

Embodied stories: African-Dutch women narrate (in)visibility and agency in the city of The Hague

Dr Brenda Bartelink ¹

Assistant Professor at Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies,
University of Groningen

Gabriela Bustamante MA

Senior Instructor at The Hague University of Applied Sciences

Lerina Kwamba

Stek / Kariboe Bibi (Community based centre for
African-Dutch Women in The Hague)

Sophia Löwe BA

Research Master's student in Theology and Religious Studies,
University of Groningen

Abstract

The article explores African-Dutch women's embodied stories of agency. It builds on participatory research carried out in the city of The Hague in the Netherlands, in which African-Dutch women were engaged in the process of making visual and material objects, that elicited storytelling. Discussing how agency is embodied, the article demonstrates how a focus on the body and materiality opens up perspectives on women's agency and empowerment that often remains invisible. It also argues that such embodied stories offer counter-narratives to the more visible stories that are present in dominant discourses and interventions to empower women with migration backgrounds.

Keywords: Embodiment, storytelling, agency, African-Dutch women, inclusion

“Tying a headcloth is a matter of the senses”, says Vera. “You never do it in front of the mirror, you just feel with your hands whether it is okay and then only check it in the mirror afterwards”. Vera says this while tying a green, black scarf with golden threads around her head, demonstrating the various ways in which women in Congo tie a headscarf. In the conversation that emerges the importance of being beautiful is connected to multiple desires, such as self-expression, identity, belonging and dignity. “Every woman has stories”, Vera tells us, “we have escaped our countries. I came through Angola. Some of us came on boats. I can't tell you... I will not tell you about what I have been through. I was a nurse in Congo, and here I work as a cleaning lady. I never anticipated this. But here we make ourselves beautiful. We do not show what life did to us.”

Vera tells a story about herself by making herself beautiful and showing us the different ways in which a scarf can be tied around the head. She demonstrates how she consciously performs herself as an African-Dutch woman in the Netherlands, who wants to influence how other people see her. Being beautiful and respectable is important. Vera's beauty practices are a source of agency that helps her to navigate the challenges and hardships of migration and integration. Vera's story stands in contrast to public narratives about migrant women that question their ability to become agents in charge of their own lives (Bracke 2012; Wekker 2016). This stereotype has extensively been criticised by anthropologists, feminists and critical theorists alike, often as part of critical understandings of agency in contemporary politics and scholarship (e.g. Butler 2006, Mahmood 2006, Ghorashi 2010; Bracke 2012). Inspired by the work of anthropologist Sabah Mahmood (2006), this article explores how agency is embodied. We investigate how a focus on the body and materiality elicits narratives on women's agency and empowerment that often remain invisible.

This article is based on data gathered a research project entitled “Designing the Body”, that was set up as a participatory project (e.g. Hennink et al. 2020), and focused on the stories of African-Dutch women living in the city of The Hague and the broader area. In 2018 and 2019 we implemented a series of workshops which focused on making visual, material and embodied practices happen, and while happening, to elicit stories in conversation. This article, therefore, engages with storytelling as it was enacted in the process of doing, making and experiencing with and between women. In the following sections, we will introduce our conceptual and methodological framework, the context of the project implementation and how the project changed and evolved. In the subsequent sections, we describe and analyse the stories, reflecting on how visual and material processes of making, can contribute to broadening our understandings of agency that are often alien to policymakers or academics.

Conceptualising (in)visibility, agency and the body

In the past two decades, the Netherlands has witnessed a shift from the invisibility of migrant women, to a strong concern with their emancipation. This has created extreme visibility that is problem centred (Ghorashi 2010). African-Dutch women, for example, tend to be visible as victims of female circumcision, sex trafficking, healing practices and alleged abuse scandals in churches (van Dijk 2001; Vloeberghs et al. 2012; Wekker 2016; Knibbe and Bartelink 2019). Visibility and invisibility are not dichotomous, but a continuum (e.g. Leinonen and Toivanen 2014). Certain aspects such as religion can become hyper-visible (Jeldtoft 2013), while other aspects and intersectional characteristics and positions often remain invisible, particularly for women of colour (Crenshaw 1989, 2015; hooks 1983, 2001). As the black feminist scholar and activist bell hooks, reminds us, invisibility is a very direct and real bodily experience: “To be invisible hurts. To live in our bodies, but always away from them was

to live always alone in states of fierce and lonely abandonment” (hooks 2001, 66).

