A new feeling of unity: decolonial Black Power in the Dutch Atlantic (1968-1973)

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Conclusion

From the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, the Black Power movement spread around the globe like wildfire, encouraging thousands of activists around the world to stand up against racial and colonial oppression in their own societies and beyond. Regardless of the specific geographical location, the radical rhetoric and symbolism of the movement provided marginalized communities with the ideological tools and transnational networks to challenge these systems simultaneously and cooperatively. The Black Power movement became especially popular within the African diaspora, consisting mostly of those whose ancestors had once been forcefully displaced from their continent and had since been treated like second-class citizens wherever they lived. To them, the movement offered a new feeling of belonging and purpose, convincing them that they did not have to fight their oppressors alone. At the same time, the movement left plenty of room for interpretation and adaptation, allowing it to maneuver easily across national borders, regions, continents, and even. This makes its history incredibly rich, with plenty of space left for inquiry.

Yet, as historian Nico Slate has argued in *Black Power Beyond Borders*, new studies of transnational Black Power should do more than simply "adding new characters to an old story" but should also offer new perspectives on what the movement has meant to different people in different places.[624] This dissertation has done both. At its very basis, it has introduced new actors, organizations, geographies, and languages to the study of the movement. It tells the story of four Black Power groups that were previously sidelined in the historiographical narrative or even overlooked completely. Not only does this dissertation expand the total list of Black Power organizations known within the field, but it also adds the Dutch Atlantic as a new space for Black Power research. Additionally, its analysis of the beliefs and activities of these groups has also offered new perspectives on what Black Power meant in the unique setting of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, where Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles were neither wholly independent nor under direct colonial rule.

[624] Slate, 1.

When the movement arrived in the Dutch world, Surinamers and Antilleans alike were still trying to figure out what it meant to be part of the newly structured Kingdom of the Netherlands. As explained, the 1954 Charter had provided both territories with more opportunities for self-governance but at the same time continued to limit their abilities to, for example, defend their own borders or represent themselves internationally. This left the Dutch Caribbean countries less autonomous than many of their Anglophone neighbors, who had obtained independence in the early 1960s and had started to establish themselves as sovereign states in the following years. At the same time, Surinamers and Antilleans learned from their neighbors that national independence did not automatically lead to fundamental change, as the remnants of colonialism continued to shape day-to-day life all around them. In this context, Black Power activism became synonymous with the quest for decolonization, as the movement's global fight against racism was seen as inherently connected to the global fight against imperialism.

Black Power as Decolonization

The first research question posed in this dissertation was why activists in the Dutch Atlantic believed it was important for them to align with the Black Power movement. This also corresponds to the sub-question of how they legitimized the need for Black Power in their individual contexts. Remarkably, the answer to this question was nearly the same for all of them. As the different case studies have shown, all of the groups examined saw the Black Power movement as a powerful ally that could help their majority Black countries decolonize and, once those efforts were successful, offer them a robust international support network to help them safeguard their independence. They believed, as both Benjamin Fox and Cyriel Karg stated repeatedly, that their countries had only continued to depend on the West because of the 'divide and conquer' strategies used by European and American governments to exploit them for their own benefit. To beat them at this game, the 'Black' world – which by itself was free to interpretation – had to overcome these divisive strategies and unite in the fight against White domination.

Although this perspective is similar to that of other Caribbean Black Power groups, particularly in Bermuda, it was unique in the context of the Dutch Atlantic. While nationalist movements such as Wie Eegie Sanie and *di-nos-e-ta* had also adopted

an Afrocentric approach to decolonization, they had not looked outwards but inwards to carve out a decolonial path, using a language of authenticity and exclusivity rather than connectedness and belonging. This difference existed because their goals were different: whereas the nationalist movements strove for complete independence from the Dutch through self-reliance, the Black Power movement strove for independence by replacing their ties to the Netherlands with new, or rather renewed, ties to the African diaspora. Without such a network, Black Power advocates feared their countries would be too vulnerable and would, therefore, fall prone to new forms of imperialism. In other words, they prioritized internationalism over nationalism.

