Research Article

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Black Women's Transnational Activism and the World Council of Churches

Abstract: This article considers the internationalisation and institutionalisation of the fight against European and global racism and sexism within the World Council of Churches in the 1980s and 1990s. It presents the ways in which the Women Under Racism sub-programme, the SISTERS network that emerged from it, as well as their respective coordinators—the Afro-American activist Jean-Sindab and the Afro-Brazilian activist Marilia Schüller –facilitated encounters between Black-European women. In turn, this paper analyses Black-European women's agency within these institutional and transnational antiracist and gendered spaces. I argue that the WUR and the SISTERS network were used by Black-European female activists to meet each other and other women of colour, and to voice and share their experiences publicly. These international gatherings also stimulated a transnationalisation and a Europeanisation of their activism, while being spaces where they affirmed multiple and overlapping identifications.

Keywords: internationalism, Europeanisation, antiracism, Women Under Racism, SISTERS

Introduction

A growing number of historians of the Black and African diaspora in Europe (Bressey; Florvil 88; Perry and Thurman; Kelly and Tuck 3-4; Angelo 18-19; Campt 64) are stressing the need to consider the connected and transnational dimensions that shaped the lives and agency of Black people, including the impact of the European integration. With regards to the latter, social scientists (Monforte 6; Imig 916-17) have been analysing the impact of political Europeanisation on social movements from the 1980s onwards. As much as their findings reveal that Europeanisation leads to an extension of the scope of local social movements rather than the abandonment of the local in favour of the international, less attention has been paid to the gendered aspects of such processes, as well as the role of transnational institutions aside of the European institutions and NGOs. On the other hand, a number of scholars of women's contemporary history (Florvil 88; Nijhawan 12-13; Sluga 61; Barthélémy 18; Johnson-Odim 51; Materson 36; de Haan 179; Rupp 1571-72) have demonstrated how and why women—both White and of colour—internationalise and institutionalise gender issues, as well as the impact of such activities on their activism and collective identifications. Within this particular scholarship, Florvil's research on Afro-German women's organising the Fifth Cross-Cultural Black Women's Studies Summer Institute in 1991 is, to this day, one of the few historical accounts on continental Black-European women's politics of belonging and organising transnational political spaces tackling racism against Black women in Europe in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Building upon these three research trends, my aim is to present a historical analysis of Black women's agency within the World Council of Churches (WCC) in the 1980s and 1990s, with special attention to the WCC's sub-programme Women Under Racism and the SISTERS network that came out of it. I start my article

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with a presentation of the WUR which, as I will show, was established as a radical political institutionalised space for racially oppressed women, inclusive of all religious and non-religious beliefs. Through its mission, its global articulation of women's oppressions, and the work of Jean Sindab, the WUR reached out to and attracted Black-European female activists. In my second section, I demonstrate how the WUR was, in fact, a facilitator for Black-European women's encounters and how these women seized the opportunities of international consultations and workshops to voice their local experiences, make collective claims contesting "Fortress Europe" amongst other issues, and to affirm a number of overlapping identifications. My last section looks at how Black-European women's transnational agency was further encouraged and enacted within the SISTERS network under the leadership of Marilia Schüller, yet affected after 1994 due to a lack of resources.

I draw most of my findings from a contextualised interpretation of written and visual archival material, namely the WUR and SISTERS archives kept at the WCC in Geneva, as well as Jean Sindab's personal papers kept at the Schomburg Center in New York. Both collections are open to the public, and contain personal correspondence which I tried to make the best ethical use of by informing the concerned people when I felt it was needed. In addition, I also interviewed Marion Kraft and Marilia Schüller by email and used their written replies.

In this paper, I argue that the WUR and SISTERS facilitated Black-European women's encounters and transnational activism as long as they had the financial and human resources to do so. I also contend that Sindab and Schüller played key roles in their own respective ways to attract and inspire Black-European women within these spaces. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that WUR and SISTERS participated in Europeanising Black-European women's activism by facilitating their encounters with each other and their claim-makings against "Fortress Europe." Finally, I stress that although I decided to categorise these women as "Black-Europeans" for the purpose of this article, their interventions and claim-making show that, rather than invoking a fixed Black identity, these women embraced multiple and overlapping identifications which they alternatively affirmed.