The broader webs of gendered and racialised power relations in which women are embedded also affect contemporary academic scholarship and analysis (Knibbe and Bartelink 2019). Saba Mahmood’s work (e.g. 2011), in particular, has challenged Western feminist scholars to revisit their Western, secular and liberal understanding of agency and explore agency and empowerment in the everyday lives of women themselves. In her book *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood 2011), she directs our attention to the bodily and material dimensions of agency. Bodily practices show how particular ethics around the body (e.g. “neutrality” or “religious purity”) intersects with the daily lived reality of being confined to such a body. She sensitises us to consider what certain bodily practices mean in terms of performance and ethics, which may be very different from what these bodies are assumed to perform. Building on Mahmood’s work, Fadil reminds us that both bodily practices that women perform (e.g. tying the head cloth, wearing a veil) and do not perform (e.g. unveiling) are matters of agency and power simultaneously (Fadil 2011). Vera’s decision to not showing ‘what life did to us’ is therefore as significant as her work to make herself beautiful. It reveals her agency and speaks to her experience of the powers that denied her agency.

The discourse on women’s emancipation in the Netherlands has shifted over the years and adopted various elements. In the 1990s, migrant women were primarily seen as in need of rescue through emancipation programmes (Prins 2004; Prins and Saharso 2008; Ghorashi 2010). The culturalisation of social integration and citizenship that emerged since then demanded that migrants demonstrate their Dutchness (Duyvendak et al. 2010). The recent emphasis on resilience assumes migrant women to be equally oppressed and helpless while they are to be responsible for correcting themselves, in order to, then, be cherished for their resilience (Bracke 2016). This resonates with what Butler refers to as the paradox of

agency, which requires women to prove their agency in structures that they have not chosen and that they will not be able to influence (Butler 1997; Bracke 2016).

An example of how this paradox plays out in the context of The Hague is the government-subsidised programme for kickboxing to empower girls from Moroccan descent living in deprived neighbourhoods of The Hague (Rana 2014). In her analysis, Jasmijn Rana demonstrates how a programme that is designed to support integration, increases the experience of being different ethnically. While kickboxing increases participants' physical resilience, it also communicates the message that it is up to the girls themselves to fight the systemic injustices they experience. A more symbolic example of how emancipation efforts can be blind to intersecting systemic injustices that women navigate is the annual award for female emancipation in The Hague. The award (Kartini Prijs) is named after Raden Adjeng Kartini, a woman born in 1879 into a Javanese noble family at the time Indonesia was a Dutch colony. Historical research shows that Kartini succeeded in making education for women part of the political agenda, through her fight against colonial and gender oppression simultaneously (Kartini and Coté 2014; Coté 2008). On the website of the Kartini prize, Raden Adjeng Kartini is presented as an extra-extraordinary woman who resisted "traditional" norms and values in Indonesia (www.kartini.nl). Whilst showcasing Kartini as a person who emancipated herself from "tradition", the more structural forms of patriarchal and colonial oppression that she battled are ignored. Interventions to empower women are often embedded in biased and stereotyped discourses of empowerment. This discourse, which uncritically informs government policy, is lacking a proper analysis of the various forms of oppression women experience and the various strategies women themselves deploy to improve their lives and wellbeing.

This article takes up the challenges that Mahmood has put forward so eloquently in her work. Conceptually, it explores how a focus on embodiment opens up perspectives on women's agency and empowerment that are otherwise invisible or silenced. Methodologically, it engages with storytelling as it was enacted in the process of doing, making and experiencing with and between women. It builds on a project that focused on creating a process of tangible practices and invited African-Dutch Women in the city of The Hague to narrate and discuss their embodied experiences of everyday life in the city. As Buitelaar reminds us, storytelling in a research setting can itself become an agentic act, as it allows for self-reflection, self-regulation and negotiation (Buitelaar 2014). Combining this with what Ingold referred to as "anthropology with art" in which thinking happens through bodily practices and stories, this article also aims to explore which narratives emerge in the process of engaging with material and visual forms (e.g. Ingold 2013).