Additionally, while their understanding of Black Power was similar to that of their Caribbean neighbors, surprisingly little contact seems to have existed between Black Power groups in the Dutch and Anglophone Caribbean. Although the efforts of the movement in nearby territories such as Jamaica, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago did not go unnoticed, all Black Power groups in the Dutch Atlantic first and foremost looked to the United States for inspiration, leadership, and solidarity. This challenges the common assumption that Caribbean Black Power was separate from Black Power in the United States, as laid out in the introduction. Although there are many connections between the Dutch and Anglophone Caribbean in terms of their ideas and timelines, African American activism seems to have held more of an appeal than that closer to home. Rather than understanding Caribbean and American Black Power as two separate movements, then, the history of Black Power in the Dutch Atlantic shows that the two were, in some areas, deeply interconnected.

It is likely that the Dutch Atlantic groups' interest in the United States was shaped by the personal backgrounds of their leaders, all of whom had studied in the West. Both BPC founder Stanley Brown and BPSC chairman Peter Schumacher had studied in the Netherlands in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the New Left had just started to take shape in western Europe. The New Left had been shaped by continuous interactions between activists in the United States and Europe, where it had familiarized both men with the Black Freedom movement. ABP foreman Benjamin Fox and BPS leader Cyriel Karg, on the other hand, attended college in the United States, where both of them had become personally involved in that same movement. It was here that the young men encountered new forms of anticolonialism, which enabled them to make sense of their own experiences as racialized people (of course

with the exception of Schumacher) in countries dominated by colonial thought. Once they returned home, they used these tools to build new revolutionary networks, mobilizing hundreds if not thousands of teenagers, students, workers, and others in the fight against oppression.

The second research question asked how Black Power groups in the Dutch Atlantic participated in the movement. Here, the answer is much less consistent, as all four groups endorsed different strategies. The Black Panthers of Curaçao, who identified with the revolutionary nationalism of the Black Panther Party, addressed a relatively wide range of issues faced by Afro-Curaçaoans but ultimately believed these problems could only be challenged by overthrowing the colonial system in its entirety, including the capitalism they believed to lie at its basis. In trying to mobilize Black workers on the island, BPC founder Stanley Brown anonymously wrote a column in his journal *Vitó*, where he explained how race, colonialism, and capitalism intersected in the Curaçaoan context. The group also addressed these issues at the notorious Saturday meetings at the Gomez Square in Willemstad, allowing it to interact with the island's broader anticolonial movement. Though the BPC itself remained small and never called for any mass protest directly, echoes of its revolutionary nationalism could later be heard in the Trinda di Mei uprising of 1969.

Following this uprising, Curaçao became home to a second Black Power group: Antillean Black Power. While this group was active in the same spaces as the Curaçaoan Panthers and took over many of its supporters, its approach to racial equality was quite different. Based on the supposition that the colonial system was too powerful to face head-on, ABP leader Benjamin Fox proclaimed that Afro-Antilleans had to gain self-confidence if they wanted to be effective in their resistance, thus taking a cultural nationalist approach to decolonization. In doing so, he especially encouraged his followers to learn about and reconnect to their African roots, even to claim an African identity for themselves. Fox's ultimate aim was to give Afro-Antilleans a new feeling of pride, so that they could decolonize their minds and rid themselves of the 'inferiority complex' installed by centuries of Dutch indoctrination. Only once they realized what they were worth could they know what there was to fight for.

Located at the heart of the Dutch empire, the Black Panther Solidarity Committee had a completely different approach. Though it adopted the same revolutionary nationalist ideology of the Black Panthers of Curaçao, the BPSC – which

for the most part consisted of Dutch-born Whites – joined the movement from the sidelines. Here, Black Panther sympathizers Peter Schumacher, Lily van den Bergh, and others called for a global revolution against imperialism, which included Dutch colonialism in the Caribbean as well as American imperialism in Europe. This positioned the BPSC at the crossroads of three transnational movements: the Black Power movement, the local anticolonial movement, and the New Left, consisting of a variety of Marxist organizations and Third World support groups. These collaborative efforts allowed the BPSC to raise widespread support for Black Power activists through education, fundraising, and protest, with room for critical self-reflection and political awareness.

The final addition to the Black Power landscape of the Dutch Atlantic was Black Power Suriname, later Afro-Sranan, which adopted a combined ideology of Black capitalism and cultural nationalism. This group believed that the secret to decolonization lay in financial self-sufficiency, which had the potential to make any remaining ties to the West obsolete. In collaboration with Black capitalist groups in the United States, BPS leader Karg and others made plans to open up an international market for Black-owned businesses to trade within and across national borders, while they also explored the possibility of setting up agricultural programs and other employment opportunities within Surinamers. The BPS furthermore collaborated with the cultural association Wie na Wie to host events where Surinamers could familiarize themselves with their African heritage. The latter became Afro-Sranan's primary focus when leadership was taken over by Cedric Lashley, whose approach to decolonization was similar to Benjamin Fox's in that he believed cultural awareness to be a precondition for freedom.

