

Dutch Caribbean Creatives in the Netherlands

Documenting Living Heritage and Navigating Cultural Identity Through Art

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Introduction

I - What?

In July 2023, I moved to the Netherlands to continue my studies and further develop myself as an art educator. At the beginning of this study I knew I wanted to research something related with Art and education in the Caribbean because I felt like I owed something to my home country. I had multiple conversations with my peers and tutors, and some self-reflection on my role as Caribbean art educator that recently moved to the Netherlands. This resulted in a drawing (figure 1) where I brought together artistry, cultural roots, the Netherlands and the Caribbean experience.

Having worked three years on the island of Bonaire as an art educator, my Caribbean identity was not a big part of my work. As a young local entrepreneur and art teacher at the only high school on the island, my Caribbean identity was never an exception. My goal was to connect different members of the community (young and old) with the values of art education (through team-building activities, sunset painting sessions and social gathering events etc.). But also to show people the tools and different ways for them to express themselves as they are.

When I moved to the Netherlands and started working here as an art educator, suddenly being from the Caribbean had a big effect on my role. I was now perceived as a *Caribbean* art educator, and often even felt ostracized for this fact. While I know that this is a general experience for most expats, I expected the Dutch Caribbean islands to be less 'foreign' to the Dutch. I noticed that most Dutch people I met were not aware of the Dutch Caribbean islands and our shared government, culture and history. I then started to wonder what effect this might have on Caribbean artists that move to the Netherlands and are suddenly not just creatives anymore, but can be considered Caribbean creatives, especially when using cultural



Figure 1 Picture of Symbol for research question (Assignment with Lizzie en Sjoerd 01/06/2024): A Roman pillar symbolizing Fine arts (Visual, Music, dance, etc), Orange ovals representing dutch cheese wheels, curls in pillar representing roots of the tree connected above, tree symbolizing cultural background, person on top of pillar in the middle of tree symbolizing the courageous artist, sun above head of the artist symbolizing light and awareness on Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands. Scribbly black line in the middle of pillar representing "tuning fork", balance, connection.

elements in their work. What does it mean to have a cultural background as a Caribbean creative living internationally (here in NL), and therefore navigating the world as 'ethnically marked'.

I am curious how Caribbean creatives manage here in NL and how they experience interaction with their audience in the Netherlands, both Caribbean and European. Much like I experience interaction with my students in my classroom in the Netherlands, compared to those in Bonaire. With this research, I am creating an archive of documented experiences of Caribbean creatives. I will be doing this by interviewing Caribbean creatives that are active in the art scene in the Netherlands on their experience.

Core research question:

What impact does cultural background have on a Caribbean Artist and their work here in the Netherlands?

Sub-Question :

1. What challenges do they face as Caribbean artists in the Netherlands? What opportunities have they found?
2. What specific cultural symbols and motifs are prevalent in their art?
3. How does a Caribbean artist interact with their Caribbean public vs international public?
4. How do you navigate the art scene in the NL as a Caribbean creative?

II - Why?

There are many reasons to shine light on this unique experience. Cultural background brings a wide variety of factors that influence a person, and their art (more on that in the theoretical framework). A representation of this reflection can be seen in figure 2. For the Caribbean specifically, I was curious how the phenomenon of 'island mentality' affects how a Caribbean creative navigates the Netherlands. This refers to a person/community that lacks exposure to the outside world. What happens when these people choose to migrate to the Netherlands, and are suddenly exposed to this outside world? For artists, their livelihoods depend on this exposure. I started exploring the current Caribbean art scene in the Netherlands and was surprised that there was a lot happening yet little was being documented. This sparked frustration, but also my interest and motivation to bring this experience to light.

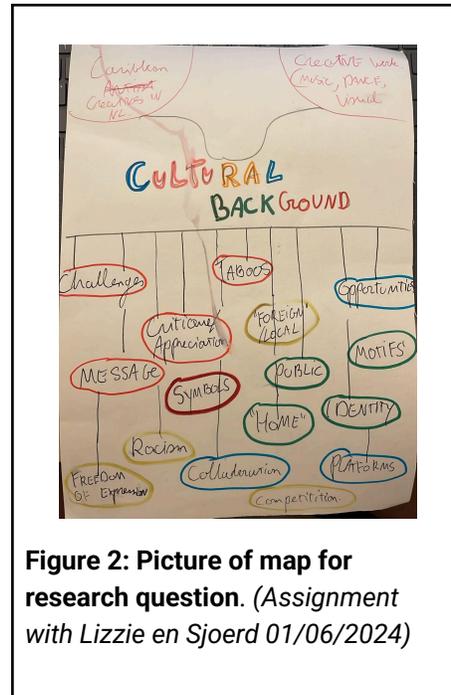


Figure 2: Picture of map for research question. (Assignment with Lizzie en Sjoerd 01/06/2024)

By researching this topic, I not only shine light on this experience, but also the hidden network of Caribbean creatives. Back at home I often hear people talk about “underground” artists who are making it big here in the Netherlands but yet nobody seems to know them back at home. I hope in the near future I will be able to share the findings of this research, therefore also providing more visibility on Caribbean creatives. However, It’s important for the Caribbean community (back home) to learn about these creatives and their experience, and especially why they should be proud of them.

Even though I'm now living in the Netherlands I manage to stay in contact with the community back home by keeping close contacts with local artists, curators and educators. Also by visiting events in the Netherlands focused on these artists and keeping myself informed about and involved in the community. That’s why I'm also very aware of how fast things are changing in the art scene back home (through access to more subsidies etc). This is another reason that I want to contribute to this change: by doing this research. By researching this topic I develop myself as an educator and professionalize myself with this topic, therefore contributing to the art scene as well. Bu

It's important that these artists are documented and archived, so that there is physical documentation of their experience - something that does not yet, or barely, exist! Growing up on the island myself, exploring what it means to be creative, there was no information or access to this type of information. Now, after years of experience as an art educator, I wanted to shift my focus more on research, becoming the student of my own research. On finding answers to questions that perhaps others might also have about this very particular experience. But especially to learn. I dream that in the future I can be specialized in this subject which would make me a facilitator for the Caribbean art scene. I would like to be an inspiration for the Caribbean youth to expand themselves beyond the idea that a career in Art is taboo. Hopefully this inspires them to also recognize the value of art education in the Caribbean.

III - How?

Goal:

My main goal with these questions is to shed light on Caribbean creatives here in the Netherlands, explore their relationship with their Caribbean background and their publics.

First I explore the existing theory to bring into perspective the target group. I specifically look at the following themes, which are directly related to my research question(s).

1. Caribbean identity and the diaspora
2. Geographical influences of the Caribbean
3. The relation between Audience and art
4. The caribbean community in the Netherlands

This literature serves as theoretical support for my educational project.

Educational project:

The project aims to document the experience of Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands through in-person interviews. By interviewing artists among their creations, or immediately after their performance, I recorded an honest “in the moment” reflection from them. This reflection was based on (partly) personalized questions that I created using my research themes. For each artist, I adapted the questions to their artistry, but I used a standard set of questions as a guideline (Table 1).

Table 1:

Research theme	Interview question
<i>Caribbean identity</i>	Do you consider yourself a Caribbean-Creative, yes/ no, Which island do you represent?
	How important is your cultural background when it comes to creating Art?
<i>Geographical influences of the Caribbean</i>	What are the central cultural symbols or motifs that appear in your work, and what do they represent?
	How do you communicate or translate Caribbean cultural symbols for an international public?

<i>The relation between Audience and art</i>	Do you feel a sense of responsibility to represent Caribbean culture in a particular way for non-Caribbean audiences?
	Do you find that the general audience in the Netherlands responds differently to the cultural symbols in your art compared to audiences in the Caribbean? Yes? How ?
	Do you feel that Dutch critics and audiences appreciate the cultural depth in your art, or do they tend to focus on its aesthetics?
	How important is it for you that your Caribbean public fully understands the nuances of your work?
<i>The caribbean community in The Netherlands</i>	How has exposure to European art influenced your perspective on Caribbean art and culture?
	Are there specific curators, institutions, or initiatives in the Netherlands that you feel have been champions of Caribbean art?
	Have you had the opportunity to collaborate with other Caribbean artists in the Netherlands? How have those collaborations enriched your work?
	What advice would you give to other Caribbean artists looking to break into the Dutch or European art scene?
	Opinion on the caribbean art scene

Some of these questions were purely out of my own curiosity, some came naturally through the process, and some seemed important to discuss while being documented. The questions were based on their experience ‘behind-the-scenes’, which doesn’t usually get told. They don’t usually get asked these questions simply because the public might not get the chance to. For example, the question on responsibility, that’s a question that I struggle with myself. The idea of being responsible for the representation of a specific marginalized community, I was curious if that was something that I struggled with by myself. But also the question about appreciation of aesthetics vs deep messaging within the art. These are all personal questions that I felt like as a Caribbean researcher it was my responsibility to ask.

Each interview was documented by a video-recording after which the videos were edited and transcribed.

I also created a list of artists to interview based on their activity and accessibility (Table 2). The goal was to interview at least one creative from each of the six Dutch Caribbean Islands. I also tried to vary in the different artistic disciplines of my subjects. I then spent a few months contacting these artists, explaining my project and arranging and conducting various interviews.

Table 2: an overview of preliminary artists with their island and particular discipline.

Artists :	Island:	Discipline:
Raygenie Finies	Bonaire	Photography
Eva Croes	Aruba	Choreographer
Dillon Ranou	Bonaire	Fine Artist
Sjoerd Scott	St. Martin	Comedian
Juny martina	Curaçao	Rapper
<i>Travis Geertudia</i>	Curaçao	Fine Artist
<i>Eugenie Boon</i>	Curaçao	Multidisciplinary artist
<i>Karina Gouverneur</i>	Curaçao	Sculptor / Ceramicist

The Art of our Geography

The Caribbean map (Figure 3) is a fragmented yet interconnected geography, rich in cultural, historical, and artistic meaning. It shows a chain of islands separated by water but linked by the beautiful Caribbean sea but also a dark twisted history. This map challenges the idea that each island stands alone, showing instead how the region's culture and politics are deeply connected. The Caribbean played a central role in colonization, migration, and cultural exchange leading to a diverse yet complex cultural identity. This geography marked the beginning of colonization. It served as a meeting point for colonizers from diverse origins, triggering a series of historical events. Over time, it has strongly influenced contemporary artists, with the map becoming a key starting point for exploring artistic and cultural identities.

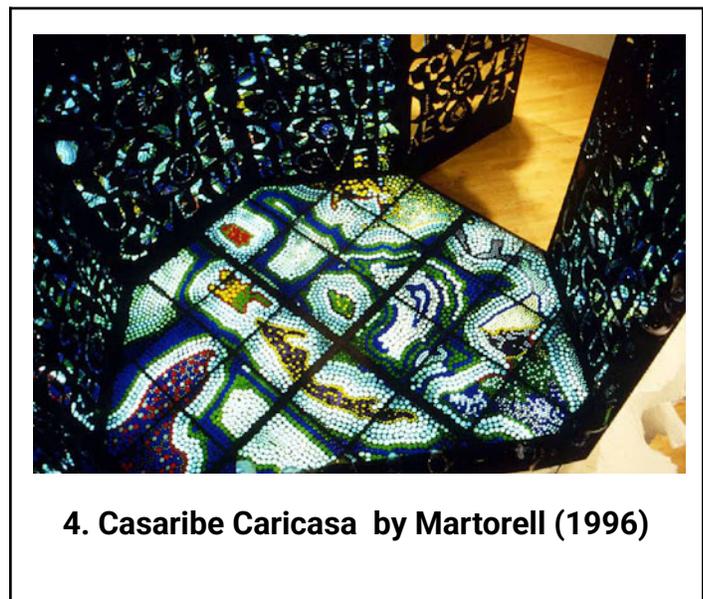
The Caribbean is often seen as a tropical paradise for tourists, but this image doesn't reflect the challenges its people face. Economic struggles, historical hardships, and environmental issues tell a much deeper story. Many Caribbean artists address these realities, focusing on themes like survival, resilience, and rebuilding. The Caribbean Sea, once a key path for travel and trade, now stands as a symbol of both the region's beauty and its fragility. These islands aren't just vacation spots, they are places full of history and culture, where people work to preserve their memories and strengthen their connections.