The context and the project

"Designing the Body" was a project that aimed at focusing on the stories of African-Dutch women living in the city of The Hague and the broader area. Women of African descent are part of the 36% of the city population that has a non-Western migration background (Den Haag in Cijfers 2020). African-Dutch women are an incredibly diverse group, with various origins from all over the African continent, migration genealogies that vary from forced to economic and educational migration, which leads to a range of different official statuses, such as being undocumented, documented or acknowledged as Dutch citizen (Blakely 2005). As mentioned before, the project was a participatory project, in which African-Dutch women (the participants) and the project team from Dutch and mixed origins, participated in a series of workshops focused on storytelling through making visual and material objects. We created it as a process in which engaging with visual and material forms such as fabric and objects

elicited storytelling in a material, visual and embodied way. In the original planning, we envisioned a process of four workshops (Let's Meet, Let's Talk, Let's Create and Let's See), in which participants would design and paint porcelain figurines in Delft Blue technique. The stories that were elicited in this process and in the interactions that were part of it provide the empirical basis for this article.

While we expected to work with the same women in these four different activities, many of them struggled to carve out time to join us because of their caring responsibilities, challenging health or economic situations or because they prioritised church programmes, weddings, or funerals. After an initial successful workshop (Let's Meet), the women who indicated to participate in the second workshop (Let's Talk) all cancelled in the hours before the workshop took place. In addition to the reasons mentioned, we learned that the idea of having to "craft" also put up a barrier for women to participate. It challenged us to rethink the project design. We decided to organise an excursion to the Royal Delft Blue factory and museum in Delft, to offer the participants an activity of leisure with no particular task or outcome connected. Following, we organised a Let's Create workshop with some of the women who participated in the first workshop and some who joined us for the excursion. The fourth workshop Let's See was integrated into a broader closing event that also included an exhibition and additional activities that we further introduce in the empirical sections below.

In total, around twenty women participated in the workshops and the excursion organised during the project in 2018 and 2019. Additionally, over 50 people, of whom the majority were women as well, attended the closing event organised in December 2019. Most of the participants were born in various Sub-Saharan African countries (e.g. Congo, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Zambia), some were born in the Netherlands and from Dutch-Surinam and Dutch-Caribbean descent. Much of the storytelling was done in an informal way during various activities. Gradually, women formed an informal

network. Some became closely connected to the project and its outcomes, while others just participated once or twice. In addition, we had informal conversations with women who decided not to participate. While all these interactions offered us insights that informed our writing, four women figure prominently in this article: Vera, who volunteered with Kariboe Bibi to organise the events, and Haimanot, Bahia and Marie who became active after the excursion. These four women organically started to offer us advice as well as critique and contributed to organising the closing event and the writing of this article.

What makes Vera, Haimanot, Bahia, and Marie's stories remarkable is that their embodied stories call into question the structures that affected them, but rarely work in their favour (e.g. Bracke 2016). The stories bring to mind hooks' reflections on how the experience of invisibility of her own body in public and private space make her body even more intimate and precarious to her (e.g. hooks 1983, 2001). The stories of these four women are told with a focus on how they resonate with themes that women brought up in the project. Their stories voiced and embodied the more implicit forms of reflection and critique we observed among the women involved in the project, including a critique about researchers always seeking for intimate knowledge yet never contributing to transforming unequal structures. While the sections on aesthetics engage more with the embodied stories, in the section on inclusivity, we take up this critique.

This article does not claim to offer any generalisable knowledge on how agency is embodied by African-Dutch women in the city of The Hague. Rather, we offer a perspective on the type of stories that are elicited in the process of engaging, making and thinking with and between women. We are interested in the ways these stories offer counter-narratives to the stories that are most visible in dominant discourses and interventions on empowerment. Whilst an academic article was one (of many) desired outcome of this project from the start, the content, form and shape of the present text are a consequence

of the experiences, observations and conversations gathered throughout the project. We recognise the input and feedback that we received from Vera, Haimanot, Bahia, and Marie. With their collaboration, we attempt in this article to give space to what women who generously shared their stories considered important to put into writing.

