
Insider/Outsider: Black Surinamese Dutch Women in Predominantly White Educational Institutions

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This qualitative study explores the self-identification of young Black Surinamese Dutch women in the racialized context of Dutch society by specifically looking at how their identities shape their everyday lives in predominantly white educational institutions in the Netherlands. Given the historical and colonial relationship between Suriname and the Netherlands—notably how common it is for white people in the Netherlands failing to acknowledge the existence of racism in Dutch society—Black Surinamese diaspora members must explore the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of Black Surinamese Dutch women as a way to gain a better understanding of how to navigate racial inequalities within the country. Specifically, it is crucial to center the identity formation of young Black Surinamese Dutch women in examining the navigation of racial inequalities, since the lived experiences of young Black women and Black girls are often overlooked in the educational context, and this is the same for the educational system within the Netherlands. In-depth online interviews were conducted with eight young Black Surinamese Dutch women who were residing and/or studying in the two largest and most diverse cities in the Netherlands: Rotterdam and Amsterdam. Findings illustrate the importance of using an intersectional approach in trying to understand the unique insider/outsider position of these young women in navigating predominantly white educational institutions. The decisions they made on a daily basis, whether conscious or subconscious, ensured that they protected themselves while creating spaces to be themselves. But feeling out of place and being perceived as an outsider continued to impact the lives of these women into higher education and beyond.

KEYWORDS: Identity Formation, Black Women, Surinamese Diaspora, the Netherlands, Education

THE NETHERLANDS IS AN INTERESTING CONTEXT to study questions of racism and identity, especially because many white people fail to acknowledge racism in Dutch society.¹ That is why this study seeks to center the experiences of Black Dutch people generally, and Black Surinamese Dutch people in particular. Living as a person from African descent in a society wherein racism is notably denied, adds to the complexity of one's identity negotiation.² In many ways, this speaks directly to W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, in which identity negotiation is determined by a "two-ness" in a white American world.³ The complexity of negotiating that "two-ness" for Black Surinamese Dutch people is heavily influenced by the colonial and historical ties between Suriname and the Netherlands. Suriname became a colony of the Dutch Kingdom in 1667⁴ and served as "the one real plantation economy in the Dutch empire."⁵ Over time, Suriname would develop as a multi-ethnic, racial, and religious society due to Dutch invasions across the globe.⁶ But a lot of people in the Netherlands were not educated about their colony, Suriname, and what had happened internally because of the prominent role of the Netherlands in the Transatlantic slave trade, while at the same time, in Suriname, language, administrative structure, and values were centered around Dutch culture.⁷ Even though Suriname gained full independence on November 25, 1975, these historical ties linger through in contemporary everyday life. In the Netherlands, institutional racism and systemic discrimination experienced by people of color in for example "housing, employment, education, law enforcement and politics"⁸ reflect ignorance of the Dutch regarding the historical unequal relationship between colonizer and colonized. Therefore, having an inferior position in

¹ Gloria D. Wekker, *Witte Onschuld: Paradoxen van Kolonialisme en Ras* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 9.

² Philomena Essed, *Alledaags Racisme* (Gennep B.V. Nederland, 2018), 50.

³ Dickson D. Bruce, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (1992): 299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2927837>.

⁴ Allison Blakely, "Historical Ties among Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands," *Callaloo* 21, no. 3 (1998): 473, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cal.1998.0135>.

⁵ Blakely, "Historical Ties among Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands," 474.

⁶ Haidy J. M. Lie-A-Ling, Pam H. Zuurbier, and Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, "A contemporary look at parenting beliefs and practices and childhood outcomes in Caribbean cultural communities," *Caribbean Journal of Psychology* 10, no. 1 (2018): 56, <https://doi.org/10.37234/CJP>.

⁷ Blakely, "Historical Ties among Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands," 474.

⁸ Blakely, "Historical Ties among Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands," 477.

Dutch society because of one's Surinamese background has everything to do with the historical relationship between Suriname and its former ruler the Dutch Kingdom.