3. The map of the Caribbean Islands

For artists like Puerto Rican Antonio Martorell, the map is both a symbol and a medium for exploring identity. In works such as *Casaribe Caricasa* (Figure 4) and *Mundillo Desencajado* (Figure 5), Martorell reimagines maps to reflect on the themes of displacement and transformation in the Caribbean islands. By using *mundillo* lace-making, a traditional Puerto Rican craft to create distorted maps, he critiques how migration, colonial legacies, and globalization have reshaped borders and communities. These works capture the tension between fragmentation and unity, reflecting the shifting nature of identity and connection in the region.

Visitors to *Casaribe-Caricasa* often hesitated to step onto the vibrant mosaic, which depicted the map of the Antillean islands. In response, the artist urged them, saying, “Tread on us, as it has been done for centuries.” Surrounding the mosaic were dark walls adorned with mirror fragments that reflected and fractured the viewers’ images. These fragments were arranged to spell words like *Discover*, *Uncover*, *Recover*, *Cover up*, creating a kaleidoscopic effect that symbolized division and disarray, evoking the aftermath of 1492 (The arrival of Christopher Columbus, the beginning of European colonization) . Through this installation, Martorell transformed the map into a reflection of the region's fractured history and identity, engaging viewers in a dialogue about colonization’s lasting impact.



As part of his *Mundillo Desencajado* (1996) series, Martorell also created two additional works showing the cartography of other regions. These maps were also made using *mundillo*, the traditional Puerto Rican lace-weaving technique, meticulously crafted by skilled artisans based on his designs. The resulting maps presented distorted geographies where, for example, the Caribbean islands were out of place. Instead of aiming for accuracy, the maps intentionally reflected the dislocation of territories to explore themes of migration and change.

Martorell explained that these works served as “geopolitical documents,” capturing the reshaping of borders and identities caused by political, economic, racial, religious, linguistic, and military forces. Imagine if the Netherlands was suddenly bordered by Italy and Russia.

Through this lens, his distorted maps reveal the effect of migration and global change on the Caribbean. History shows that these effects were often temporary and changing. His art invites us to consider how history, geography, and human migration continue to reshape our understanding of place and identity.

His particular love of maps has, in his own words,

“[...] sealed a romance that continues, a love triangle between my eyes, the map and the hand. I want to bring closer that which is far away, make the vast small, travel without leaving home and then, now as then, draw my own maps, turning them upside down, putting myself inside of them, like Jonah in the whale [...]” (Martorell, 2008:2).

The aim of this research is to bring to light the experience of contemporary Caribbean artists, based on this reality. Not only to bring this knowledge home but also bring this knowledge together - and like Martorell, creating a map. Although these artists might be scattered throughout the Netherlands, they share a common cultural background.

This research will explore: how this background influences their experience as creatives in the Netherlands.

What are the commonalities, how are they connected?

And how do they connect with an international public?

My aim is to document their experience and add to the collective of existing geopolitical documentation on the Caribbean. I hope one day, a young Caribbean creative or art educator like myself, can open the internet and find accessible information on this unique experience.



5. *Mundillo desencajado* by Martorell (1996)

Caribbean identity

“A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin, and culture is like a tree without roots.” – Marcus Garvey

Identity is what defines who or what someone or something is. It's the essence that we, as human beings, protect, value, and want others to recognize. However, identity is not formed alone; it is shaped by many influences. The Caribbean diaspora is a clear example of how identity constantly evolves. It can therefore become problematic when questions like, “Who are we as a people? Is our identity clear and certain? Is this identity shaped by syncretism, and how do we blend with others?” are asked in an attempt to understand who we are as Caribbean people.

Elderly people in the Caribbean often express concern that today's youth are disconnected from their cultural roots and don't fully understand what it means to be Caribbean. They also recognize that younger generations have been taught to value foreign influences over their own, seeing local traditions and practices as inferior. This raises important questions about the impact of constant evolution of the Caribbean identity.

In my view, many Caribbean people forget that our colonizers didn't just strip our ancestors of their identity, names, culture, religion, and more but also imposed new identities upon them. They rebranded our ancestors with foreign names, customs, and beliefs, and instilled the idea that they were inferior to the 'white man.' The slave was taught what to think, say, and do by their colonial masters, and as a result, the system of slavery and the plantation society became what is known as a 'total institution.' This deeply shaped the collective consciousness and identity of the Caribbean people, an influence that continues to affect how we view ourselves today. **For example**, how European physical features determine the beauty standards, a lot of Caribbean people



have Dutch last names, and the central role of catholicism in traditional Caribbean households.

In an online article by T'vaughn Lewis, titled 'The Caribbean's Last Opportunity For Redemption Part II', he commented on this by stating¹:

*Slavery and the plantation society are 'total institutions' that have bequeathed a legacy of dependence and contingent development upon the Caribbean. For some three hundred years, the Caribbean has been conditioned in this manner (This does not mean that it's impossible to break this cycle of dependence) and to date, it still perpetuates the colonial institutions that it has inherited since the plantation structure. Slavery, and particularly the plantation society, left behind an accursed dependency syndrome and legacy- **It's almost like the Caribbean still maintains an umbilical relationship with its colonial masters though 'independent' of them** (Lewis 4).*

Nowadays, one can find more and more representation of this dynamic (Netherlands as a colonizer, the Caribbean as the colonized) in artworks by Caribbean Creatives. An example is Eugenie Boon, whose work reflects on her upbringing in Curaçao and the island's historical relationship with the Netherlands. She explores the small details of everyday life, which often show a sense of duality; the idea of two opposing forces existing together. This duality appears in themes like religion, gender roles, and colonialism.



Her work also looks at how social hierarchy can limit a person's opportunities and how these limitations are passed down through generations, a common theme in Caribbean households. Even in modern times, the way a country is owned or controlled can still

¹ Lewis, T'Vaughn Samuel. "The Caribbean's Last Opportunity For Redemption Part II." Triniscene.com. N.p., 1 Oct. 2015. Web. 5 Oct. 2015.

reflect its colonial past. The starting point for her work 'Krese par'i pia pa nabega den bida' is how people experience elders or figures of authority (Figure 7). This idea is shown through the scene and specific details - a halo, DNA structures forming the two figures, and yellow waves that carry information. As in her other works, the colors red and blue are important. They represent the different ways people react to inequality; either passively or actively.

To truly understand who we are as Caribbean people, we need to look at the impact of slavery and the plantation society on our identity. Because of this history, our sense of self is not completely our own, it has been shaped by colonial rule and its lasting effects. Today, many young people are trying to define themselves in a world that is constantly changing. To do this, they must look back at where we come from. By understanding and appreciating our past, we can decide who we want to be, both in our region and in the wider world.

Understanding this history is key to understanding ourselves, and art can help in this journey. Through art, we can continue to explore these stories, pass them on, and shape our identity for the future. While artists don't have to focus on history or social issues, many choose to do so. Through their work, they honor important historical figures and help keep their stories alive.

One strong example is Tula, an enslaved man from Curaçao who led a revolt against slavery. His story has inspired many Caribbean artists over the years. His fight for freedom has been told through sculptures, music, and theater. These forms of art help people learn about the past and remind us of how important Tula was in the struggle for emancipation. Even today, Tula's legacy is present in modern art. Some artists use simpler forms, like t-shirt designs, to reach younger generations. But the message stays the same: **Tula taught us to stand up for ourselves.**

Our history of struggle goes even further back. When the Spanish arrived, they not only forced Indigenous people to work, but also brought diseases that killed many of them. After much of the Indigenous population was gone, colonizers brought in enslaved people from Africa, East India, and other parts of the world to work the land. As scholar



H. Adlai Murdoch explains, most people in the Caribbean today come from somewhere else. Some arrived by choice, others through contracts or forced labor, but many were brought through slavery. This shows that the roots of Caribbean identity are deeply tied to migration and foreign origins.

None of the people who now live on the islands, whether black, brown, white, African, European, American, Spanish, French, East Indian, Chinese, Portuguese, Jewish, or Dutch originally "belonged" there. The Caribbean is the place where creolization, assimilation, and syncretism were shaped. It is the New World, the space where the crucial encounter between Africa and the West took place.

It must also be seen as a place marked by continuous displacements: the displacement of the Arawaks, Caribs, and other indigenous peoples, who were wiped out or forced from their land; the displacement of people from Africa, Asia, and Europe through slavery, colonization, and conquest². This evidence puts Caribbean people in a challenging position. How can we claim to be one people when our cultures, identities, and histories are so varied? It complicates any notion of a unified identity.

During the entire process of colonization, slaves brought to the Caribbean islands were stripped of their original cultural practices, which were vital for expressing their beliefs, thoughts, and emotions. Colonial masters not only punished slaves harshly for practicing their own cultures but also forced them to adopt the masters' ways of life. As a result, many slaves had to practice their cultural beliefs in secret, fearing retaliation. Some even blended their masters' cultural beliefs with their own, creating a hybrid culture. For many slaves, this meant sacrificing part of their identity. **The Caribbean diaspora is full of examples of how cultures can blend to create something new, sometimes benefiting multiple groups. However, this cultural mixing can also lead people to forget who they are, where they come from, and what they have lost, as dominant cultural identities often overshadow the weaker ones.**



² Hall, S. (2015). □ Cultural Identity and Diaspora. In *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory* (pp. 392-403). Routledge.



10. Left, Arawaks playing traditional drum instrument 1860
Right, The modern Caribbean drum “Tambu”.



11. Left, Aztecs blowing Conch shell 1300
Right, Caribbean people using a Conch instrument in music.

Derek Walcott, a poet from St. Lucia comments in his words³, “*In time the slave surrendered to amnesia. That amnesia is the true history of the New World. That is our inheritance. . . . **The slave converted himself. . . . as he adapted his master’s religion, he also adapted his language, and it is here that we can look at as our poetic tradition begins.** Now began the new naming of things”.*

Is Walcott’s view of Caribbean culture correct? Do we even have a true Caribbean identity, or are we just too diverse to have one? Colonization has made it hard to know who we really are as a people. Even though we fought for independence and freed ourselves from physical chains, mentally, we are still enslaved. We continue to judge each other based on race, color, and ethnicity. In this way, we are still searching for an identity that is truly ours, not one influenced by TV, social media, or fashion. Yet,

³ Burnett, P. (2017). *Derek Walcott: politics and poetics*. University Press of Florida.

throughout this conversion a completely new and unique language was born, Papiamentu. Which is still being used as a way of expression, also used to create art, making this language unique to the Caribbean identity and culture.

It's interesting to observe that over time, some Caribbean islands have used politics to divide each other, and this division has become ingrained in our culture. Paul Gilroy touches on how identity can be disrupted from an identitarian perspective⁴. He explains:

"The idea of diaspora offers a ready alternative to rooted belonging. It rejects the popular image of natural nations spontaneously endowed with self-consciousness... diaspora is a concept that challenges the cultural and historical mechanics of belonging. It disrupts the power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple connection between place, location, and consciousness. It challenges the idea of common memory as the foundation of identity by highlighting the political dynamics of commemoration."