Aesthetics in integration

Haimanot is dressed in a white dress with multiple scarves with colourful hemlines, representing both the colours of the Ethiopian and the Dutch flag. While she roasts the beans and pours the coffee during her coffee ceremony at the final exhibition of the project she says: “In Ethiopia, it’s very common to host coffee ceremonies and to invite your neighbours and friends. Everyone takes turns, and this way, everyone gets together for regular meetings.” When she arrived in the Netherlands, she decided to invite her neighbours for a coffee ceremony to get to know them: “It was a way of sharing my culture and knowing theirs.” Haimanot is 51 years old and has migrated from Ethiopia to the Netherlands just before the onset of the current millennium. In the various stories that Haimanot shared, her belonging to two cultures and countries is a consistent theme that comes up. When she joined the visit to Royal Delft Blue in Delft, dressed in blue and white, she noted: “I love Delft Blue, even my house is decorated in Delft Blue and white.” In the months following, Haimanot continued to share pictures via WhatsApp from Delft Blue porcelain teapots and cups, a Delft Blue wall piece in her living room and the blue and white curtains she had made in Ethiopia. Not surprisingly, but different from most of the women participating in the project, during the making of her own porcelain figurine, she paints Dutch and Ethiopian symbols in blue and white. With her collection of Delft Blue, she expresses “the love of my second country!” In a blog post, she shares with us a few weeks later, she is quoted to say: “Delft Blue

is a symbol for the encounters, the friendships and the loving dimension of Dutch society” (Van der Sande 2019).



Photo by Sophia Favela: Haimanot’s coffee ceremony.

The connection between aesthetics, emotions, and belonging emerged as one of the most insightful themes during and in relation to the visit to Royal Delft Blue, not only for Haimanot but also for other women who participated that day. The visit started with a short film on the history of Delft Blue ceramics in the Netherlands. The film explained that Delft Blue ceramics originate from China, and only started to be produced in the Netherlands because the demand for it was growing among the emerging bourgeois elite in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century (Aken-Fehmers et al. 2007). “If it is Chinese and not only Dutch, Delft Blue can be Dutch and African as well,” said one of the women as we left the room for a walk through the factory. This was met with an affirmative response from the other women. Marie, a highly educated human rights activist, lives in the city of The Hague for nine years since she had to leave her home in the Democratic Republic of Congo for political reasons. After landing in the Netherlands, she passed the Dutch courses and citizenship exams

successfully with high grades. As the years passed and she failed to access the labour market, she came to realise that passing the obligatory Dutch courses does not offer the type of proficiency that is required on the Dutch labour market. At the same time, many non-Dutch speaking professionals and academics find their way on the labour market speaking English: “I have decided to speak English instead of Dutch. English is spoken by the international ex-pats and accepted by everyone. When you speak broken Dutch, you are seen as a migrant, and it’s much harder to be respected.” This invited other women to share their experiences of standing out visually, while not being included on the labour market: “Sometimes I wish I was blond, tall and with blue eyes for one day and see what that experience could look like,” one of them said. While painting a tile with Delft Blue technique later during the visit, Marie picked up again on the conversation about language and inclusion: “I didn’t know this place. We always hear that we should learn the language, that we should integrate. This should also be available to us, now we understand better where we are.” In using the word “this” she referred to Delft Blue as an aesthetic visual form that she was able to see and appreciate, which created a sense of connection that Marie felt was absent from much of the integration efforts.

While walking through the exhibition at Royal Delft Blue, Bahia held still at an exhibited women’s dress made of Delft Blue fabric. “I am a fashion designer. I would love to use this type of fabric to make a design,” she explains. In the weeks after the visit, she shares pictures of dresses, skirts and jackets in typical waxed fabric with African designs she made. Bahia, who was born in Tanzania, is 40 years old, married, mother of three children and living in The Hague. She holds a degree in International Relations, however, unable to find employment in the Netherlands, she has worked in various cleaning jobs while setting up a business of designing and selling clothes and related products entitled “Holland Fashion”. Bahia decided not to participate in the painting of the dolls. Instead, she offered to design

clothes using Delft Blue fabric, with support from the project funds. Two models showed her vibrant designs during the closing event. The garments allowed her to visualise herself creating a new fashion line that explores the boundaries of Dutch and African cultures, creating items that express a cultural blend between Delft Blue’s clearly identifiable visual language and shapes of traditional African garments.



Photo by Sophia Favela: Dresses made by Bahia.