The WUR, a Radical Political Platform for Women Combating the Triple Oppression of Race, Sex and Class

The WUR was established as a radical sub-programme within the WCC's Program to Combat Racism (PCR). The WCC was founded in 1948 with the aim to gather Christian Churches in a federation in order to promote ecumenism and intervene within societies. Created within the organisation in 1970, the PCR had been the result of the revolutionary spirit of the late 1960s. Indeed, representatives from armed struggles against colonisation and Apartheid, as well as from the Black Power movement in the USA and the UK, had taken part in its founding conference in Notting Hill in 1969 and had contributed in shaping its mission (Ohene-Nyako, "Femmes de couleur" 33-34; Welch 876-877). Consequently, the PCR's primary focus was on "white racism" ("An Ecumenical Programme to Combat Racism" 4)[1] and it answered demands for reparations through financially supporting antiracist liberation organisations (independently of their religious beliefs), through the creation of a Special Fund, and by helping a number of groups which openly resorted to armed struggle such as the African National Congress (ANC) or the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO), to name a few.

Although antiracist and antisexist Black women such as South-African Brigalia Bam (at the time director of the WCC's Women's Unit) and Sierra-Leonean Rena Karefa-Smart had taken part in its foundation, the PCR did not consider gender in its articulation of racism until growing pressure within its constituency in the 1970s (Ohene-Nyako, "Femmes de couleur" 31-33, 42-50). Then, in the summer of 1980, women of colour who attended the WCC World Consultation on Racism in Amsterdam demanded the establishment of a programme within the PCR that would primarily focus on racism such as it particularly affected women:

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1 In the PCR's definition, "White racism" encompassed the historical, economic and political process undertaken by White people to oppress people of colour.

> Racism has been singled out because it is primarily the first conscious oppression that they face… Restrictions imposed upon them by their sex is situated within a more positive framework and the negative aspects emerge later in a process of conscientisation. (Sindab, "Women Under Racism and the Churches Decade" 1)

This position was an outcome of debates from the 1970s onwards within local women's movements, the UN Women's international conference in Mexico in 1975, as well as within WCC gatherings such as the conference "Sexism in the Seventies" in 1974 and the 5th WCC General Assembly in Nairobi in 1975 (Ohene-Nyako, "Femmes de couleur" 42-45). While voicing the lack of visibility and power racially oppressed women faced in comparison to racially oppressed men in the fight against racism, a number of women rejected the argument of White-Western radical feminists who considered that the main oppression against women was based on their sex. Women of colour also criticised White socialist feminists for their lack of acknowledgement of their racial privilege. Instead, they argued that they faced multiple oppressions as women but also as members of racially, economically, culturally and politically oppressed communities. Therefore, their struggle could not limit itself to an oppression based on sex but had to encompass their communities at large.

Women inside the WUR thus located their struggle within the general fight against racism, while seeking autonomy from racially oppressed men they felt dominated the terms of the debate and did not consider the particularities of racism such as faced by women. In the 1980s onwards, this particular position contributed to the theorisation and generalisation of the notion of triple oppression that regarded racism, sexism and classism as three oppressions that worked together, amongst other forms of domination. For instance, at its 6th General Assembly in Vancouver in July 1983, the WCC recognised that:

> The interlinkages among various manifestations of injustice and oppression are becoming more and more clear. Racism, sexism, class domination, the denial of people's rights, caste oppression, are all woven together, like a spider's web. Singly and together they are at the root of many injustices which cause much suffering and death. ("Struggling for Justice and Human Dignity" 31)

As the WUR's theoretical scope developed, its actions also became more significant, namely after the workshop it held during the NGO's Forum during the UN Third World Women's Conference in Nairobi in 1985. Encouraged by the level of attendance at the workshop and taking notice of the tensions between women of colour and Western-White radical and socialist feminists on the question of priorities at the conference ("Women's Forum, Nairobi" 3), the WUR restated its aim and mission as a platform that could "…play an important role here by giving more information and enabling encounters of women through visits, workshops and seminars" ("Women's Forum, Nairobi" 1). The appointment of the WUR's first coordinator, Jean Sindab, further boosted the WUR's activities and its understanding of triple oppression.