For example, you can use the idea of diaspora to explain how rice and peas is a dish that has different variations across the Caribbean, but it still represents a shared cultural connection despite its differences. Just like diaspora, the dish of rice and peas exists across various Caribbean islands, but each island puts its own twist on it. For example, in Jamaica, it might be made with kidney beans, coconut milk, and scotch bonnet peppers, while in Trinidad, it might include pigeon peas and different seasonings. Even though the ingredients and preparation methods can differ from island to island, it's still recognized as rice and peas, a dish that unites Caribbean cultures.

This mirrors how diaspora works: while each group of people might have different experiences, influences, and ways of expressing their identity, they still share a common cultural foundation. Just as rice and peas might look or taste different depending on where it's made, the people of the Caribbean, living in different countries or regions, still maintain a shared identity—one that transcends geography and history, shaped by their shared colonial past, migration, and cultural exchange. So, diaspora is like rice and peas: while the "ingredients" (culture, history, language, etc.) might differ from place to place, they all come together to form a collective identity, much like how rice and peas is recognized as a unifying dish across the Caribbean, no matter the variation.

⁴ Gilroy, P. (2000). *Against race: Imagining political culture beyond the color line*. Belknap/Harvard UP.



Due to such syncretisms, Stuart Hall offers an important reflection on the nature of identity for migrants and the host communities⁵. He writes:

"Such people retain strong links with their places of origin and traditions, but... are obliged to come to terms with the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They carry the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages, and histories that shaped them... They are irrevocably the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at once to several 'homes' (and to no one particular 'home')... They are products of the new diasporas created by postcolonial migrations. They must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them."

The Caribbean diaspora for a certainty accommodates many from different parts of the world. It opens up its borders and allows persons to integrate themselves into a space they can call home away from home. However, each person must come to realization that he/she does not have a singular identity and because of such can take hope in that though diverse we (the Caribbean) have come a long way from slavery, independence, and becoming a republic. The decision now rests upon us to know what we will do with this identity that is ever so evolving, especially migrating to a new country.

It becomes more apparent and interesting which cultural elements artists choose to incorporate in their artwork. It also begs the questions which of these elements truly belong to the caribbean identity, or might actually belong to one of the many

⁵ Hall, Stuart, David Held, Anthony G. McGrew, and Neil Stammers. The Question of Cultural Identity. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

nationalities of which this identity is composed of in the first place. Is the artist even aware of this possibility?

Why do so many Caribbean artists leave their homeland to pursue careers abroad, traveling as far as the Netherlands to find success? Are they looking for more exposure, financial support or perhaps they are more interested in an international audience, and finding like-minded communities. Does the admiration of an international audience hold more value than recognition from one's own people? Is there an unspoken belief that true success can only come from being seen elsewhere? Do we truly value the foreign moreover our own home? Or should we trust artists and their artistic agency? That they are free to express themselves and make intentional creative choices based on their own vision, experiences, and values.

I think the answers to these questions might vary for every artist. I can even recognize myself in these questions. For me it has always been for the further development of my career and education. I've not necessarily felt the need to find like-minded communities although it's been very helpful as a Caribbean person to find other diasporic communities who share the same struggles. It gave me a place to feel seen and understood. And as a cliché as it sounds; the feeling of not being alone.

Our culture carries the echoes of survival practiced in secret, adapted to fit within the master's traditions, reshaped over generations. What was once hidden became something fluid, neither fully ours nor entirely theirs. A blend of resistance and adaptation, influenced by imposed beliefs, yet still holding onto traces of what once was. But it also carries the echoes of shame, instilled into us through slavery.

To migrate is to be reshaped by the gaze of the outsider. In the eyes of the colonizers, the Caribbean is a singular entity, stripped of its individual identities. The distinct cultures of each island blur into one, erasing any claim to self-definition. The diaspora brings both creation and destruction seen as a source of richness to the world, yet to ourselves, it fractures our sense of belonging. We struggle to appreciate our differences because we are named as one.

The word *Antillean* carries the weight of colonization. Do Caribbean artists embrace this label, or do they distance themselves from it? Does identifying as *Antillean* feel like a limitation, a reminder of a painful history? Or does it offer a sense of solidarity? What do they call themselves? West Indian? Caribbean? By their island's name? And when faced with the world, how do they define where they come from? Is the Caribbean seen as creative enough in its own right, or must its artists always seek validation elsewhere.

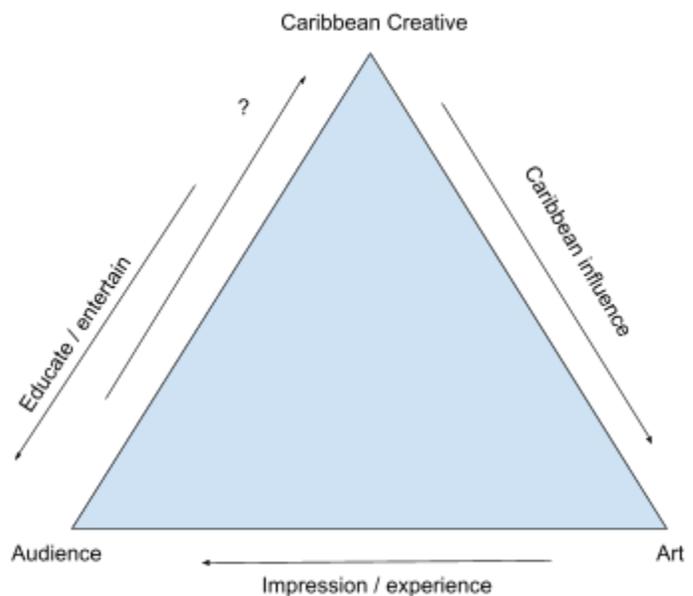
Audience and art

“The best work, in our time, are works which show the process of art. Such work includes the viewer as part of the conversation.” - Joseph Kosuth

According to James O. Young⁶, an audience is made up of individuals who engage with artworks in some capacity. While experiencing artwork is essential to being part of an audience, it is not the only requirement. Some people may encounter a work of art but not truly be considered part of its audience. For instance, ushers in a theater or concert hall may hear a performance but do not necessarily perceive it as an aesthetic experience. Similarly, a museum guard may see paintings daily yet may not engage with them on an artistic level. A person meeting a friend in a gallery might glance at the artworks but, if focused solely on finding their companion, would not be considered an audience member. This suggests that simply experiencing an artwork is not enough; one must engage with it in a meaningful way.

According to Young, to be part of an audience, individuals must interact with an artwork in a way that allows them to appreciate its aesthetic value. If an artwork evokes pleasure, emotion, understanding, or any other response tied to its artistic purpose, then those who experience and benefit from these aspects can be considered part of its audience.

However, not everyone can be part of an artwork’s audience. Certain abilities are required. In the simplest sense, an audience consists of those who can hear a performance, meaning that individuals with hearing impairments cannot fully engage with a musical piece. Likewise, a painting’s audience must have the ability to see. Beyond sensory capacities, an audience may also need intellectual familiarity with artistic styles, history, or context. For example, someone entirely unfamiliar with classical music may struggle to engage with Mozart’s



⁶ JAMES, O. Y. (2010). Art and the educated audience. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 44(3), 29-42.

compositions in a way that reveals their aesthetic depth. Those who possess both the sensory and intellectual capacity to fully appreciate a work's artistic value can be considered its educated audience.

Similarly, for Caribbean creatives, it begs the question how they interact with their audience. Besides being able to see, feel, hear etc, the audience also should be able to recognize the cultural elements and symbols. Do the audience of Caribbean creatives all truly interact with their artwork? This dynamic can be explored through a triangle (Figure X). Caribbean creatives pour into their art using caribbean elements and symbols, which gives the audience a certain impression. Is there a difference in this impression for international audiences, compared to Caribbean ones? And how do Caribbean creatives deal with this difference? Can the audience relate to the artwork - or as happens very commonly - it's simply deemed 'exotic'.

Bob Marley and his global influence is a perfect example of how the engagement of an audience with an artwork, can vary based on cultural background, personal experience, and deeper understanding of artistic elements. His music, which blends reggae rhythms, Rastafarian philosophy, and political activism, reaches diverse audiences in different ways.

For Caribbean audiences, Marley's music is more than just entertainment. It is a reflection of their common history, struggles, and identity. His use of Jamaican Patois, traditional Nyabinghi drumming, and reggae's signature offbeat rhythm creates a sound that feels familiar and personal. His lyrics about poverty, colonialism, spiritual resilience, and resistance resonate with people who have experienced these realities firsthand.

- *Redemption Song* speaks directly to the Caribbean experience of slavery and colonial oppression, with lines like "*Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery*" encouraging self-liberation.



Bob Marley: One love Concert 1978

- *Get Up, Stand Up* reflects a spirit of resistance and empowerment that many Caribbean nations embraced during and after their struggles for independence.
- *Trenchtown Rock* references Marley's own upbringing in the Kingston ghetto, a reality many Caribbean listeners relate to.

Because of these cultural markers, Caribbean audiences don't just *hear* Marley's music, they *live* it. We understand the symbols, language, and historical references used in his work, making our interaction with his music more profound.

Marley's music also attracted a massive international audience, but the way they engaged with it was different. Many international listeners, particularly in the West, were drawn to the sound and vibe of reggae rather than its deeper messages.

Some saw Marley as the face of a "chill, tropical lifestyle," associating reggae with relaxation, beach vacations, and good times but often missing the political message in his lyrics. Others connected with his themes of peace, love, and unity, which were universal, but they couldn't recognize the specific Caribbean political and historical context behind them, simply because they didn't know the history well enough. In some cases, reggae and Marley's image were commercialized, used in branding for products and media without recognizing the deeper meaning behind his art.

Marley, like many Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands, had to navigate the challenge of different audience interpretations. He was a cultural ambassador for Jamaica and the Caribbean, yet his music broke geographical barriers. He used his art to educate global audiences about the struggles of black and oppressed people all over the world.

However, the question remains: Did all of his listeners truly understand his message? Many international fans appreciated the music but failed to engage with its deeper meaning, while Caribbean listeners connected with Marley's work on a more personal and cultural level.

Like Bob Marley, Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands create art that often carries deep cultural meaning, but can that meaning be fully appreciated by all audiences? Do Caribbean artists need to adapt their work for a broader audience, or should they remain true to their roots, even if their message is misunderstood or not heard at all?

The Caribbean community in the Netherlands

Since arriving in NL and looking into the Caribbean art community - I was baffled at the lack of spaces that are dedicated to Caribbean people in the art world. In any case, not the combination of these two worlds. What I did find over time are the following organizations/communities that do provide the spaces for being both Caribbean and Caribbean art itself. I might be mistaken, but these are the only organizations that create space for this community. I'm personally related to all of these except the Black archives.

The Caribbean community in the Netherlands I've found

- Taal Tours; Papiamentu kunst instituut melly
- Caribbean ancestry club
- Pakhuis de zwijger; Bou di watapana (under the watapana tree)
- The Black archives
- Stichting weconnect

Taal Tours; Papiamentu kunst instituut melly⁷

Kunst Instituut Melly invites Papiamentu-speaking art enthusiasts to have the opportunity to take part in specialized Language Tours conducted in Papiamentu. The tours are part of Melly's language inclusivity program. These guided tours provide an engaging artistic experience and are available once or twice a month in various languages spoken by local communities, including Turkish, Dutch, English, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), and Papiamentu. The Papiamentu tour is led by Papiamentu-speaking art mediator Sabrina Schoop. For Caribbean art enthusiasts, this tour offers the chance to explore art in their own language!