Bahia’s aesthetic practices clearly show agency. Her designs are at once creating and affirming beauty, as well as positive visibility for hybrid identities. Hybridity meaning the multiplicity, dynamicity, and flexibility that characterizes how the women in this study merge and integrate different aspects of their cultural identities, while holding contradictory aspects of these identities in a flexible manner (Nyongesa 2018, Zubida et al. 2014). Bahia reflects this in her own labour to realise economic security for herself and her (extended

transnational) family on two continents. Mixing African and Dutch fashion in her designs, whilst showing her dresses on both black and white models, Bahia creates hybrid Afro-Dutch aesthetics that can be adopted by women regardless of whether they were born as Dutch or Tanzanian.

Aesthetics in connection

Aminata, a woman in her forties, explained to us that she wanted to make a porcelain figurine dedicated to women in Sierra Leone, her country of birth. She did not want to stick to blue and white, the colours of the Delft Blue tradition: “I want to tell a story of women from Sierra Leone, it has to include circumcision. We have a sculpture that is black, with a black neck or face. I need to include black to tell the story.” She explained later on that this particular mask represents an evil spirit dedicated to the process of female circumcision in Sierra Leone.

The process of drawing, painting and dressing the figurines, created a playful atmosphere in which figurines and accompanying narratives were told, adapted, and changed. For instance, Vera describes her process:

First, I was painting a traditional woman from my country, Congo, with traditional clothes made of leaves. Later I thought I want to make a beautiful woman. I am thinking about the ladies from my country. In Kivu, the east of my country Congo, many women were abused. For me, I wish for the people in my country that the war will finish, for the women to be able to dress in nice clothes. I wish that the women from Eastern Congo can be like us. Make their hairs nice, do their make-up, make themselves sexy. I wish that the women in the east of the country can be made beautiful again.

Where Aminata used visual and aesthetic forms to express painful and unjust realities that women find themselves in, Vera chose to conceal such realities through aesthetics. While this act of concealing is a way

of ascribing dignity and doing justice to survivors of gender-based violence, a question remains open: is beauty connected to agency when it is used to conceal harsh realities? Vera explained that, upon arriving in the Netherlands, the use of a credit card allowed her to buy beautiful clothes and to send gifts to her family in Congo. It allowed her to show that she was living the promise of an affluent country, even though she had not accessed the labour market yet. Expectations to send or bring remittances and gifts to the family back in Congo or Tanzania, often create additional pressure for people in their post-migration life (Humphries et al. 2009; Makina 2013). For Vera, it resulted in enormous debt. With support from Kariboe Bibi, she was included in a government programme for debt-relief. A strict regime allowed her to pay off part of her debt while learning Dutch and doing professional training in elderly care. Being awarded by her commitment and persistence, part of her debt was written off by the local government. At the closing event of the project, Vera raised her hands holding a letter from the municipality from earlier in 2019, telling the audience that she was now declared debt-free. Her narrative provoked loud cheering and clapping by the audience. Coming back to the question posed earlier, we can see that rather than concealing painful realities Vera is actively rewriting stories of victimhood through her use of beauty and aesthetics, again confirming the agency that is visible in beauty practices.

A red thread through the stories narrated in these first two sections is the connection between aesthetics and dignity. The loss of their home countries, their families, their professions, and class position, as well as the trauma of migration and their gender, class, and racial positions in Dutch society are entangled into women’s aesthetic choices. In addition, women also expressed their connection and solidarity with women in their countries of origin. Their aesthetics makes visible that African-Dutch women choose to narrate these stories as stories of dignity, even when (as we observed with Vera) the desire for beauty and aesthetics contribute to precarity. As such,

aesthetics and beauty emerge as powerful techniques for women to transform themselves and create wellbeing.

Paradoxes of visibility and agency

Haimanot, Marie, and Bahia volunteered as co-organisers of the closing exhibition. During a brainstorm session facilitated by Gabriela (co-author), Haimanot, Marie, and Bahia agreed that the purpose of the event, and by extension of the project, should be to influence policy-making. Storytelling should be done to positively illustrate African-Dutch women's talents and their visions for the city of The Hague, they stated. They were very ambitious in their aim that the event would contribute to The Hague becoming a more inclusive city, in which all women can participate socially and economically.