The goal of this study is to investigate the role of self-identification in navigating racialized Dutch society, through the influence of predominantly white educational spaces on the intersecting identities of young Black Surinamese Dutch women. Examining their identity formation is needed because the experiences of young Black women and Black girls are often overlooked in the educational context⁹ and this is the same for the educational system within the Netherlands.¹⁰ Given the historical and colonial relationship between Suriname and the Netherlands¹¹ and how many white people in the Netherlands fail to acknowledge the existence of racism in Dutch society,¹² exploring the ideas, thoughts, and feelings of Black Surinamese Dutch women is important in gaining a better understanding of racial inequality in the Netherlands and the position of these women in the educational system. This led me to exploring the following research question: *How does the current self-identification of these Black Surinamese Dutch women impact their navigation of predominantly white educational institutions in Dutch society?*

EDUCATION AS SOCIALIZATION MESSENGER

Because racial inequality is rooted in Dutch society, it is perpetuated through various mechanisms in the educational system.¹³ As such, educational environments can play a powerful role in shaping an individual's identity formation. When Black Surinamese Dutch students attend school in a society organized unequally by race, they are confronted with having to make sense of who they are in an environment that often teaches them that they are inferior.¹⁴ In Dutch society, race and ethnicity are not lawfully registered as in the US¹⁵, so this negotiation of identity happens in a context of denial and

⁹ Monique Morris, *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools* (The New Press, 2016), 26.

¹⁰ Philomena Essed, *Alledaags Racisme* (Gennep B.V. Nederland, 2018), 164.

¹¹ Blakely, "Historical Ties among Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, Aruba, and the Netherlands," 473.

¹² Essed, *Alledaags Racisme*, 60.

¹³ Essed, *Alledaags Racisme*, 157.

¹⁴ Essed, *Alledaags Racisme*, 182.

¹⁵ Zakia Essanhaji, Zakia, and Seda Müftügil-Yalcin. "Whiteness as the academy's orientation: On gendered and racialized boundaries and the disciplining of women of colour in Dutch academia," *Organization*, 33 no. 1 (2026): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084251376815>.

erasure, which stresses the importance of centering self-identification. As seen in the US context, Monique Morris illustrates how Black girls not only have to deal with expectations generated through racial and class oppressions, but also with expectations that emerge from gendered forms of oppressions.¹⁶ Dealing with stressors from all these different forms of oppression can be problematic for Black girls, as education is seen as one of the most important protective factors in a girl's life¹⁷. When Black girls become adolescents, the influence that the school environment has on their lives is critical to their socialization. Therefore, telling the stories of young Black women, and in particular the stories of young Black Surinamese women, can help us investigate the influence of education on their socialization in the Dutch context.

INTERSECTING SOCIAL IDENTITIES

When an individual is Dutch, but not always being viewed as Dutch, they need to be aware of how their skin color and ethnic background influence the perceptions of others about them, especially as they interact with authority figures in society, such as teachers. This is where Du Bois's concept of double consciousness comes into play. Du Bois originally used this concept to show us the conflicting reality of being Black and being American in a white American world.¹⁸ Double or multiple cultural and ethnic identities can cause a great deal of internal conflict but also create opportunities to view society differently. Black Surinamese Dutch people can offer new perspectives to Dutch society because they experience what it is like to be Black and Dutch at the same time, while also negotiating their Surinamese identity. Even though Black Surinamese Dutch women are part of racially and ethnically minoritized groups experiencing oppression, their realities as women members of these groups are often overlooked.¹⁹ P. H. Collins describes this as having an outsider-within position:²⁰ Black women are overlooked in Black issues, because they are not men, and Black women are overlooked in feminist issues, because they are not white. Uncovering these dynamics

¹⁶ Morris, *Pushout*, 29.

¹⁷ Morris, *Pushout*, 25.

¹⁸ Dickson D. Bruce, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (1992): 301, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2927837>.

¹⁹ Wekker, 89.