This is a primary example of the Caribbean community coming together for art. These tours make the art accessible for Caribbean audiences. It provides them a guide into Caribbean and international art. It's a beautiful example of how the community can come together to appreciate something that they wouldn't be able to back at home. In the Caribbean, people are unlikely to pay and



⁷ <https://www.kunstinstituutmelly.nl/nl/series/7741-taal-tours>

visit a museum to appreciate art. It's in a way breaking taboo, showing the possibility, but also showing how to make the art accessible (besides language/culture) by having a nice building, low costs and great art. It gives access to the community to step outside of the box and experience something they wouldn't on the islands - exposure to (caribbean) art.

Caribbean ancestry club⁸

The Caribbean Ancestry Club is a heartfelt initiative founded by Alfrida Martis and Daudi Cijntje, driven by their deep love for the Caribbean. Hailing from Bonaire and Curaçao, respectively, they take pride in their Afro-Caribbean heritage and strongly believe in the transformative power of love and community.

Through events and gatherings, their mission is to unite and amplify the voices of Afro-Indigenous Caribbean peoples, particularly those from Bonaire, St. Eustatius, Saba, Curaçao, Aruba, and St. Maarten.

The Caribbean Ancestry Club provides a space where Caribbean people can express their identities freely and engage in meaningful discussions on diaspora and island life, colonialism, intergenerational trauma, activism, cultural rituals, art, ancestral knowledge, and family histories. The club hosts family-friendly events filled with poetry and spoken word performances, music, traditional island cuisine (kuminda krioyo), and intergenerational "show & tell" conversations featuring voices from the ABC & SSS islands. These events explore themes of diaspora and island life, the importance of preserving family histories, and ways to archive knowledge in predominantly oral Caribbean cultures.

Audience members have the opportunity to share their own stories during an open mic session and are encouraged to bring a personal item that represents their heritage or memories. While everyone is welcome to join, the events center the voices and experiences of the ABC & SSS islanders, ensuring their stories remain at the heart of the conversation.



⁸ <https://worm.stager.co/web/tickets/111080966>

These spaces are a powerful example of Caribbean people organizing for themselves, creating a community-driven platform where they can come together, share their artistic talents, and support one another. Unlike institutions like Kunstinstituut Melly, which primarily showcase established artists, these spaces provide a stage for emerging Caribbean artists who are still navigating their path and seeking opportunities in the Netherlands.

What makes this initiative so valuable is the welcoming and supportive atmosphere it fosters. Whether through poetry, music, or other creative expressions, artists are given the freedom to showcase their work in a space that truly understands and uplifts them. Beyond simply offering a platform, these events boost artists' confidence and energy, as they are being appreciated by an audience that shares their cultural background.

This Caribbean audience in the Netherlands is not only engaged but also deeply connected to the themes explored in these performances—issues such as adapting to life in the Netherlands, healing from colonial history, and navigating identity in a diaspora setting. The shared cultural understanding between the artists and their audience creates a space of mutual appreciation, learning, and emotional resonance.

If this initiative continues to grow and develop, it has the potential to become a highly impactful and successful organization, providing essential visibility, support, and empowerment for Caribbean artists in the Netherlands.

Pakhuis de zwijger; Bou di watapana (under the watapana tree)⁹

'Bou di Watapana' is a series of dialogues embracing the narratives of the Dutch Caribbean diaspora in the Netherlands. In each episode, they engage in thought-provoking conversations that unravel the 'how' and 'why' behind the chosen paths and the



⁹ <https://dezwijger.nl/programmareeks/bou-di-watapana>

unique perspectives that shape the endeavors of (young) professionals from the ABCSSS-islands.

But the series isn't just about individual stories; it's a celebration of community. Explore how our guests give back to their communities, creating a positive ripple effect through their work. 'Bou di Watapana' invites you to a space where stories converge, knowledge is shared, and the spirit of community thrives.

Because the purpose of the Diaspora Dialogues is to give various diasporas space for an open, constructive, and honest dialogue, they adhere to the following guidelines:

- They acknowledge that these conversations can become uncomfortable, so they explicitly agree to handle that discomfort constructively together.
- They believe in the power of multiple voices and are committed to promoting an environment where everyone feels encouraged to share their perspectives.
- **IMPORTANT:** they also encourage all attendees to first give space to the present members of the invited diaspora during the conversation.



What makes the Bou di Watapana series truly unique and special is its direct reference to the act of gathering under the Watapana tree, a tradition deeply rooted in Caribbean culture. In the Caribbean, sitting under the Watapana tree is a moment for people to come together, engage in dialogue, and share perspectives on complex social issues, daily life experiences, and events happening on the island. This series beautifully modernizes and reinterprets that tradition for the Caribbean diaspora in the Netherlands, creating a space for conversation, connection, and cultural exchange.

I was honored to be part of the first edition of this series, where I joined a panel of speakers from different Caribbean islands to share our experiences. At the time, I had just moved to the Netherlands, and what stood out to me was the diverse mix of audience members—young people, newcomers, and



longtime residents of the Netherlands, each bringing unique perspectives shaped by their personal journeys. It was more than just a discussion; it was a reunion, with people coming together from different cities, reconnecting, and sharing a space filled with Caribbean culture, food, and music—including delicious local treats like pastechi.

What I appreciate most about Bou di Watapana is how it is not only created for Caribbean people but also led by them. Organized by Pakhuis de Zwijger, this initiative provides a platform for diverse expressions of Caribbean identity. Each edition focuses on a new theme or question, sparking discussions on topics ranging from cultural identity to entrepreneurship and activism. Beyond conversation, the series embraces movement and performance, welcoming poets, rappers, and other artists to share their work. It also provides visibility for Caribbean entrepreneurs, giving them space to showcase their businesses and talents.

What truly sets this initiative apart is its commitment to highlighting the Caribbean people behind the scenes—the individuals who are making a significant impact in the Netherlands but often go unrecognized. These events serve as a moment of discovery, where attendees can learn about the faces, stories, and contributions of Caribbean professionals, artists, and changemakers. By bringing these voices to the forefront, Bou di Watapana is building a powerful community of connection, recognition, and cultural celebration.

The Black archives¹⁰

The Black Archives is a unique historical archive that serves as a space for inspiring conversations, educational activities, and literature that highlight Black perspectives and other underrepresented narratives. It offers a rich collection of books and historical materials that provide valuable insights into Black history, culture, and activism.

Each month, The Black Archives organizes events centered around themes from its collections, fostering discussions on knowledge, education, and social issues. Through these activities, the archive not only



¹⁰ <https://www.theblackarchives.nl/>

preserves history but also creates a platform for critical dialogue and learning, ensuring that these important stories are shared and acknowledged.

Although I don't have extensive personal experience with The Black Archives, it has been a recurring reference from advisors throughout my research. Nearly every time I discuss my work, it is recommended as a valuable resource. This is likely because it is one of the most well-known, if not the only, historical archives in the Netherlands dedicated to Black history and the African diaspora.

The Black Archives serves as a vital source of information for those seeking to learn about Caribbean and Black communities in Europe. It is closely connected to the National Archives of the Netherlands but specializes in preserving and documenting the histories, contributions, and experiences of Black people and the diaspora.

Beyond its archival work, The Black Archives is also an active cultural and educational platform. They organize lectures, exhibitions, and events that highlight influential Black figures and their impact on the community. Additionally, they produce a podcast that explores various topics related to the diaspora, fostering discussions on identity, history, and activism.

Their commitment to inclusivity ensures that all Black and brown communities are represented in their work, making The Black Archives not just a repository of knowledge but also a dynamic space for education, dialogue, and empowerment.

Stichting weconnect¹¹

The WeConnect Foundation serves as a professional bridge between the Netherlands and the Caribbean islands of Curaçao, Aruba, Sint Maarten, Bonaire, Saba, and Sint Eustatius through educational and multimedia projects. Their initiatives focus on empowering young people by facilitating multimedia projects, such as film workshops, fostering creativity and cross-cultural connections. Additionally, WeConnect provides guidance and support for



¹¹ <https://nl.linkedin.com/company/stichting-weconnect>

Caribbean students in the Netherlands, helping them navigate academic and professional opportunities. By actively linking Caribbean young professionals to the Dutch labor market, WeConnect plays a crucial role in strengthening career pathways and building a network of opportunities for the Caribbean diaspora.

WeConnect holds a special place for me, not only because I work with them as part of the team, but also because I was involved from the very beginning. Having witnessed its early development, I have seen firsthand how the foundation has grown into a key representative of the Caribbean ABC community in the Netherlands. If you are looking to connect with young professionals from Curaçao, Aruba, Sint Maarten, Bonaire, Saba, or Sint Eustatius, WeConnect is the organization to turn to. They have built a comprehensive database of professionals from various disciplines and backgrounds, offering guidance, education, and support to help them navigate life in the Netherlands. Through workshops, mentorship programs, and practical resources, they equip students with the tools they need—from budgeting and handling racism to maintaining family connections and embracing their identity.

As a non-profit organization, WeConnect continues to expand by fostering community, awareness, and empowerment. They emphasize the importance of staying connected, both with fellow Caribbean students and within the larger international environment. By creating this network of support, they help students build confidence, find opportunities, and transition successfully into professional life—whether in the Netherlands, Bonaire, or the wider Caribbean region. I deeply respect the hard work and dedication of WeConnect in helping students turn their education into meaningful careers. Their work is not just about professional growth; it's about empowering Caribbean youth to thrive, no matter where they are.

Practice based research

The goal of this practice-based research was to have conversations with Caribbean creatives that are active in the art scene in the Netherlands. I chose these artists based on my own network and their availability/accessibility. These conversations were held through interviews, often on the scene of their work, which were also recorded on video. During these interviews I asked them about their experience as a Caribbean creative specifically in the Netherlands, while using my own research themes as a guideline. For example, discussing how they experience the relation between their art and different audiences. My role within these interviews was to channel their personal experience into the questions of my own research, to bring to light what impact cultural background has on a Caribbean Artist and their work here in the Netherlands.

All interviews and transcripts can be found at the link below:

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1ZurQQdygNwu1nVM3_yj4SB7CDDAFyl20?usp=sharing

In the next pages I share the main findings from each interview.

Interview 1: Raygenie Finies

Interview with Raygenie Finies – October 6, 2024 | Amsterdam

Raygenie Finies, a photographer from Bonaire based in The Hague, is emerging as a compelling voice in contemporary Caribbean art. Fresh from completing her Bachelor's in Photography at Hogeschool Rotterdam, she recently presented her graduation project *Biba mi cultura: Keeping my cultural traditions alive* at the Melkweg MILK Café in Amsterdam. The exhibition, which blends traditional motifs with modern fashion, has captured the attention of both local and international audiences.



Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

Ray, a fine art photography graduate from Bonaire, is using her work to explore and confirm her identity as a Caribbean creative. Based in the Netherlands, she places cultural heritage at the forefront of her artistic practice, navigating life in the diaspora while staying rooted in her island origins. For her, photography is not just a visual medium, it's a means of cultural preservation and a way to share Bonaire's rich traditions with broader audiences.