Another notable difference between the groups lay in the types of connections they were able to build to the overarching Black Power movement, which seems to have evolved over time. The BPC was connected to the movement by imitation only, with no evidence of any direct contact between the Curaçaoan activists and the African American organization. Connections between the ABP and the broader movement were slightly closer, as Fox had had some ties to the movement in New York and had purposely brought his experiences and ideas from the United States to the Netherlands Antilles to build his organization. Yet the first group to maintain a direct connection to movement was the BPSC, which was established in collaboration with the Black

Panther Party and its European representatives. Not only were Black Power activists in the United States and elsewhere aware of this group, but they also visited the Netherlands to strengthen their ties to it. In the end, however, none would compare to the BPS, which was able to fully immerse itself into the transnational movement, speaking at one of the largest Black Power conferences of the time, corresponding with prominent movement leaders such as Amiri Baraka and Elijah Muhammad, and setting up agreements with renowned organizations such as the Republic of New Africa. This seems to be as close as any Black Power activists in the Dutch Atlantic came to embedding their own struggle in the broader movement.

Impact and Legacies

It is difficult to determine how much impact the Black Power movement really had on the decolonization in the Dutch Atlantic. Fifty years after its decline, it goes without saying that these groups never built the powerful global Black front they had dreamed of, nor were they able to break with colonialism in the way they had envisioned. Although Suriname did become independent in 1975, and the local Black Power organization may have had some influence on public discourse leading up to it, all other Dutch Caribbean territories have remained part of the Kingdom, albeit in a slightly different arrangement. As a constituent country, the Netherlands Antilles continued to exist until 2010, though Aruba already separated from it in 1986, becoming a constituent in its own right. Following a series of referendums on the other islands in the early 2000s, Curaçao and St. Martin also became constituents, while Bonaire, St. Eustatius, and Saba became 'special municipalities' of the Netherlands, now maintaining even closer ties to the metropole than they had before. To this day, the struggle for decolonization continues on the Antillean islands, albeit still in small numbers - perhaps even smaller than in the 1970s.

Yet it would be unfair to measure the success of the movement by its most ambitious goals only. While Black Power did not manage to create the kind of independence its followers had envisioned, there were other areas where it did leave a mark. Most striking was its role in the popularization of African culture in the region. Though nationalist movements across the Dutch Caribbean had already begun to revive Afro-Caribbean heritage, the Black Power period saw a notable shift towards more 'continental' African culture, including in places where no Black Power groups

seem to have been active, such as St. Martin and Aruba. By continuously educating their audience about African history and heritage, introducing them to daishikis and the Pan-African colors, and celebrating natural Black beauty, the movement helped encourage an entire generation of Afro-Caribbeans to explore and embrace their roots. The significance of such a cultural revival should not be underestimated. For centuries, Eurocentric ideals and trends had dictated Caribbean fashion and entertainment. In this context, 'Black is Beautiful' was a truly revolutionary message. To reclaim their Africanness was an unambiguous act of resistance against the cultural hierarchy that continued to exist even after 1954. From this perspective, the groups' ability to create a new sense of self could be seen as a decolonial success, as it replaced colonial expectations with (what they imagined to be) their pre-colonial identities.

Other successes can be found in the intellectual sphere. As the previous chapters have shown, Black Power groups inspired thousands of laborers, students, and other young radicals throughout the region to better understand racial oppression in both local and global contexts. For many, this was a significant eye-opener, as discussions about race had long been taboo in the region, especially in Curaçao and the Netherlands. Even when the Black Power movement itself went into decline and eventually disappeared, some of its ideas stayed. Some former Black Power activists would even take these with them into their political careers later in life, including Angel Salsbach, who served as a member of the Curaçaoan island council for Partido MAN in the 1980s and 1990s, Wim Udenhout and Ronald Venetiaan, who respectively became Surinamese Prime Minister in the 1980s and President in the 1990s and 2000s, and Anja Meulenbelt, who in the 2000s served as senator for the Dutch Socialist Party (SP) and is now a board member of political party BIJ1, the first political party to be led by a Black woman. Also known for her important role in the Dutch feminist movement, Meulenbelt has repeatedly stated that her participation in the BPSC laid the foundation for her later activism.[625]