Additionally, Bahia, Haimanot, and Marie are all working on expanding their entrepreneurial activities. Supported by a talent coach, Bahia is exploring whether fashion- and jewellery-design can help her set up a business. Haimanot's business includes hosting Ethiopian coffee ceremonies in the Netherlands, as well as guided tourist trips to Ethiopia. Marie is the coordinator and initiator of a cooperative of women with African backgrounds offering various services, including catering and tailoring. At the time of writing this article, she finished renovating a large property in the city centre of The Hague for the cooperative. Interestingly, all of these women combine their skills and talents with their Africanness. This makes their small business distinctive enough for customers to buy their products and services, while it also reaffirms their otherness.

Behind these entrepreneurial activities and the passion of each of these women to share their talents and support other people in doing so, there were also stories of economic insecurity and exclusion. Haimanot is also a broker (*sleutelfiguur*) between local (health) institutions and government and the Ethiopian community. This work is strictly voluntary, and these activities require a large investment of time for Haimanot. Relying on relationships of trust and deep

knowledge about the communities, Haimanot provides crucial services that (Dutch) professionals could not do. Only because she experienced problems accessing the (paid) labour market, Haimanot was able to invest her time in these unpaid activities.

Marie founded the cooperative for women to work towards becoming financially independent by selling their goods and services. Her attempts to access long term employment and paid labour repeatedly failed. That is why she wanted to create the possibility for herself and other women to get out of the deadlock of social security. In 2016, she used the right for citizens to speak to the city council to advocate for more attention for African women's economic security (Inspreektekst Stichting WIN 2016). She hoped to get governmental support for the cooperative to develop their entrepreneurial activities while continuing to collect their social security benefits and be exempted from applying for regular jobs until they were financially independent. Her request was not granted. In 2017, once more, she called upon the local government to support the cooperative as a way of empowering women with African backgrounds (Inspreektekst Stichting WIN 2017). She was heard this time, yet the support of the local government resulted in a call for proposals, rather than direct support for her cooperative. In the end, a well-established local NGO in The Hague secured the allocated funds, while she remained within a function of voluntary labour and continued to rely on government social security.

Interestingly enough, both Haimanot (2012) and Marie (2018) have been awarded the earlier mentioned Kartini prize. Marie and Haimanot both accepted the award as an honour and a sign of being acknowledged. However, it did not give them the possibility to move from voluntary to paid labour. Haimanot, furthermore, was knighted in the order of Orange Nassau in 2020. This is a royal honorary award that she received for how she "excels as a volunteer in projects on emancipation, participation and integration" (Omroep West 2020). It is clearly Haimanot's voluntary labour that is awarded. While this

makes Haimanot's agency and resilience visible, the structural problem of exclusion from the job market which the women in our project all describe as one of their biggest challenges is not solved. Rather, we would argue, the voluntary nature of their activity seems to be proudly paraded by officials.

Bahia, Haimanot, and Marie have actively engaged with programmes for empowerment, found their way through the institutional and political landscape of the city, and are guiding others to do the same. However, they all have experiences of not being seen, supported, heard, or included on the most crucial aspect of their integration: their inclusion on the labour market. Upon volunteering to organise the closing event of the project, their message was clear: they have done the work, and it is now up to other inhabitants of the city of The Hague and in particular those in positions of privilege, power, and influence to make the city of The Hague to support African-Dutch women in the city to become fully integrated.

This is not limited to government policy or commercial businesses that provide work but also speaks to the researchers (academic, applied, students) they have encountered on their journeys. In some ways, as we also explained in the project description, participants experienced the research project as another intervention that promised to change things while not going beyond gathering information of which women themselves do not see concrete outcomes. If we understand the role of an anthropologist as one that moves between different worlds (e.g. Knibbe 2020), this comes with the responsibility to navigate, hold, and interrogate the paradoxes research produces. In this case, it means taking seriously the way the women in our study speak back to academic knowledge production. What does it mean that participants in our study indicate that they do not need another research project to share their experiences but a space of influence as well as access to paid labour?

We have aimed to take this critique seriously by involving participants in the writing of this article, while also exploring ways in which the insights in this article and the projects can contribute to their own aspirations and causes. In addition, we take these insights back to our knowledge institutions to discuss what an inclusive research and design practice could look like. In a time when societal impact and knowledge valorisation are high on the agenda of knowledge institutions and funding bodies in Europe (as is reflected in the funding obtained for our "Designing the Body" research project), it is also necessary to ensure that this is not only translated into partnerships with economically affluent parties (e.g. Bacevic 2017) but creates equal opportunities for people in more precarious positions to participate.