Geographical Influences of the Caribbean

Her latest exhibition showcases three photo series, each reflecting a facet of Bonairean culture. Two of the series focus on traditional clothing: the ribbon dance costume and *kunuku* (farmwear). The ribbon dance costume draws from a once-popular local dance, representing community celebration and cultural pride. The *kunuku* series, meanwhile, highlights the role of women in agriculture and animal care - an often overlooked but vital part of island life. Through these works, Ray documents not just clothing, but the stories and histories they carry.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

In bringing traditional elements into a modern context, Ray faced the challenge of connecting with both local and international audiences. To bridge that gap, she infused

her work with contemporary fashion cues - sneakers, stylized poses, and a unique aesthetic - that make the images accessible without thinning out its meaning. The result is a visual language that resonates on multiple levels. Local audiences found cultural familiarity in her work, while international viewers responded to its fashion sensibility. Ray admits she initially feared the cultural depth might be lost on some viewers, but responses from the exhibition's opening night affirmed otherwise: audiences connected with both the visuals and the narrative.

I admire Ray's ideas of combining contemporary elements in her cultural work. I think it's also a good way of inviting her viewers, local and international, to have a look at how she sees her culture in a fun and explorative way. I think it's always a challenge to make your art accessible for a wide range of audience, but I also know that seeing the goats in her pictures gave me a different feeling than an international tourist seeing the same picture.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

Ray also speaks openly about the difficulties of relocating to Europe and adjusting to its cultural landscape. She highlights the importance of staying authentic, especially for Caribbean creatives navigating new and unfamiliar environments. Her message to emerging artists is clear; keep creating, even if your work isn't immediately understood. Cultural representation, she says, is worth the risk. Ray expresses pride in representing Bonaire abroad and is especially honored to exhibit in Amsterdam among a talented roster of artists. She hopes to bring the exhibition home to Bonaire soon, allowing her community to also experience the work firsthand.

Interview 2: Eva Croes

Interview with Eva Croes – October 11, 2024, 3 PM | Amsterdam South

Eva Croes, an Aruban choreographer based in Amsterdam South, has been steadily building her career in the Netherlands since 2013. A professional dance educator at Amsterdam’s School of Arts, Eva has become a leading voice in Caribbean dance within the Dutch cultural scene. Her work bridges movement, identity, and multicultural storytelling - both in the studio and on stage. During this interview, she had been invited to perform with her students during a high-profile conference at the Ministry of Culture & Education, a moment she describes as both humbling and affirming.



Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

Eva is deeply committed to uplifting Caribbean artists within the diaspora. Since moving to the Netherlands in 2013, she has become a mentor to aspiring dancers and creatives from the Caribbean who wish to study or work abroad. “Keeping our cultural flame alive is essential,” she says. She encourages young artists to embrace their roots while navigating unfamiliar environments. For her, success begins with knowing your worth: something she believes Caribbean artists must hold onto, especially when facing obstacles in Europe’s competitive creative industries. “Stay true to yourself,” she urges, “and take every opportunity that aligns with your purpose.”

Geographical Influences of the Caribbean

Eva’s artistic practice is rooted in dance but extends into broader disciplines like acting, theater, and performance installation. Her work is inspired by a strong connection to Caribbean elements like music, nature, and especially the ocean. “These symbols are part of who I am,” she explains. Born of a multicultural background that includes African and Arabic heritage, Eva’s identity shapes her creative expression. Her choreography often reflects layered cultural influences, blending movement with narrative and emotion in ways that reflect both personal and collective memory.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

When it comes to connecting with international audiences, Eva is intentional about remaining grounded in her identity. She believes that Aruba has long been seen through the narrow lens of tourism, and hopes her work can help shift that perception. “I want people to see Aruba not just as a vacation spot, but as a creative, artistic hub,” she says. She envisions a future where the island’s artistic community is fully supported by infrastructure that enables creativity to flourish and contributes to a broader economic and cultural identity.

Discussing how her work is received, Eva points out a notable difference between Caribbean and European audiences. In the Netherlands, dance is widely accepted and supported, with systems in place for professional development. Aruba, by contrast, lacks that normalization, often questioning the value of creative careers. “There’s still skepticism around the arts in the Caribbean,” she says. “Whereas international audiences tend to be more open, curious, and willing to interpret.”

Creative careers and creative expression is still seen as taboo in the Caribbean. I think this is directly linked to the powerful “Catholic” culture that dominates on the islands. It is believed that any form of creative expression like dancing, singing or painting that is not within the principles of the church, is related to satanism and evil.

This causes a big division among the people of the island when cultural festivities like Carnival season come around. It’s supposed to be a time of celebration with lots of beautiful hand made costumes, music and dance. Yet those who are deeply invested in the church might shame those who take part in these activities, even if they are their own children or family.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

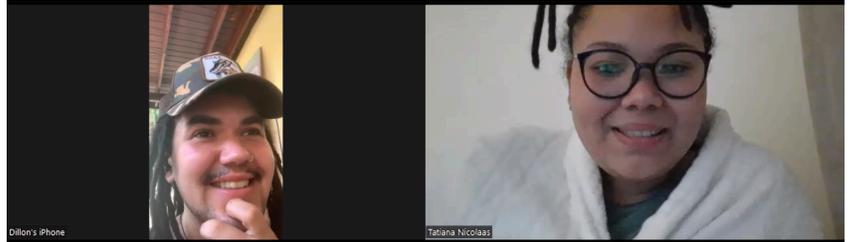
Eva doesn’t shy away from discussing the challenges she faced while studying at the Dance Academy. The intense competition and cultural disconnect made it hard to feel a sense of belonging. “I was one of the few Caribbean students there,” she recalls. “There was a real lack of diversity, and it took time to find my place.” Despite these hurdles, she found strength in community and now advocates for the importance of mentorship and cultural visibility.

Organizations like Kompas and the Caribbean Ancestry Club have played a crucial role in supporting Caribbean students in the Netherlands, providing safe spaces and resources for adaptation. Eva believes that Caribbean artists should stay grounded in their identities while embracing the flexibility, or adaptability that they need to succeed abroad. “You have to know your strengths, believe in yourself, and hold your space,” she says. In a competitive field like dance, that inner confidence can make all the difference.

Interview 3: Dillon Rannou

Interview with Dillon Rannou – October 21, 2024 | Online

Dillon Rannou, a fine artist based in Bonaire, has been painting since a young age and is now recognized as one of the island's prominent contemporary artists. Recently, he was invited to participate in the *Living with*



Water exhibition at the Watersnood Museum in Ouwerkerk, the Netherlands. This was a collaborative artist residency addressing climate change and the threat of rising sea levels in the Caribbean. His vibrant, culture-based work adds a powerful visual layer to conversations about resilience, identity, and environmental vulnerability.

Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

Dillon identifies strongly as a Caribbean creative. His art, rich in tropical vibes and inspired by daily island life, serves as a visual love letter to Bonaire. “I feel a sense of responsibility,” he explains. “Even if my paintings aren’t always explicitly about Bonaire, they carry my roots.” Whether his process is spontaneous or highly intentional, Dillon draws from a mix of music, vintage fashion, and lived experience. Art, for him, offers a freedom that he contrasts with the more structured nature of music, another of his passions. That creative freedom allows him to infuse his cultural heritage into his work in subtle, but deeply personal ways.

Geographical Influences of the Caribbean

While Dillon didn’t say much about specific geographic elements in this interview, his art keeps reflecting the vibrancy and pace of island life. The warm, bright color palettes he favors represent the landscapes and spirit of Bonaire, while his themes are often based on everyday life in the Caribbean, its people, and its evolving identity in the face of environmental and social challenges. His participation in the *Living with Water* project brought these themes together, combining cultural narratives with scientific urgency.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

Being an artist in Bonaire comes with its own set of challenges. Dillon highlighted the lack of support for the arts on the island, especially from families who often discourage their children from pursuing creative careers. In response to this, he has taken on a mentorship role, teaching and encouraging the next generation to embrace their talents. “We have to give young artists a chance,” he says. “There’s so much potential in the Caribbean that’s overlooked.”

He also shared the surprising reality that sometimes strangers are more supportive of his work than those within his immediate circle. But that hasn't stopped him. He advises upcoming artists to push forward, seek out like-minded collaborators, and build communities where creativity is celebrated.

At the Watersnood Museum, his work received a warm reception. Collaborating with scientists during the residency allowed him to explore how art can make complex topics (like climate change and sea level rise) more relatable to the public. "Some people come for the aesthetics, and that's fine," he says. "But it means more when they understand the story behind the colors." Visitors, including Dutch and Bonairean audiences and even the US Ambassador, praised the exhibition for bridging art and science with emotion and clarity.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

Dillon's experience in the Netherlands, even if it was very short, highlighted the value of Caribbean voices even in international dialogues. Especially those that speak on global issues like climate change. He believes in the power of community among Caribbean artists and stresses the importance of cross-border collaboration. Support, he says, is vital not just from institutions but from each other. "When we stand together, our stories travel further."

I think Dillon is setting a great example for the Art community on Bonaire. He refuses to be influenced by those who call him crazy and focuses hard on building his career as a fulltime visual Artist. He is an inspiration to a lot of people from this island including myself.

Interview 4: Sjoerd Scott

Interview with Sjoerd Scott – January 3, 2025 | Rotterdam

Right after stepping offstage from his first solo show at The Comedy Club Haug in Rotterdam, Sjoerd Scott, an emerging comedian from St. Maarten, sat down with me for an interview. Known for mixing Caribbean culture into his comedy, his performance was a fresh mix of wit, social commentary, and island charm. With his growing digital following and a clear artistic vision, he's carving out space for Caribbean voices in the Dutch comedy scene.



Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

Sjoerd has been living in the Netherlands since 2017, but his Caribbean identity remains at the center of both his personal and professional life. “I consider myself a Caribbean creative,” he says. “It’s who I am, and it shows in everything I do.” Raised in St. Maarten, he credits the island with shaping his worldview and his comedic voice and humor.

For Sjoerd, comedy is more than entertainment, it's art. “Comedy, like modern art, is about expression,” he explained. “It can send a message, create a new world, or give people a different way of seeing reality.” He’s especially drawn to the idea that comedy often comes from tragedy, meaning that you should not only have humor but also craft, timing, and emotional intelligence. His material reflects this idea, with him drawing from cultural misunderstandings, identity, and life between two worlds.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

Sjoerd first discovered his comedic voice in high school, where he enjoyed adding a humorous spin to his presentations. It wasn't long before a fellow student introduced him to stand-up, and he decided to give it a shot. Now, years later, he's moved on from classroom banter to packed comedy clubs.

Like many artists of his generation, Sjoerd built much of his early audience online, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram helped him gain visibility, but he always felt something was missing. “Performing live is a different kind of energy,” he says. “You can feel the reaction, the connection. That’s what I love most.”

Because of this, he makes it a point to connect with his audience during live shows, often interacting with them and creating a space where everyone feels included. The way he is able to translate Caribbean humor for a broader audience, without losing its essence, has become a key characteristic of his work. “Making people from different cultures laugh... that's a real connection,” he says. He recalled once performing for an all-Caribbean crowd, where his references landed perfectly and the sense of shared understanding was palpable.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

Breaking into the Dutch comedy scene wasn't easy for Sjoerd. He emphasized cultural differences and the competitiveness of the field. “It's tough, especially when you don't see people like you onstage,” he says. But instead of blending in, he doubled down on what made him different: his Caribbean voice, his storytelling style, and his commitment to craft.

He also stressed the importance of consistency and skill. “It's not just about being funny,” he says. “You need technique. You have to know your timing, your delivery and you have to keep learning.”

Looking ahead, Sjoerd has big plans. He wants to tour more, develop a recognizable brand, and eventually create a comedy platform inspired by Kevin Hart. He's also looking to incorporate new elements like skits and collaborations with other creatives. His advice to young Caribbean comedians is simple: believe in yourself, be your biggest fan, and stay in motion. “Try, fail, learn, and try again,” he says.