Sindab was born in Cleveland in 1944 and grew up in New York as a dark-skin Black woman with five siblings raised by their single mother and grandmother in a low-income household. After working as a secretary in the 1960s and aged 26, she decided to expand her education and thus intellectual liberation by undertaking a BA degree in African and socio-economic history at Hunter College in the context of the Black Studies movement. Through her studies as well as her travels to West Africa in the early 1970s, Sindab developed a pan-African and Third-Worldist internationalism which she further expanded through her graduate and postgraduate research (Ohene-Nyako, "Femmes de couleur" 67-69). In 1981, her internationalism led to her involvement in the fight against Apartheid as she became the first Black female director of the Washington Office on Africa (WOA). The WOA was one of the organisations funded by the PCR's Special Fund, and its aim was to lobby the American government for the imposition of economic sanctions against the South-African state. Thus, Sindab's position at the WOA helped her develop strong campaigning, organisational, and public speaking skills. In parallel, she was a consultant for the UN which furthered her knowledge of international organisations and led her to travel extensively to Southern Africa where she networked and acquired field knowledge. Finally, although Sindab's activism was mainly focused on antiracism, her consciousness of sexism and the gendered aspects of racism grew in the 1980s as an outcome of readings and encounters with Black and African women.

Thus, her knowledge of Southern Africa; her involvement in the anti-Apartheid struggle; her Third-World feminist internationalism (Ohene-Nyako, "The Heart of the Race" 250-51), as well as a strong Christian faith led her to move to the WCC headquarters in Geneva. She joined the PCR in 1986, and she felt "so proud to be part of this revolutionary-minded church group" (Letter of Jean Sindab to Ethel). Although the coordination of the WUR was secondary in her specifications, Sindab's Third-World feminist internationalism fuelled its constituency, as well as its practical and theoretical framework. Indeed, she actively reached out to antiracist women of colour across the world (including Europe) pursuing the WUR's mission to bring together women globally. As testified by the correspondence she held with women like Afro-Dutch scholar Philomena Essed or Afro-German activist Helga Emde, she reached out and was contacted not only as the coordinator of the WUR but also as a Black woman herself who comforted, listened and advised other women of colour. In fact, she frequently used her own autobiography as a dark-skin and low-income Black woman to relate to the women within the WUR and to articulate a shared identity and strategy based on the common experience of suffering and resisting triple oppression (Ohene-Nyako, "Femmes de couleur" 78-79). Furthermore, drawing from her understanding of history and storytelling as steps to mental liberation, she strongly encouraged the creation of spaces that enabled racially oppressed women to tell their stories.

Regarding Sindab's intellectual contribution to the WUR, she helped define the category "women under racism" which differed from "women of colour" to put emphasis on racial oppression rather than skin colour. Also, by the late 1980s, the expression "triple oppression," as well as the rhetoric of a "global sisterhood" of women who shared this experience, were at the centre of the WUR's official institutional discourse and imagery (WUR official flyer). The WUR became a political platform with the aim to facilitate networking, to grant financial resources to women's groups and initiatives, and to enable women of colour's leadership and empowerment in communities and churches. Sindab officially qualified it "…as [a] program [in which] we have found our political space, our articulate voice, our empowerment tool. It is here that we can tell our own story in our own way." ("Women Under Racism. A decade of Visible Action" 1). The platform's radicality was clearly communicated as exemplified by the image used on the WUR's official flyer representing a female's fist breaking the words racism, sexism and classism.
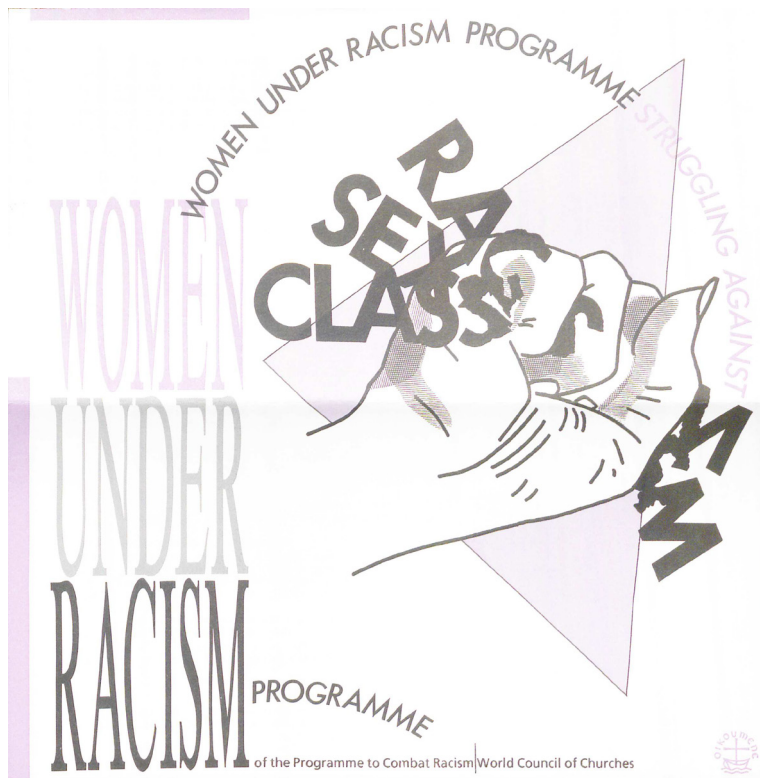