²⁰ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought, 30th Anniversary Edition: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge, 2022), 17.

prompted me to rely on intersectionality in exploring the experiences of young Black Surinamese Dutch women in predominantly white educational environments. Intersectionality—introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw²¹—is everywhere, as it is a concept that explores how power relations influence social relations in societies around the world.²² It can be used to illustrate how social categories like ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, ability, and age not only shape our society, but are also intertwined and reciprocal. And this complexity cannot be fully understood if each of these categories is solely studied separately as distinguished entities.²³

METHODOLOGY

I approach my research through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which allowed me to focus on telling (counter) stories and contribute to a greater understanding of the concepts of race and racism,²⁴ while using intersectionality to analyze the junctions between culture, ethnicity, race, and gender within the context of racialized Dutch society.²⁵ I also draw on phenomenology²⁶ as my focus on the lived experiences of this particular group of Black Surinamese Dutch women enabled me to explore the creation of shared meanings among this small group of individuals as they navigate the Dutch educational system. My focus on this group reflects my own identity as a young Black Surinamese Dutch woman in higher education and served as my insider perspective. At the same time, being a sociological researcher and residing in the US gave me an outsider perspective.

To explore the lived experiences of my participants based on the perceptions of their social identities, I conducted individual in-depth interviews. The interviews were conducted virtually in the Fall of 2021 with eight young Black Surinamese Dutch women between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-six. During the time of our interviews, these women were residing and/

²¹ Zakiya Luna, et al. "On joy and war: Black feminism/intersectionality." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 50 no. 1 (2024): 66. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-090123-032434>.

²² Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 1.

²³ Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*, 1.

²⁴ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, "Critical race theory: An annotated bibliography," *Virginia Law Review*, 79 no. 2 (1993): 462, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1073418>.

²⁵ Wekker, *Witte Onschuld*, 36.

²⁶ Creswell, John W. and Cheryl N. Poth. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage Publications, 2017), 75.

or studying in the two largest and most diverse cities in the Netherlands: Rotterdam and Amsterdam.²⁷ The interviews were conducted in Dutch and coding occurred in both Dutch and English. When discussing my findings, I focus on examples from my participants that explicitly center educational experiences that touch on their insider/outsider position.

OPPOSITION IN AND FROM SCHOOL

When talking to my participants, it becomes clear that their school experiences have been critical to their socialization. When I asked Larissa (twenty-two years old), who described herself as Surinamese Dutch, about challenges she had faced in school, she gave me two examples of opposition from both high school teachers and her university. In high school, when choosing her profile,²⁸ teachers made assumptions about how she was not going to make it and that the workload would be too much, because nobody else had chosen the number of classes she wanted:

“Ik wil dit en dit en dit doen weet je wel, ook die extra vakken en zo wil ik dat mijn pakket eruitziet. En daar kwam een beetje denk ik de eerste weerstand zo van aannemen dat kan niet, mensen doen dat niet. Je moet wel heel goed zijn om dat te kunnen. Wordt het niet te veel? En ik was zo van nee. Ik wil dat, dus laat mij dat gewoon doen.” (I want to do this and this and this you know, those extra classes too and I want my profile to look like this. And that is when I think that first opposition came up as in making assumptions that that is not possible, that people don’t do that. You have to be really good to be able to do that. Is it not too much? And I was like no. I want this, so just let me do this).

But Larissa believed in herself and was clear in what she wanted to do, and in the end, she proved them wrong. When she later entered university, she faced opposition when she planned to do an exchange to the US. The exchange program was for one semester, but she requested an extension. Even after approval and getting funding from her university in the US, her university in the Netherlands was not cooperating. After three stressful

²⁷ “Hoe divers is de Nederlandse samenleving? Factsheet.” Sociaal Cultureel Planbureau (SCP), accessed January 22, 2026, <https://www.scp.nl/documenten/2024/06/01/factsheet-hoe-divers-is-de-nederlandse-samenleving>.