Interview 5: Juny Martina

Interview with Juny Martina – February 10, 2025 | Ministry of LVVN, The Hague

Curaçaoan rap artist Juny Martina during this interview, reflected on his musical journey, the completion of his album *Negropont*, and the deeper messages embedded in his work. His music is more than just sound; it's a vehicle for cultural pride and activism. Through his work, he aims to confront systemic issues, elevate African heritage, and ensure that the Caribbean voice remains strong and visible in the Netherlands and beyond. During this intimate conversation following his album's completion, Juny discussed his artistic growth, the importance of cultural pride, and the need for more authentic Caribbean representation in the Dutch art scene.



Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

As a Caribbean creative, Juny Martina emphasized the deep connection between his identity and his art. Raised in Curaçao, his music is deeply influenced by his roots, cultural pride, and his drive to address systemic issues within his community. Juny explains that his album *Negropont* reflects both celebration and confrontation by bringing together party tracks but also deeply political themes.

The album is not just a collection of songs but a statement on identity politics, African heritage, and the colorism and discrimination faced by Haitian people in Curaçao. “We are descendants of Africans, Black Power,” Juny says, quoting a phrase from the album, inspired by Rasta Moses. “Recognizing our shared African roots is key to reframing issues like colorism in the Caribbean.”

For Juny, the inclusion of these messages has become second nature. “I’ve always felt that it’s important to speak on what’s real. Not just to make music that people want to dance to, but to speak on the issues that matter,” he explains. He reflected on the challenges of maintaining cultural authenticity while also trying to make a living from art, acknowledging the compromises a lot of artists might face. However, for him, addressing these important issues has always been more important than commercial success.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

Juny's music is a reflection of his life and the world around him. His latest album, *Negropont*, brings together his four key themes: culture, identity politics, lyricism, and the essence of the islands. "When I create, I can hear the sound of the ocean or imagine a piece of poetry," he says, explaining how deeply personal and visual the process is for him. The album is rooted in cultural elements that are vital to his identity, and it's clear that for Juny, authenticity and connection to his island roots are central to his art.

While he addresses both his island audience and the white Dutch community, Juny makes it clear that his primary focus is on the people from the islands. Both those living on the islands and those in the diaspora. He does not translate his lyrics for non-Dutch audiences, believing that those who want to understand his music should ask someone to translate it for them. "My music is for the people from the islands. I talk about things that matter to them," he explains. While he recognizes the value of connecting with Dutch listeners, he doesn't prioritize their understanding of his music.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

Juny was very outspoken about the challenges Caribbean artists face in the Netherlands. He critiqued the commercial focus often adopted by Caribbean artists, advocating for more authenticity and community-driven work. "It's not about making the most money, it's about creating art that speaks to who we are," Juny says. He also expressed admiration for those in the Caribbean art scene in the Netherlands, who still remain committed to authenticity and innovation.

Despite his critique, Juny also saw potential for growth within the Caribbean art community in the Netherlands. He highlighted a gap between the Caribbean and Dutch art scenes, noting that the white Dutch art scene can often be a parallel institution, one that's not always accessible to Caribbean artists. "We need to bridge that gap and show that we are just as valuable, just as talented," he stated.

For Juny, this means more than just creating art. It means understanding the systems that can help sustain it. He encourages Caribbean artists to (next to creating) also learn about available subsidies, funding, and resources that can help their work thrive without compromising their cultural identity. He also stresses the importance of organizing events that are community-focused and not just commercially-driven.

Advice for Aspiring Artists

Juny offers really good advice to young artists, especially those considering moving to the Netherlands. "Don't come just for career opportunities," he says. "Come with a clear foundation, with a reason, with a passion for your craft. Be determined." He emphasizes

that young artists should seek knowledge, engage with experienced artists, and remain strongly connected to their roots.

He also had a message for the Caribbean community, encouraging us to support one another, both as artists *and* as audience members. “We need to show up for each other,” he says. “Attending events, supporting each other’s work—that’s how we can really thrive.” Juny’s own journey reflects this commitment to community and shared knowledge, as he’s determined to pass along what he’s learned to help other artists navigate the Dutch art scene.

Interview 6: Travis Geertudia

Interview with Travis Geertruida – February 13, 2025 | Stroom Den Haag

Travis Geertudia is a visual artist and teacher from Curaçao who has dedicated his career to exploring the intersection of Caribbean heritage, nature, and personal expression. In this conversation held at Stroom Den Haag, we discussed Travis' artistic journey, the challenges of being a Caribbean creative in the Netherlands, and the importance of authenticity and versatility in artistic practice.



Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

For Travis, his identity and artistic expression are very entangled with his Caribbean roots. As both a visual artist and teacher, his work draws from the vibrant colors and symbols of Caribbean carnivals, the natural landscapes of the islands, and his passion for storytelling. He acknowledged that in the beginning, his creative journey was very much shaped by external cultural influences. Especially from American and European cultures. But over time, he grew to appreciate the warmth and beauty of his own Caribbean heritage.

This is a common phenomena among young kids growing up in the Caribbean. Just like Travis, I also grew up exposed to American culture via TV and imported goods that would dominate our local supermarkets. Travis reflected on his struggles with navigating both his Caribbean identity and the expectations placed on him as a Caribbean artist in the Netherlands. "There's this confusion... am I international, local, or native?" he says. This confusion was made worse by language barriers and the discrimination he faced due to assumptions about his language abilities and cultural background. "Often, I'm judged based on how I look, and there's this assumption that I can't speak Dutch," Travis shares. "It's been a challenge, but I've learned to validate my existence and challenge those misconceptions through my work."

While he doesn't necessarily see it as his duty to represent Caribbean culture, Travis views his work as an opportunity to stand out and to bring authenticity to his artistic practice. "I think it's a privilege to be able to represent my culture, but I'm not here to serve as the sole representative of Caribbean identity," he emphasized.

Geographical Influences of the Caribbean

Travis's journey to understanding and embracing his Caribbean heritage is reflected in his artistic work. While initially influenced by American and European art, he grew to

appreciate the uniqueness of the Caribbean's architecture, natural beauty, and traditions, which he now incorporates into his sculptures and performances. An exchange to New-Zealand played a big role in this shift, as this is when he saw others embracing their own cultural heritage too. In discussing the complexity of cultural representation, Travis also highlighted the potential for exploitation within the arts. He mentioned comedian Jandino Asporaat as an example of someone whose content he may not personally appreciate but understands why it resonates with other members of the Caribbean community. "It's important to have the freedom to express oneself within one's culture, but these conversations need to happen," he notes, also highlighting the importance of creative authority and respecting individual artistic expression.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

When it comes to his own audience, Travis believes that while his work carries deep cultural significance, it is also meant to be appreciated for just its visual and aesthetic appeal. He compared it to his Catholic upbringing, where storytelling and aesthetics held value, and explained that even if the cultural depth of his work may not be understood by everyone, the beauty and narrative of the art can still resonate with a broader audience.

He did acknowledge that the depth of his work may not be universally accessible, especially for those outside the Caribbean community. But, he still strives to make his pieces visually engaging, regardless of the viewer's cultural understanding. "I want to share the beauty of Caribbean culture, even if not everyone will grasp the full cultural context," he says, emphasizing that aesthetics and storytelling are key components of his art.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

As an artist in the Netherlands, Travis has found support from key institutions and curators that have been integral in helping the Caribbean arts community. He highlights organizations like STROOM, Nest, and Mama, as well as some curators who are championing Caribbean art and artists in the Netherlands. "It's important to have those institutions and curators who believe in and support the work we do," he states.

As advice to young creatives, Travis says they should focus on building strong work ethics, developing good communication skills, and being versatile in their creative pursuits. He encourages them to not only explore their art form but to delve into organizing, collaboration, and problem-solving. These are all skills that could help them succeed across various genres. "Art is more than just creation; it's about collaboration and finding new ways to express yourself."

Interview 7: Eugenie Boon

Interview with Eugenie Boon – February 25, 2025 | Boon Studio, Den Haag

Eugenie Boon is a multidisciplinary artist from Curaçao, who is redefining the boundaries of Caribbean art with her thought-provoking performances, installations, paintings, and sculptures. Drawing inspiration from her own Caribbean roots and the historical ties between Curaçao and the Netherlands, Eugenie uses her art to explore the complicated themes of religion, gender constructs, and colonialism. In her intimate studio in Den Haag, Eugenie reflected on her journey, the challenges of balancing her Caribbean identity with Western influences, and the overall growing confidence of Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands.

Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

Eugenie Boon is a proud Caribbean creative, who is deeply connected to her Curaçaoan heritage. Her work, which spans across multiple artistic disciplines, begins with simple mediums like paint or drawing and expands into sculptures and installations. At the core of her art is an exploration of her own cultural identity and how it intersects with broader societal themes. "I make sure to authentically represent my background in my work," Eugenie says, reflecting on her use of cultural symbols and motifs. One notable symbol is the use of 'traditional' board games, such as Monopoly, which she repurposes as a critique of capitalism and colonial systems.

Despite her deep-rooted cultural background, Eugenie also confronts the complexities of being an artist who bridges two worlds. "I've always struggled with reconciling my Western education with my Caribbean identity," she admits, thinking back on her time at Art Academy where she began to critically examine the Western influences on her work. She said that her goal is to maintain a balance—staying true to her Caribbean origins while also drawing from European art influences. "It's about authenticity. I don't want my work to be shaped by Western ideologies," she says, emphasizing the importance of creating art that remains grounded in her personal cultural experiences.



Geographical Influences of the Caribbean

Eugenie's work is a vivid representation of the dynamic between Caribbean and Western influences. While her education in Europe provided valuable skills and perspectives, it also posed challenges as she navigated the complexities of identity. "When I went to art school, I felt the need to reposition myself," she explains. Eugenie's work explores how she balances these influences, consciously resisting the pull of Western narratives in favor of a more authentic and personal storytelling approach. "There's a fine line, and it's about making sure my work reflects my Caribbean truth while also understanding the global conversation."

In her art, Eugenie challenges colonial legacies and the psychological impacts of Western education on Caribbean identity. "I believe that authenticity comes from embracing where you're from, even as you're influenced by the world around you," she notes.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

Eugenie is very aware of how her art is perceived by different audiences. She uses symbols like board games to critique capitalism and colonialism, but she also acknowledges that not all of her audience will immediately understand these deeper messages. "Monopoly was originally intended to critique capitalism, and I'm continuing that conversation," she says, noting that her work often includes elements that may not be universally recognizable, or the stories behind the elements might not be widely known.

She also expressed her frustration with tokenism, this idea of being chosen or included only because you're a minority. Which she believes can be a barrier for Caribbean artists. "At first, I feared my work was being chosen because I was the token Caribbean artist," Eugenie admits. "But if that's the case, I'll make sure I'm the best damn token there is." Over time, she found a sense of comfort and authenticity in her work, understanding that it's okay to be true to herself, even if that means confronting difficult questions about representation.

While Eugenie initially felt a strong responsibility to represent Caribbean culture directly, she has since broadened her focus to explore universal themes. Her work now reflects not only her personal experiences but also larger, collective struggles and histories. "I've learned that the narrative should be bigger than just one culture—it's about humanity," she shares. This evolution of her artistic perspective allows her to create work that resonates both locally and globally. But therefore also with a broader audience.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

Eugenie is inspired by the growing confidence and solidarity within the Caribbean arts community in the Netherlands, but she also notes the challenges that come with being

part of a small, often competitive group. "We have to open doors for each other," she says, highlighting the importance of collaboration among Caribbean artists. Despite the challenges, she is optimistic about the future of Caribbean art in the Netherlands, observing a positive shift towards more authentic and culturally resonant work.