Figure 1: Cover of the official WUR flyer. SISTERS box. Image by author, May 2018

By illustrating a fist, the message of such iconography symbolically linked the WUR with radical and revolutionary movements from the 1960s and 1970s onwards (Ohene-Nyako, "Femmes de couleur…" 88). Not only was this radicality and politicisation enabled by the fact that the WUR was part of the PCR which itself was deeply politicised, but they also expressed the activism of its constituents. As I will demonstrate in my next section, it is in this particular radical, gendered and internationalist space that Black-European women met each other and encountered other women globally with which they shared common positionalities and experiences.

The Fight Against Racism and Sexism in Europe through the WUR

Although racism in Europe had been discussed at the PCR's founding consultation in 1969, it is only in the 1980s that the programme acted against it. Racism and xenophobia in the media, by politicians and at an interpersonal level had been ongoing issues for Black people in Western Europe but were resurging at an alarming rate. The situation was exacerbated by the economic recession and the passing of national anti-immigration legislation. These exclusionary laws were enacted at the same time that France, Germany and the Benelux States consented to the free movement of their citizens under the Schengen Agreement in 1985, which was followed by EEC governments agreeing similarly in 1986 under the Single European Act which scheduled the implementation of a single market in 1992. Consequently, fears were that inter-EEC movement and immigration would become even more restricted for migrants and people of colour who were residents or born in those countries but who were not citizens.

In reaction, Black-European women contested racism and whiteness through publishing and forming antiracist groups. In the UK, for example, Black women were producing knowledge through books and journals on their particular struggles as women facing at least racism and sexism (Thomlinson 432; Ohene-Nyako, "The Heart of the Race" 249). Moreover, they organised against racism in employment, housing and social services, as well as against police abuses and the criminalisation of Black people (Swaby 12; Sudbury 9-11). In Germany, women of African descent were at the forefront of a process of Black consciousness raising which led to the foundation of the Initiative Schwarze Deutsche (ISD) in 1985, followed by the publication of the Black women's book *Farbe Bekennen* in 1986 and the formation of the Afro-German women's group ADEFRA (El-Tayeb 471-473). In France and in the Netherlands too, Black women collectives and initiatives were created such as the Mouvement pour la défense des droits des femmes noires [Movement for the defence of Black women; MODEFEN], Sisters Outsider, and Flamboyant, amongst others. Black women from these countries also produced knowledge on racism, either at a grassroots level like in the case of the French Coordination des femmes noires [Black Women's Coordination] or within the women's movement and academia. A good example is the case of Philomena Essed whose article "Racisme en feminisme" [Racism and Feminism] in 1982 denounced the racism within the Dutch feminist movement, and whose 1984 book *Alledaags Racisme* [Everyday Racism] contested the Dutch denial of racism (Essed, "Naming the Unnameable" 119-120).

Although all these initiatives were set in a local context, they took inspiration from transnational influences either through Black lesbian feminist internationalism like in the case of German and Dutch encounters with Audre Lorde (Bolaki and Boeck 10); or travels and readings of literature by radical and feminist people of colour (Essed, "Naming the Unnameable…" 126; Opitz et al. 109, 208). Moreover, as much as Black-European women organised as Black women, they continuously encountered and coalesced with other racially oppressed groups, which led to overlapping collective identifications, one being political blackness that was embraced by people in Britain, the Netherlands and Germany. Overall, political blackness considered "Black" to be a strategic identity emphasising the shared experience of racial and ethnic oppression rather than African ancestry.