²⁸ The classes she would take her high school exams in.

months, she was finally able to push it through with an appeal. When I asked her if she knew what could have been the reason for the opposition she had faced, she replied implicitly with not wanting to think about that it could have been racism:

“[...] ik heb van als ik het daarop gooi, dan weet ik dat ik dat van mezelf ga verliezen. En dat wil ik mezelf gewoon niet aandoen, dus ik weet het niet. Als dat wel zo was, dan fuck them. En als het nu niet zo was dan ook fuck them. Want uiteindelijk ben je...uiteindelijk weet je ik heb het gehaald. Dus ik wil niet zeggen van, oh het was daarom.” ([...] I know that if I put it that way, I am going to lose to myself. And that is something I don't want to do to myself, so I don't know. If that was the case, then fuck them. And if it wasn't then fuck them too. Because in the end...in the end I still made it. So, I don't want to say, oh it was because of that).

What I understand from Larissa's interpretation is that despite the opposition she had faced, she mentally tried to protect herself and not stress herself out. She wanted to deal with the problems without having to dwell on them, making sure she did what she wanted to do by blocking out what could have been the reason for the mistreatment. Felicia (twenty-four years old), who described herself as an Afro-Surinamese woman, did explicitly mention experiencing racial bias. She explained that she was recently diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), but she understood from a younger age that she had a lot of concentration problems:

“Ik ben bijvoorbeeld dit jaar gediagnosticeerd met ADD. Uhm, terwijl ik duidelijk al heel veel concentratieproblemen had op de basisschool. Maar wat je dan vaak ziet is dat ze een bepaalde etniciteit of nationaliteit koppelen aan het veel praten ofzo weet je, terwijl dat bij een witte jongen uhm niet het geval zal zijn dat er daar gelijk alarmbelletjes zouden rinkelen. Dat is bijvoorbeeld bij mij niet gebeurd.” (This year, for example, I was diagnosed with ADD. Uhm, while I clearly already had a lot of concentration problems in elementary school. But what you often see is that they match being really talkative or something like that to a certain ethnicity or nationality, while that is not the case for a white boy uhm as for them all the alarm bells would go off. That didn't happen with me for example).

Felicia experienced that her teachers in elementary school failed in helping her get diagnosed when they had the chance, and that this was due to racial and gendered stereotypes.

UNCOMFORTABLE SITUATIONS IN THE CLASSROOM

When Felicia got to university, she had a hard time navigating the predominantly white environment, especially because she did not feel comfortable in the classroom with so many white people. With an increase in online classes due to the pandemic, the situation improved for her, but she gave me a pre-Covid example, which made her feel uncomfortable:

“En ik zat toen in een klas waar ik ook weer het enige Zwarte meisje was en op het moment dat ze bijvoorbeeld over drill [muziek] of over racism begonnen te praten. Dan weet je gewoon iedereen zit naar je te kijken weet je wel en dan ben ik echt van [denk ik van] oké calm down, wat doen jullie? Uhm, ik zeg maar, op zulke momenten voel je dat echt. Het voelt gewoon verschrikkelijk oncomfortabel en ook onaangenaam.” (And I was in a class where I was the only Black girl again and when they for example start talking about drill [music] or about racism. You know that everyone is just staring at you you know and then I am really like [in my mind] okay calm down, what are you guys doing? Uhm, in moments like that you really feel that. It just feels terribly uncomfortable and unpleasant).

Seeing these topics as so-called Black, and Felicia being the only Black student in the room, the white students expected her to remark on them, making her the token expert. This situation brought her a lot of discomfort and unpleasant feelings. She felt lonely and annoyed and instead tried to focus on herself. She told me that in moments like these, she preferred to keep her mouth shut with the hope that the attention would be redirected. When I asked Victoria (twenty-three years old), who described herself both as a dark (skinned) and Surinamese woman, about challenges she may have faced in school, she said she had more issues in high school than in university with the attitudes displayed by her teachers. Transitioning out of a multicultural elementary school to a white high school, she automatically tended to flock to the other Black children in her class:

“Dus uh uiteindelijk als je dan donkere mensen in één klas zet, trekken die naar elkaar toe. Dus dat is gebeurd. En we waren dus

eigenlijk een groepje van vier of vijf. En hoe je het went of keert hadden we altijd alles gedaan, we hadden altijd alles gedaan. Het was, oh die groep, ja want die groep. En waarom zijn we die groep? Because we're Black?" (So, uh, eventually if you put dark (Black) people in one classroom, they tend to flock to one another. So that's what happened. And we were actually a group of four or five. And however you put it, we had always done everything, we had always done everything. It was, oh that group, yes, because that group. And why are we that group? Because we're Black?).