Eugenie believes that Caribbean artists in the Netherlands are increasingly finding their voices and creating art that reflects their heritage and experiences. "We're seeing more and more artists referencing our culture, and that's powerful," she says. "But we must also support each other, help one another find opportunities, and not compete for limited spaces."

For aspiring artists, Eugenie stresses the importance of pursuing one's passion beyond formal education. "Don't rely solely on your education. There are so many ways to grow and learn in this field. Pursue your craft, develop your voice, and find mentors who can guide you along the way." She urges them to keep pushing forward, stay true to their roots, and collaborate. "Your work has the power to change perspectives, but you must stay grounded in who you are and what you want to say."

Interview 8: Karina Gouverneur

Interview with Karina – March 9, 2025 | Karimics Studio, Den Haag

Karina, a talented ceramicist from Curaçao, is redefining the boundaries of functional art with pieces that not only serve a purpose but also tell powerful stories. Focusing on the female body and the challenges of societal norms, Karina uses her Caribbean heritage to infuse her work with deep meaning, often using language and symbols to challenge conventional ideas. In her cozy home studio in Den Haag, Karina reflected on her journey as a Caribbean artist, the challenges of finding her authentic voice, and the importance of staying true to oneself in the face of external expectations.



Caribbean Identity and the Diaspora

Born and raised in Curaçao, Karina identifies deeply as a Caribbean creative. While she doesn't feel a direct responsibility to represent Caribbean culture in her work, it naturally influences her art. "My cultural background is always present, even if it's not always immediately visible in my pieces," she explains. As a ceramicist, Karina mostly works with functional art, crafting pieces that tell stories through form and design. Her main focus is on the female body, which she explores to challenge societal taboos and attempt to desexualize the female form. Through her art, her goal is to communicate the importance of self-ownership and body autonomy, which can be seen in pieces like *Doño di mi Kurpa* ("Owner of my Body"). Though Karina's work is rooted in her Caribbean identity, she doesn't necessarily see herself as an artist with a singular mission to represent Caribbean culture. Rather, she views her artistic practice as a personal journey of expression and authenticity. "I create for myself first and foremost. I don't want to feel pressured to create work that meets others' expectations," Karina shares. This is something that we both realized during our studies, it was a blessing and a curse. Staying authentic is a common struggle for Caribbean Art students.

Geographical Influences

Karina's time at a European art academy initially left her feeling insecure and disconnected from her true self. "I spent a lot of time making art for my teachers, not for myself," she reflects. This experience of conforming to external expectations led her to create work she wasn't proud of, which left her feeling frustrated and uncertain about her artistic identity. Post-graduation, she took the time to reflect on her own artistic vision and began to listen more to her authentic voice. The exposure to European art,

while influential, also caused a sense of cultural disconnect, as she struggled to reconcile her Caribbean background with the academic demands of the European art world. "There was a tension between what I was expected to create in school and what I truly wanted to express," Karina admits. However, over time, she found a way to incorporate her Caribbean identity into her work, using language and titles to embed cultural symbols into her pieces. *Doño di mi Kurpa* ("Owner of my Body") is a perfect example of how Karina combines storytelling and art to challenge societal norms while also still honoring her heritage.

The Relationship Between Audience and Art

Karina's work resonates with both Caribbean and Dutch audiences, a blend that reflects her unique ability as a Caribbean artist to navigate multiple cultures. "I appreciate when people enjoy the aesthetics of my work, but I also believe it's important to communicate the cultural depth behind it when necessary," Karina shares. Her pieces, which include functional items like incense holders and necklaces, often feature cultural references that are meaningful to Caribbean audiences, while also appealing to Dutch collectors who appreciate the artistry and symbolism.

The Caribbean Community in the Netherlands

Karina values the collaborations she's had with other Caribbean artists in the Netherlands, particularly those from her home island. She has worked with fellow creatives like Lovelies by Lulu and Minced Milk, producing products such as necklaces and incense holders. These collaborations allow Karina to work within her cultural community, blending her ceramic skills with the vision of other artists from similar backgrounds.

Although Karina has international reach, shipping her products to the Caribbean presents logistical challenges. Nonetheless, she has developed a strong following from the Caribbean community in the Netherlands, who purchase her work regularly. Her ability to connect both culturally and artistically with her audience is one of the driving forces behind her success. Looking ahead, Karina dreams of establishing a dedicated studio outside her home. "Having a proper studio will allow me to focus more on my craft and less on the distractions of teaching or other responsibilities," she says. She hopes that this will help her take her work to the next level, creating a space where she can experiment and collaborate freely.

For other aspiring Caribbean artists, Karina offers valuable advice: "Stay true to your roots. Create for yourself, not for the expectations of others. The art world may try to box you in, but your authentic voice is your power."

Conclusion

With this research I wanted to answer the question: **What impact does cultural background have on a Caribbean Artist and their work here in the Netherlands?** By diving into the history of Caribbean culture, I explored how it shaped the (art) community today. After a series of interviews with a range of artists from the Caribbean, the theory became practical. It became clear that an artist's cultural heritage plays a significant role in shaping both their creative process and the way their work is received by different audiences.

Being a Caribbean artist in the Netherlands seems to come with a unique mix of struggles and breakthroughs. From dance to visual art to comedy, the Caribbean creatives I spoke with all pointed to the challenge of navigating spaces where our culture isn't always seen, understood, or valued. Some, like Karina and Eugenie, described how art school pushed them to create work that didn't feel true to who they were. Others, like Travis and Sjoerd, faced assumptions and stereotypes before they even stepped onto a stage or into a gallery.

The common theme in all of these stories is the importance of authenticity. These artists are not just making art, they're building bridges between cultures, telling stories that matter, and holding space for their Caribbean roots in places that often overlook them. There's a real tension between staying true to that identity and adapting to a European context, but a few creatives have found power in leaning into what makes them different. But even this comes with its own challenges. There seems to be a thin line between "exposing" your culture and being "exploited" for it. Navigating this line is a challenge with no clear instructions. The creatives' main advice? Stay true to yourself.

Mentorship and community also came up as an important factor. Whether it's Dillon mentoring young artists in Bonaire, or Eva advocating for visibility and representation in the dance scene, there's a clear sense that this journey isn't just about individual success, it's about opening doors for other Caribbean creatives too. In almost each interview, the creatives pointed out the importance of supporting one another. Breaking through a competitive art world (in another country) is hard enough without the burden of feeling isolated. "Diaspora" can often feel like a double-edged sword, giving a shared bond but also sometimes breaking us apart when we can't work together.

How does a Caribbean artist interact with their Caribbean public vs international public?

For example, the concept of an audience by James O. Young emphasizes that simply being exposed to an artwork does not make one part of its audience. This interaction between artwork and audience goes beyond what can be communicated by just seeing, or hearing. True engagement with art requires a deeper interaction, it requires feeling. And feeling happens when an audience connects with art aesthetically or emotionally. For Caribbean artists that create work influenced by their cultural background, it's important for the audience to understand the artworks' context, history, and cultural elements, in order to *feel*. Because of this, the experience of an international audience can differ dramatically from that of a Caribbean audience. Talking to Caribbean artists on their experience with this interaction (Caribbean vs International audience), I realized that while most of them incorporate their cultural background in their art, they don't necessarily think about the interaction of the audience. Juny for example creates art in his native language Papiamentu and he doesn't 'care' about the audience that doesn't understand this language, and therefore can't experience/interact with his art. I think him choosing to do this is a form of protest. He stands by his community and invites but also challenges others to make an effort to understand his work.

Others valued the recognition from the audience. Raygenie even experimented with the symbols and references in her photographs, in order to connect with a broader audience. The combination of traditional folklore elements and more modern elements made the overall work feel familiar to more people. Even if the way this work was interpreted by the different audiences varied. At the same time, some artists also expressed frustration at the interaction between international audiences and Artworks that contain cultural references. Their work is often misinterpreted or even 'exoticized'. Something that happens for example with cultural elements like bright colors, patterns and portrayal of animals. This audience fails to understand the deeper cultural or political context of the work. An example of Eugenie's work..

These interviews showed me how different Caribbean artists navigate the different audiences here in the Netherlands. Especially how they feel about these audiences interacting with their work. There is also an element of education in this interaction. Some Caribbean creatives feel responsible for sharing the history and context of their work, so that a broader audience can understand the cultural significance in the art. It seems like a challenge that can be dealt with in different ways, but overall they all agreed that it's important to remain authentic to their cultural roots. Juny even shared, "*I could change my sound to suit international tastes, but I won't. My work is about telling my story, our story, and that's something that can't be compromised.*"

What specific cultural symbols and motifs are prevalent in their art?

For Caribbean creatives living and working in the Netherlands, cultural symbols aren't just visual flourishes: they're vessels of memory, identity, and resistance. Whether through photography, movement, ceramics, or comedy, these artists are using their cultural heritage as a foundation to build something deeply personal and politically resonant. Through these interviews, it became clear to me how unique it is that elements like the waves of the ocean, the vibrant colors of nature, the history of folklore and characteristic family dynamics are used in art by these Creatives.

Ray's photo series captures more than just traditional costumes; it shows the quiet power of Bonairean life, from ribbon dances to women working the land. Eva, meanwhile, draws on the ocean and her mixed heritage to choreograph performances that feel both ancestral and urgent. Dillon lets his work speak in colors; sun-warmed, musically influenced, and rooted in the everyday beauty of island life. This use of cultural symbols speaks to a greater truth. Typical for the Caribbean, these artists are deeply involved in a process of syncretism, blending Caribbean traditions with influences from abroad to create something uniquely their own.

Comedy becomes social commentary in the hands of Sjoerd, who translates the nuance of Caribbean humor for Dutch stages, proving that laughter also can bridge cultural gaps. Juny's music, often equal parts party and protest, reflects a deep connection to Curaçao and a desire to challenge social norms through sound. In visual arts, Travis embraces Caribbean carnivals and island landscapes as core motifs, a creative shift sparked in part by seeing other artists abroad reclaim their own roots. Eugenie turns familiar objects like Monopoly into sharp critiques of colonialism, expanding her scope from personal identity to global issues. Karina, working in ceramics, embeds her culture more subtly through using titles in her native language Papiamentu, body forms, and her focus on ownership and the female experience. All of them are unique, inspiring, valid and more importantly... true to themselves.

How do you navigate the art scene in the NL as a Caribbean creative?

Navigating the art scene in the Netherlands as a Caribbean creative seems to be a balancing act between staying true to one's roots and adapting to the demands of a new cultural environment. Many of the artists spoke about the challenges they face, but also the vital role of community and collaboration in overcoming those challenges. The sudden exposure and expectations of the European art scene is something I recognize even in my role as an art educator.

Eva emphasized the need to hold your ground as a Caribbean artist, even in the face of skepticism. Both in self-doubt, as well as regarding the value of the arts in the Caribbean. Sjoerd (who as a comedian is relatively very confident) reflected on the struggle of finding a space for Caribbean voices in a competitive field. How does he deal with it? *"by embracing what makes you different."* Juny even went a bit further by highlighting the importance of confidence even before moving to the Netherlands. I agree with this advice to aspiring artists, to have a strong sense of purpose and a passion for their craft. Travis encourages aspiring artists to build connections and develop a versatile skill set.

While this collection of advice focuses more on the personal experience, Dillon emphasized the importance of collective action, sticking together because Caribbean voices are essential in international dialogues, especially around global issues like climate change. But to me this shows more the potential of community in art and activism. For Eugenie, the key to be successful in the art scene in the Netherlands is staying grounded in one's heritage while also embracing collaboration with other artists. Karina, is living this advice with her successful collaborations and deep connections within the Caribbean community.

