrator of the blog "Natural, Black, and Beautiful" experienced this lack of natural hair styling when she visited Ghana, her family's country of origin. Her transition to natural hair began almost casually: she stopped using chemical straightening products for health reasons, turning exclusively to so-called protective hairstyles, like braids. Once, when she had to travel to a village near Accra to see her mother, she found herself with no time to go to the hairdresser, but presumed she would be able to do so when she arrived: "I thought: what better place than Ghana to treat natural hair?" But to her surprise, she found that the dominant hairstyling practices included straightening. In an interview with Scarabello, Eyram explained that this was the main reason she founded her blog: "I had to seek out inspiration for natural hairstyles elsewhere, neither in Ghana nor in Italy. And so, I discovered [online] the nappy world of the United States. In Italy, there was nothing about nappy at that time, three years ago, and thus I started my new blog to share my hair journey!" Her online encounters with African-American styles and her direct experiences on the African continent are both central to Eyram's processes of self-styling (cf. Frisina and Hawthorne). For other Afro-Italian women, a trans-European network is equally important. In Rome, at another Nappy Hour, Scarabello met Malaika (pseudonym), an Italo-Ugandan university student, who explained that she transitioned to natural hair after a six-month stay with an Erasmus scholarship in Paris, where she discovered how widespread natural hair is in metropolitan contexts outside Italy. Because in Italy there was very little information available, she kept in contact with a Danish-Ugandan blogger, following her suggestions for natural hair care.

The success of Nappytalia is to be found in its blending of inspirational elements derived from different socio-historical contexts and in its giving voice to a specific Afro-Italian experience. It fills a void for locally situated practices and discourses on natural hair and black beauty, as it is written in Italian, and it innovates with respect to other blogs, for instance by posting hairstyle photos shared by the blog's followers. These choices create a sense of belonging and empathy among Italy-based followers, who share not only their hair care practices but also a desire to celebrate Africanness proudly. Two years after Nappytalia was founded, at the end of a Nappy Hour event, one Italo-Nigerian young woman described to Scarabello what she felt during the meeting: "There, we were all young African professionals, well-educated and ambitious. This was the first time I felt part of African brotherhood because we were all young Africans with great aspirations." These events were indeed occasions to create links among youth who, in their daily struggle for professional and social recognition, are contesting Italian society's tendency to marginalise Africandescended people and to represent them as subordinate both socially and economically.

This project reinforces the appeal of Afro-style in Italy among "cool and trendy urban people," thus countering media discourses on Africanness that are dedicated exclusively to migration and integration issues. Moreover, the increasing interest in and consumption of black and Afro-inspired objects create new economic spaces for youth entrepreneurship, for instance in fashion or natural hair. This project also sheds light on the intense discussions about identity politics among Afro-descendant youth. Nappytalia's narrative, while bringing together youth in the fight against racism and white-based beauty standards, also raises questions about the normativity implicit in the notion of "natural hair." The association of "being African" exclusively with one stylistic choice—as also seen in the notions of African authenticity advanced by the Summer School-risks overshadowing the variety of individual processes of self-styling and the multiple subject positions people can hold with regard to African heritage and identity. As an Italo-Eritrean young woman emphasised in an interview: "Over the years, I have had both straight hair and afros, but I have always felt African! What is important is not your hairstyle, but your personal choice and awareness."

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the trend towards embracing Africanness or self-identifying as African among young African-descended Europeans. We have proposed to understand this trend in the context of a society that emphasises authentic selfhood, but that leaves little room for people to define Europeanness differently. The current racialised politics of difference and belonging, and a notion of Europeanness that is predicated upon African Otherness, both render it very hard to be recognised as both European and African, or Italian and Nigerian, or Dutch and Ghanaian, et cetera. The issue of African identity thus holds some urgency among young Afroeuropeans, which is manifest in how they take up this question and express their identities through practices of self-styling. Their projects, we argue, must be understood with reference to both the various global genealogies of Africanness and blackness they invoke and the local contexts from which they are born.

We have focused here on two such locations from which Afroeuropean formations are currently emerging. In the Netherlands, a renewed interest in African roots and self-styling among postcolonial Afro-Caribbean Dutch coincides, and sometimes converges, with the coming of age of a second generation of African postmigrants, who are embracing their African heritage through popular cultural expression. In Italy, the increasing celebration of Africanness corresponds to the growing presence of Afro-descendant youth in various social and professional fields, who differentiate themselves from the migrant experiences of their parents' generation and challenge the marginalisation of Afro-descendant people.

Emerging categories such as Afro-Dutch, Afro-Italian, Italo-Nigerian, Afroeuropean, or Afropean should not be understood as given "ethnic minority identities," but as the outcome of an ideology of selfmaking (particularly strong for young people) in a context of the valorisation of cultural assimilation, with nationhood as implicitly white. For our research participants "African identity," "African roots," "African heritage" are key terms. These are not things that people simply "have," but something that people "make." They are part of *projects* of self-making and of group-making—but also of world-making: these projects decentre a particular notion of (white) Europe and Europeanness, designing Africanness into Europe. Of particular importance to these projects are the new, digital networks connecting young African-descended generations across Europe. These enable not only the reassembling and circulation of "African heritage" and "blackness" in unprecedented ways; they also mediate Europe as a space of affiliation and aspiration. We see these projects as a new engagement among African diaspora groups with the European project, as they make claims to Europeanness, in ways that sometimes transcend or even reject national identifications.

The modes of Afroeuropean self-making discussed here are influenced by global formations of Africanness and blackness—in aesthetic, political, and discursive resonances of Pan-Africanism, Afrocentrism, Black Power, and Afropolitanism—and in that sense, they are part of "global Africa" (De Witte and Spronk). At the same time, concepts like Afro-Europe and Afroeuropean, Afro-Dutch, and Afro-Italian emerge as interventions not only into white Europe but also more established African-American formations. These appear as sources of inspiration and empowerment, but might also be discarded or questioned amidst the complexities of Afroeuropean identity formations. However varied these projects of African self-making are, they are all born from European cultural, political, and historical experience. In this sense they are Afro-European, or Afropean (Landvreugd). These new Afro and African identities advanced by young Europeans do not turn away from Europeanness (as dominant identity models would assume: the more African, the less European), nor simply add to Europeanness ("multicultural" identities), nor even mix with Europeanness ("hybrid" identities), but are in and of themselves European.

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