Unfortunately for the Black Power advocates, however, their efforts were met with more criticism than support. Opponents came up with a variety of reasons why there was no place for Black Power in the Dutch context, which ultimately prevented the movement from rising beyond the grassroots. In the most conservative circles,

[625] See for example Anja Meulenbelt, "Tweede Golf – the Movie," Blogpost, http://www.anjameulenbelt.nl/weblog/ 2005/12/04/tweede-golf-persoonlijk/.

critics argued that Black Power was completely unnecessary because racial inequality did not exist in the Kingdom. The main evidence they used to support this argument was that many Surinamese and Antillean politicians were of African descent, which meant that Black power was already a reality. From that perspective, some even went as far as to argue that Black Power itself was a racist movement as it glorified Blackness in a society where racial hierarchy supposedly did not exist. Black Power sympathizers, in turn, tried to counter these arguments by explaining that these politicians (whom they referred to as 'Uncle Toms' or the local equivalent of 'Zwarte Piet') did not truly represent the Black population as they worked in the interest of the White establishment, though this argument failed to convince their opponents, to whom this only confirmed that Black Power advocates were making up problems that did not exist.

Others took more moderate stances. The majority of those who engaged in conversations about Black Power did acknowledge that racial discrimination was an issue, but did not see Black Power as a suitable solution. For them, this was because the movement was too radical. Although they seemed to appreciate certain Black Power ideas, as shown by the successes of the groups' cultural efforts, they rejected its more militant aims and methods. Others challenged Black Power because of its American origins. While they respected the movement's work in the United States, they believed that its American foundation made it unsuitable for the Dutch Caribbean or the Netherlands. After all, the United States, the Caribbean, and Europe had fundamentally different societies, each shaped by their own particular histories. To simply 'copy' the Black Power movement would be to undermine that difference. Instead, these critics wanted to combat Dutch racism in a way that was designed for their particular societies, based on the unique experiences of Surinamers and Antilleans, in line with the nationalism of Wie Eegie Sanie and *di-nos-e-ta*, as well as the rhetoric of *Yunan di Korsow*, which strictly rejected any elements that were not considered authentic. Interestingly, this response seems to have been common in the Anglophone Caribbean as well, as mentioned by Quinn.[626]

[626] Quinn, 38.

Looking back at this period, former Black Power leaders themselves have formed conflicting judgments of their work.[627] Following the conflict between the Black Panthers of Curaçao and Antillean Black Power in 1970, both Brown and Fox began to distance themselves from the movement. For Fox, as mentioned in chapter two, this decision was not so much about his belief in Black Power as it was about the way the anticolonial movement in Curaçao operated.[628] For Brown, who had watched this movement crumble after his falling out with Fox, Black Power became a scapegoat. Speaking to journalists and historians later in life, he would often blame Black Power, as well as other Afrocentric movements like *di-nos-e-ta*, for the failure of 'his' revolution, even though he himself had played a large role in building and facilitating these groups.[629] Karg would not distance himself from the movement, though he would later argue that the Dutch gave Suriname its independence too quickly, despite having been one of the leading proponents of immediate decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s.[630]

Overall, *A New Feeling of Unity* has made a number of contributions to the study of transnational Black Power and to the history of Black resistance in the Dutch Atlantic. Most significantly, it has provided the first detailed overview of the ways in which Surinamese, Antillean, and Dutch activists aligned themselves with the Black Power movement, whether through emulation, collaboration, or solidarity. In doing so, it has refuted earlier claims that there was no organized Black Power in this region, even if the groups studied here remained relatively marginal. It has argued that, as was the case elsewhere in the Caribbean, Black Power became a form of decolonization, intended to challenge the legacies of Dutch imperialism at their very core. By placing Black Power into this framework, this dissertation has not only underscored the important relationship between Black Power and decolonization, but has also

[627] Reflections on the effects of Black Power in Curaçao can be found in nearly every interview in Oostindie, *30 Mei 1969: Verhalen over de Revolte.*

[628] See chapter two and Oostindie, *Curaçao*, *30 Mei 1969,* 8.