So while they all have their individual challenges and lessons learnt, it seems that confidence, affirmation and reassurance play an important role in navigating the art scene in the Netherlands. And also that the Caribbean community in the Netherlands can very much serve as a source for all of these. When I reflect on my own experience I find that courage also plays a big role. Courage to be who you are unapologetically. And even though "Diaspora" might make us feel fragmented at times, it's also the power that connects and strengthens our collective voice. A voice that deserves to be heard in the Netherlands, but also back at home.

My personal reflection

For this research I've spoken to 8 different Caribbean creatives. I've learnt a lot during this process. The method I chose was doing interviews and this required me to be very practical and conscious of my timing. Planning these interviews meant I had to be flexible and willing to physically go to these artists. It was definitely a personal investment. But as an educator I feel like I've become somewhat of an expert in this topic. I look forward to further developing this expertise in the future.

If I could summarize my findings, I would say it's a combination of comfortability, pride, home and authenticity. Especially pride. I feel like Caribbean people are very proud of who they are as people because being Caribbean means that throughout your life, you will be discovering who you are and where you're from. It's not as simple as being taught, like when you're young your mother tells you, 'oh, you are this' and you completely claim it. Caribbean people are always in search of themselves because it's a *constant* process of finding out who they are and where they came from. And this discovery, this rich history, gives Caribbean people so much to be proud of. Which makes us want to explore our identity even more. And as artists, it becomes very easy to choose to make it the main topic in their artistic explorations. Because the Caribbean history and the Caribbean identity is so deep yet fascinating.

There's a lot to explore and there's a lot to find out about yourself and your ancestors. Unlike many other cultures, our history has not been written down for us in history books. We need to find it ourselves. And we need to find ourselves in it. And I think that that is a choice that a lot of Caribbean people make. But it is not the easiest choice. Because that history, that identity, that part of them can also be very confronting and hard to accept (because of slavery etc). So I think choosing to work with the Caribbean cultural heritage is a very brave choice. Because it's not pretty for everybody, but it is also very special. I think it takes guts to really look into it.

The Netherlands might also make you want to find more of yourself because everybody here thinks they know who they are. Even though in some areas there's such a mixture, even within that, everybody knows who they are. Like Surinamese people are proud of themselves. They know that they're from Suriname, and they know their culture. To the point that even everybody else feels like they know their culture. The Dutch people also know their culture and they stand for that culture. So as a Caribbean person, you feel like you need to be proud of that as well. Even if there's not many of us here it inspires you to represent your culture even if you're doing it by yourself.

After talking to all of these creatives, hearing their experience as Caribbean creatives here in the Netherlands, it made me think of my own advice or hope for other Caribbean creatives that want to come to the Netherlands or are trying to make it here in the Netherlands. Mostly I think Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands need to continue contributing to the representation of Caribbean art. But also make sure that this contribution is well documented and can be found on the Internet. By doing this, Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands can make sure they expose themselves more to the public back on the islands. So their experience and art is accessible even across the ocean. They need to make an effort to make sure that everything they do is well reported to their public back on the islands just as it is reported to their audiences here in the Netherlands.



My hope is that that bridge becomes stronger and that there are more educators like me that feel the need to help these artists in the Netherlands document and transfer their work to the islands. Digital documentation is also very important in this time for the younger generation to be able to access this information. Especially being so far away.

I hope that just like we rely on online sources to learn about our culture and heritage, we start seeing the value in documenting Caribbean artistry online. Leaving spores behind digitally. I think that's a great way to inspire the next generation. By showing them that yes, we do have a lot of Caribbean artists, even though they're far away, they are still working with their Caribbean culture, they are still active and they still care about us. That's the main message, that's the hope that I have. And that's also what I myself will contribute to with my research. I hope I find the courage and the time to make sure that these videos are accessible to the Caribbean public back home. To me, social media seems to be the best medium for this. After this research experience and study, I'm committing to expanding my own social media platform TXNstudios where I'll also share these (and new) interviews and findings. For the next generation of Caribbean creatives.

I've designed a physical brochure in which I summarized the interviews into testimonials. This brochure is for aspiring Caribbean creatives, to get an insight into what it's like being a Caribbean creative in the Netherlands. With this brochure I will continue my journey as an educator, researcher, promoting myself as a specialist for Dutch Caribbean art education.



Recommendations

Find ABC/SSS community
Attend events at Pakhuis de Zwijger: bou di watapana
Take papiamentu art tours at kunstinstituut Melly

Be a jack of all trades
Work on social skills with Stichting WeConnect

Know your culture and it's value
Research your cultural heritage at the Black Archives

Keep an eye out for grants & residencies
Check the list of available cultural grants for Dutch Caribbean on the website of Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland

No laga los, sa di unda bo ta bin i ser orguyoso!
-Tatiana Nicolaas



About research

Through interviews with artists from the six Dutch Caribbean islands, the project captures personal stories about identity, audience connection, and cultural expression. The aim is to give visibility to these artists, document their experiences, and inspire Caribbean creatives to embrace their roots while thriving internationally.

This research was done for the MEIA program at Piet Zwart Institute (2025).



For more info :
shegoesbytxnehotmail.com
Socials : TXNSTUDIOS





AN ARTISTIC GUIDE FOR Dutch Caribbean Creatives in The Netherlands



Travis Geertruida
Curator

Well, we are Caribbean, but then that also already confuses some people, like, are we International? Not everybody has the same feelings. That's something I get confronted with, since I can navigate a bit of both worlds. There's also this kind of sense of discrimination as well, them judging me on my physicality and assuming that I'm not Dutch or can't speak Dutch. Sometimes I had to choose to educate the people around me. Telling them that, yes, the Dutch Caribbean is still part of the Dutch kingdom, and yes, we also speak Dutch. We also have to abide by these policies, reminding them that we're also part of this conversation. **My advice would be to work on your work ethic. Be someone people would like to work with.** I think as an artist, especially nowadays, you really need to be a jack of all trades. I say don't limit yourself and explore your creativity also in organizing, collaboration, and problem solving.

Eva Croes
Dance / Choreography

It feels like a rat race at times, because we have seven major academies here in the Netherlands. You have to imagine that every year from those seven academies, you have classes that graduate, so that many dancers go into the scene, but there's not as much work as there are dancers. So I have to say that the competition is real. **Everybody wants to work at that really cool school. Everybody wants to work for that artist. How do you set yourself apart when it comes to that situation?**

Don't forget who you are. You're so needed and wanted. If you really feel the flame for dance, for arts, go for it. Please keep that flame alive because it's there for a reason.

Testimonials

Eugenie Boon
Fine Art

I hadn't really heard of "tokenism" before moving here – until I started feeling it. At times, it seemed like certain artists were chosen just to check a diversity box. I questioned whether my work was valued for its content or simply because I fit a profile. That uncertainty shook my confidence. But **eventually, I found peace in knowing who I am and what I stand for as a Caribbean artist. Even if I am the "token," I'll be an unforgettable token.**

To fellow Caribbean creatives searching for direction: come explore, study, and see what aligns with your spirit. Do your research. Stay open. And above all, learn to trust yourself in the process.

Sjoerd Scott
Comedy

When it comes to the Netherlands, there's something about you that makes you special. **You have to lean into it and show them why they need that.** I would have to say, if you truly believe in yourself, you gotta keep improvising, keep learning, keep trying new things, and that's how you grow, and that's how you make it.

Juny Martina
Music / Rap

Whatever step you take in life, if it's coming to Holland, really think about why you're doing it. **Have a very solid foundation of why you're going to do what you're going to do, and don't lose focus on why, because that will be the thing that keeps you going, and increases your determination and dedication when things get rough.** If you want to pursue an artistic career, and that's really what your heart says that you need to do, like, do it and come to the Netherlands. You can go to other countries, but just do your thing. Like, don't be afraid. And I hope that we, the generation that came before and the generations before me, can continue sharing the knowledge that we have so don't hesitate to ask questions either to people that have been here before.

Raygenie Finies
Photography

Challenges were mostly adapting to life in Europe. It's really, really rough. But don't worry about that, you're not the only one that feels that way. Keep working on what you feel. **And if your culture is what makes you feel great, and your work is only based on that, don't be afraid to do that. It's okay for people to not understand it off the bat.** I wasn't fully understood in the beginning. But sometimes you got to let your Art speak for itself.

As a *yu di tera* (a child from the islands), it's not heard of for us to make it big outside of the Caribbean. I'm really proud to carry it on my chest, on my sleeve, my culture goes everywhere with me, I'm not afraid of it.

Watch full interviews here :



Final graduation presentation framework

Live interview with Caribbean creatives

At Art institute Melly 5-07-2025

What?

At the MEIA 2025 final graduation presentation event I am planning to present my thesis by organizing a pop-up interview with two of the Caribbean artists whom I interviewed during my research. This interview will take place on Saturday 5th of July 2025 in the Cafe/library space at the art institute, Melly Rotterdam.

Why?

For my research I conducted individual interviews with artists. I asked each of them similar questions and gained a lot of information from them. My goal with this interview is to create space to continue the conversation and 1. See if the artists still agree with their answers, 2. See if there are comparisons or contradictions between them, 3. See what the artists think about the results/conclusion of my research, and 4. Allow an audience of affiliated guests to ask questions to these creatives.

How?

I would like to do this interview in a casual manner. I envision we will be sitting at a table in front of a small audience. Someone in the audience will be recording the interview so that it can be added to my archive of interviews which can be later accessed by the QR-code on the brochure. This interview will last about 30 minutes with an additional 15 minutes for questions from the audience.

Introduction (10 minutes)

- Begin with welcoming the audience
 - Short intro about research
 - Short intro about interviewees

Questions / discussion (15 minutes)

- Introduce results of research
- Ask follow-up questions
- Space for personal opinion

Audience questions (15 minutes)

- Space for audience questions

Finale (5 minutes)

- shout outs, thankyou, contact info
 - Pass out brochure

Topics of interview questions

- Importance of authenticity
- The sense of being exploited, line between exposing culture and being exploited
 - Opening doors for and collaborate with other caribbean creatives
 - Diaspora, a shared bond or tearing us apart?
 - Working with cultural symbols/themes - **video of artists answer during interview**
 - (International vs caribbean audiences)
- Navigating the art scene in the Netherlands, advice? - **video of artists answer during interview**

Expectations?

I expect a natural flowing conversation with room for improvisation. I'm curious to hear the artist's reaction to the results of my research, but I don't think they will be surprised.

A main goal of this event is giving the audience the opportunity to ask questions. I expect that with these questions we will have meaningful discussions, after which the audience walks away better understanding the experience of Caribbean creatives in the Netherlands.



Sjoerd Scott, 25, Comedian

From: St. Maarten

Based in : Rotterdam



Raygenie Finies, 25, Photographer

From: Bonaire

Based in : The Hague

Breaking into the Dutch comedy scene wasn't easy for Sjoerd. He emphasized cultural differences and the competitiveness of the field. "It's tough, especially when you don't see people like you onstage," he says. But instead of blending in, he doubled down on what made him different: his Caribbean voice, his storytelling style, and his commitment to craft.

He also stressed the importance of consistency and skill. "It's not just about being funny," he says. "You need technique. You have to know your timing, your delivery and you have to keep learning."

His advice to young Caribbean comedians is simple: believe in yourself, be your biggest fan, and stay in motion. "Try, fail, learn, and try again," he says.

Her message to emerging artists is clear; keep creating, even if your work isn't immediately understood. Cultural representation, she says, is worth the risk.

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