Victoria and her Black friends became a target for some teachers; every time there was something going on, they initially blamed her and her friends for it, referring to them as "that group," as if they were the only friend group in the class. Victoria said she tried not to care about it. Now that she's in higher education tackling mostly independent work, she said she did not think that these teachers and professors care much about her cultural background:

"Ik, ik denk omdat they don't care. Docenten op het hoger onderwijs die hebben gewoon zoiets van je bent oud en wijs genoeg. Volgende les of volgende les niet, kijk maar wat je doet. En op middelbare school is het toch meer van, niet braaf tijdens de les oh ga je maar melden. Oh dit doen oh dat doen." (I, I think because they don't care. Teachers in higher education, they just think like oh you're old and wise enough. Next class or not, just figure out what you do. And in high school it's more like, if you don't behave in class oh go report yourself. Oh, do this oh, do that).

To Victoria, it seemed that her current teachers were less preoccupied with their students when compared to her high school educators. Which could be an interesting point of departure to understand the navigation of Black women in higher education in comparison to how they had to navigate, for example, high school, and what that means for their sense of belonging.

SENSE OF BELONGING

Dina (twenty-six years old), who described herself as a Surinamese woman, described her university as really Hollands:²⁹ "Ik denk dat het echt gaat om,

²⁹ Really Dutch.

hoe kan ik het zo noemen? Hollandse studenten dan? En daarbij dan ook nog de universiteit op zichzelf en de docenten sowieso ook.” (I really think it’s about, how can I call it? Dutch students then? And also the university on its own and especially the teachers too). However, she was still able to end up with a diverse group of friends. She was aware of her transition from a multicultural high school to a predominantly white university setting, a reality that seemed to align with the widespread idea still prevalent for many young people in the Netherlands: that university is more for white people. Dina said she hoped that going to university would become more normalized for people of color: “Ik zeg altijd, iedereen kan dit wat ik doe. Iedereen kan studeren.” (I always say, everybody can do what I do. Everybody can go to university.) But being part of the small population of people of color on campus, she does not completely feel like she belongs, even though she enjoys what she is studying. She notices how her cultural mentality does not fit the mentality of the university, and this also makes her gravitate more towards other people of color when she steps inside a classroom: “Dus ik ga eerder naar een Hindostaanse dan naar een Hollander zeg maar of naar een meer, eerder naar een Turkse dan een Hollander.” (So, I would rather go to a Hindostaanse³⁰ than to a Hollander³¹ or to, you know, rather to a Turkish person³² than a Hollander). She experiences feeling “stuck” in the middle between being in and belonging in university—like her feelings towards being “stuck” between her Surinamese and her Dutch identities. This is exactly what Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness tells us about navigating a white world with multiple cultural identities.³³ While these Black Dutch women try to make sense of their social identities and how they fit into Dutch society, and more specifically, Dutch higher education, these efforts are not being recognized, which can lead to this internal conflict in their identity perception; feelings of being stuck.

DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

About her university, Felicia was very clear. She believed it is whitewashed: “Wat ik zelf bijvoorbeeld heb meegemaakt is dat het nog heel erg whitewashed is, heel erg westers uhm in dit jaar nog 2021 [...] En dat ook gewoon zeg

³⁰ Referring to a Surinamese (Dutch) person with Indian roots.

³¹ Referring to a white Dutch person.

³² Referring to a Turkish Dutch person.