[629] Brown in *Curaçao, 30 Mei 1969,* 22; Ger Jan Onrust, "De Zwarte Historische Dag: Reacties van de Antilliaanse Pers," in *Dromen en Littekens: Dertig Jaar na de Curaçaose Revolte,* eds. Gert Oostindie (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 1999), 116.

[630] Linda Otter, "In Suriname is Ruimte voor 60 Miljoen Mensen," *Trouw,* June 3, 1992, 2.

contributed to the history of anticolonialism in the Dutch context, showing that the pursuit of independence was carried by multiple groups with different visions for the future and was thus by no means homogenous.

That said, much research remains to be done. An important area for expansion lies in the study of Black Power at a global level. With the addition of new places and spaces rises the need to reevaluate and reconsider what Black Power meant and what it represented at a macro level. Currently, disciplinary divides seem to separate those studying the movement in the United States, in the Caribbean, and elsewhere in the world. Though it is necessary to position local Black Power campaigns within these regional contexts, as confirmed by this dissertation as well, it would also be worth taking a moment of reflection to compare the different branches of the movement that have been studied in recent decades and attempt to find patterns among the different expressions of Black Power. How, for example, can the idea of decolonial Black Power in the Global South enrich interpretations of Black Power in the United States? And should we even separate the two, since the American movement also operated in a colonial society? Anyone attempting to answer such questions must cross the traditional boundaries of their disciplines and include places like the Dutch Atlantic.

There are also ways in which scholars may engage further with the topic of Black Power in the Dutch Atlantic itself. As pointed out previously, one of the main limitations of this dissertation lies within its geographical scope. Though the intention of this dissertation was to study Black Power in the entire Dutch Atlantic, none of the archival materials consulted for this project made any significant references to Black Power groups on the five Antillean islands beyond Curaçao. This does not necessarily mean that the movement did not exist there. As mentioned in the second chapter, some newspapers did allude to small Black Power protests in St. Martin and Aruba. Though no further references to these protests were found, future studies may be able to identify the activists behind these protests and tell their stories through new archival materials or other methods of inquiry, such as oral history. Such research could broaden or challenge the arguments of this dissertation, for example, because Aruba and the SSS islands have stronger historical ties to the United States and Anglophone Caribbean than Curaçao and Suriname.

But it is not in geographical inclusion alone that the study of Dutch Atlantic Black Power can expand. While the focus of this dissertation has been on overt Black

Power organizing, there are many other ways in which Dutch Atlantic activists, intellectuals, artists, and others have engaged with the movement. Though the organizations discussed here have served as useful and necessary case studies to construct a first narrative, it would be equally interesting to see how the movement influenced these societies in more subtle ways. Such research could look into the impact of the movement on broader discussions on race and racial identity, its effects on local fashion, style, and beauty standards, and forms of solidarity that did not include formal alignment with the movement. Perhaps most valuable would be a study of the movement's impact on literature, whether in Papiamentu, Sranan Tongo, Dutch, or any other language. Interesting case studies could be, for example, the impact of Black Power ideology on the work of Frank Martinus Arion, who clearly sympathized with the movement in *Ruku* and became a prominent voice in *di-nos-e-ta*, as mentioned by Broek.[631] Though he does not seem to have considered himself a Black Power activist, it may well be worth examining how the movement impacted his work and that of others like him.

Finally, much remains to be said about the legacies of Black Power activism within and beyond the Kingdom of the Netherlands, even leading up to the current moment. Over the past decades, numerous Black Power veterans, including Kathleen Cleaver, Emory Douglas, and Angela Davis, have visited the Netherlands, rekindling old relationships and forging new ones. Perhaps even more so, memories of the movement have been kept alive by the Amsterdam-based Black Archives, one of the most visible activist organizations in the Netherlands in the past decade. Through its social media channels, the Black Archives has made a real effort to underscore the historical foundations of contemporary antiracist activism, often calling attention to the lasting impact of the Black Power movement. At no other moment did this impact become so evident as in the summer of 2020, when tens of thousands of activists around the Netherlands rose up in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, raising their fists and echoing the words of Malcolm X, the Black Panthers, and many others. Even if a formal study of Black Power in the Dutch context did not exist at that time, there is no denying that activist communities have kept the memory of the movement alive, even to this day.

[631] Broek, *De Kleur van Mijn Eiland,* 211-212.