Reflection

This article presented African-Dutch women's stories of agency and embodiment, and their desire to influence their visibility and inclusion in the city of The Hague. The Hague, like other Dutch cities, has its own programmes to empower women with migration backgrounds to participate in society and become financially independent. Yet, these programmes often lack knowledge of and connection to the lived experiences of women. The stories in this article have been gathered in the context of a project that combined story-storytelling and the making of Delft Blue objects. The interaction with material and visual objects, the aesthetic and sensory aspect of the research project, sparked off conversations that reveal how African-Dutch women understand and approach their life in the context of the city. In this final section, we will offer some further points of reflection about the most important themes, and reflect on how visual and material processes of making can contribute to broadening our understandings of agency.

First of all, belonging, participating, and being acknowledged as a citizen in The Hague and Dutch society, has embodied, material, and aesthetic dimensions. During the project, we observed, for example, that the women made aesthetic choices regarding their bodies and dresses that very consciously express their hybrid identities. Haimanot's white dress with a Dutch and an Ethiopian flag is part of her professional garments as part of her expanding entrepreneurial activities. Rather than being a sign of nationalism, in using the Dutch and Ethiopian national colours, she seems to embody a claim about who she is, what she identifies with, and what she belongs to. In the context of the ongoing debates that question the citizenship and belonging of migrants in the Netherlands, this is a strong statement about how African migrant women position themselves as Dutch. In addition, we observed that aesthetic and affective connections are important to a sense of belonging in a new country after migration. It is the process of "making" a connection in a visual, sensory and material way (e.g. Ingold 2013) that allows for engagement and belonging in a processual sense. The aesthetic material objects they engaged with in the project influenced their perspective on the Netherlands and how they themselves could be part of its culture and history. Visual language offers room for a playful interaction with the histories and cultures in the Netherlands and creates space for reflection and connection that formal integration efforts did not provide.

Secondly, aesthetics created space for women to tell a different story about themselves and the challenges and paradoxes they navigate. Aesthetics is a way of responding to changing gender and class positions, as the stories of Vera and Bahia highlight. While aesthetics restores dignity and agency, they may also subject women to new regimes of discipline and control. Vera's experience with debt relief and Bahia's and Haimanot's ethno-businesses are cases in point. Central to the narratives is that women (seek to) reclaim agency over their story, no matter how many challenges they experience. This was

also visible in the manners in which women used visual and material forms to narrate the problems women in their countries of origin face. Aminata's and Vera's examples shine a light on how women themselves problematise harmful gender practices without reducing them to biased terminologies (e.g. Le Roux and Bartelink 2020). Through the very act of making these women beautiful by emphasising beauty and eroticism in her design of the figurine, Vera emphasises the femininity and dignity of women who survived gendered forms of violence in Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo. Women's aesthetic practices demonstrate perseverance and the hope that adversity and precarity can be overcome. Furthermore, for the participants in the study, beauty and aesthetics are entangled with their sense of belonging and being included, as well as with agency, dignity, and justice. In Western feminist debates, beauty practices such as clothing and making oneself beautiful are often interpreted as a sexualised act that serves the male gaze (Groeneveld 2009). The empowering and agentic meanings of such beauty practices are not easily recognised behind the veil of the Western binary gender matrix.

Finally, the engagement with aesthetic, visual and material forms in the project itself needs reflection. The processes of storytelling through making, elicited stories that often remain untold; deeper meanings of beauty and aesthetics for women often remain invisible. This calls to question common methods for research, policy-making, and intervention planning focused on the emancipation and integration of migrant women. The findings in the article suggest that these are not only hindered by flawed assumptions on the problems migrant women experience and the strategies needed to solve these problems, but also indicate the limitations of interventions in which speaking is privileged over sensory and embodied forms of storytelling. The engagement with and rejection of aesthetic and material aspects of this research project have highlighted how a process of making and engaging creates space for critique and resistance. Critique on gendered discourses in which African-Dutch women's ability to

integrate in the Netherlands is thrown into relief, as well as a critique on the structural inequalities that keep African-Dutch women from participating in the labour market. Therefore, a focus on embodied stories seems to be promising, both in terms of opening up a perspective on agency and critique as well as for giving space to imaginations of a society where everyone can belong.

Notes

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