³³ Dickson D. Bruce, “W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness,” 301.

maar de machtspositie die in een universiteit behouden wordt die universiteit tot standhoudt ook.” (What I experienced myself, for example, is that it’s still really whitewashed, very westers,³⁴ uhm, still in this year [of] 2021 [...] And that also the position of power that is being held in the university that that maintains the university too). From her perspective, the university did not do justice to, or recognize, or represent the diverse history of the Netherlands and the diverse communities that are present in the Netherlands today. That is why she believes it would be a good idea to share more about underrepresented parts of history and culture, so more Dutch people are aware of the persistent racial inequality and the consequences for different people in Dutch society. But what Felicia wanted the most was for white Dutch people to be willing to do something with this (new) information once they learned it:

“Uhm kijk ik denk op zich wat ik daar mee bedoel is uhm, wat voor verandering gaat het brengen als, als een klas met witte mensen hier over leert uhm gaan ze dan bijvoorbeeld hun gedrag in bepaalde situaties daadwerkelijk aanpassen? Of is het gewoon, ok dank je wel voor deze les en op naar de volgende, snap je?” (Uhm, look I think that what I mean by that is, uhm, what kind of change is it going to bring if a classroom of white people learns about this, uhm, are they actually going to change their behavior in certain situations? Or is it just, okay thank you for this class and onto the next one, you know?).

As she told me, if they did not see it as a wake-up call to act, or at least think about their actions and the people around them, then never mind; it is not worth trying to fight for these particular changes. Felicia and others mentioned how tricky it can be to even start these conversations. For example, Li-Ann (twenty-three years old), who described herself as Cape Verdean and Surinamese, thinks it is important to talk more about the underrepresented parts of history and culture, but said that she personally felt uncomfortable engaging with topics such as slavery:

“[...] uit eigen mening vind ik dat ze me toch wel iets meer hadden moeten meegeven qua geschiedenis en cultuur. Want ik merk bijvoorbeeld dingen over de slavernij. Ik kan dat zeg maar ik kan het wel, of nee, ik kan het niet aanhoren. Ik vind dat, ik voel me

³⁴ Referring to “western” countries and “European” values.

daar ongemakkelijk bij en dat zijn eigenlijk wel dingen wat ik moet weten. Maar ik, ik, ik weet de helft niet eens.” ([...] in my opinion, I think that they should have taught us more about history and culture. Because I notice when it comes to slavery, I can, or actually no, I can’t listen to that. I find that it makes me feel uncomfortable, while these are things I actually should know. But I, I, I don’t even know half of it).

The discomfort she experienced when engaging with a heavy topic such as slavery was something she was still working to overcome, she told me. It was uncomfortable for her to engage in conversations such as these because she did not want to think about the scope of it all; the disbelief in how it all transpired exacerbates the pain of thinking about the history. This also illustrates why it can be a difficult task to engage in these conversations with white Dutch people.

CONCLUSION

My conversations with these young Black Surinamese Dutch women provided insights in the everyday lives of a mostly overlooked group of Black Diasporic women. These women have a unique insider/outsider position in Dutch society due to their self-identification and the navigation of predominantly white institutions. Based on what they told me, they were dealing with many different challenges on a daily basis in connection to navigating their social identities, such as experiences related to opposition, personal attacks, and direct assumptions about their skills. The racialized dynamics of Dutch society, rooted in a racist history and continued today,³⁵ created a number of situations in which these women felt that they could not express themselves as they wished they could and did not feel like full members of Dutch society. Nevertheless, these women all described finding ways to make sure they protected themselves while creating spaces to be themselves. For example, focusing on building relationships with other students of color around them. Still, feeling out of place and being perceived as an outsider continued to impact the lives of these women throughout their time in higher education and beyond, as they are literally stuck in between being somewhere and belonging somewhere. Their stories demonstrate the importance of using intersectionality in trying to understand their unique

³⁵ Essed, *Alledaags Racisme*, 11.

insider/outsider position as they navigate predominantly white educational institutions in the Netherlands.

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