Thus, female antiracist activism, internationalism, and cross-ethnic identifications were features of Black-European women's organising when the WUR called its Global meeting in Geneva in November 1986. But despite this activism, only two of them attended the consultation. Among the 20 participants were Janet Boateng, a Black-British social worker and Councillor in Lambeth who gave a presentation on Black women

in Britain, and Lydie Dooh-Bunya, a Black-French feminist and president of the MODEFEN. Marilia Schüller who would become the WUR's coordinator in January 1992, also took part in the consultation and gave a presentation of the Afro-Brazilian liberation movement of that time. Although restricted to the British and French contexts, the Geneva consultation still facilitated Black-European women's transnational activism in at least three aspects.

First, it brought them together with racially oppressed women from different countries, socioeconomic backgrounds and occupations, whom they may not have met if such financial and institutional resources had not been facilitated. Second, participants were given individual speaking slots to voice their specific experiences of oppression and activism with a relatively understanding audience which shared the experience of struggling against multiple oppressions.

For example, Boateng presented a number of issues faced by women of African descent and Black communities at large in Britain despite antiracist legislation ("We the Women, We the World" 64-69). She detailed the state of unemployment, economic exploitation and housing especially in a context of economic recession, deindustrialisation and social cuts. She also explained how Black women and their communities were targets in their physical, sexual and mental health, namely through practices of gynaecological neglect, police brutality, anti-immigration policies, and everyday racism and sexism. Overall, Boateng argued from a Marxist standpoint that Black women's labour and anti-Black racism in Britain were consequences of the country's history of economic exploitation through slavery and colonisation. This kind of Marxist articulation was not an isolated case as testified by the argumentation in the seminal book *The Heart of the Race* released a year before the WUR's global consultation (Bryan et al. 2-3). After pointing out to the issues faced by Black women and their communities, Boateng also emphasised the history of resistance of Black working-women as well as contemporary initiatives such as the launch of small businesses, community child-caring facilities, and defence committees against police abuse. This, I argue, was a way of saying that Black working-women were not passive in the face of racism, but that they took initiatives, fought against oppression – amongst themselves and their larger communities – and had a history resistance and coalition building they could draw from. Boateng concluded in expressing her hope that "...this consultation [would be] part of the process. ("We the Women, We the World" 69), thus emphasising the importance she gave to international and transnational spaces in the fight for social justice.

As exemplified by Boateng's intervention, not only did participants use the opportunity of the consultation to share information about their local struggles, but interventions of this type also enabled the circulation of knowledge produced by the participants themselves without which the consultation would have lacked in content. Moreover, it additionally stimulated their constant self-reflection on their own struggle in relation to the ones faced by their counterparts.

A third dimension in which the WUR consultation facilitated Black-European women's transnational activism was by stimulating collective claims and identifications as demonstrated by the Action Agenda they directed at the member Churches of the WCC and the institution itself. In the first section, participants articulated collective demands based on their common geography. Thus, migrant, Black, Sinti-Roma and Sami attendants endorsed a collective identity as "we the women of Europe" through which they demanded

> attention to and action against the denial of political and legal rights of <u>Sinti-Roma</u> women in Europe and <u>Sami</u> women of Scandinavia as well as the immigration and employment discrimination and other forms of police brutality and state harassment against women of <u>African, Asian and Caribbean descent</u> living in the United Kingdom and France. The rights of <u>migrant</u> women throughout Europe should be guaranteed and protected. ("We the Women, We the World" 86)

As stated in this declaration, these women endorsed together the particular demands issued from the individual presentations of the participants, and thus showed solidarity with each other. This, I argue, contributed to a Europeanisation of their claims, a process in which domestic contexts remained relevant, but the scope of identifications and solidarity was expanded.

At the same time, national and continental claims and identifications were further extended to a global level. For example, in a following section ("We the Women, We the World" 86-87), all participants, no matter their origin, collectively called for the churches to put pressure on their respective governments

to pass anti-discrimination laws; to condemn discrimination and forced removals of Indigenous people; to cease the forced sterilisation upon women; to address needs in healthcare; to condemn abusive detention and police brutality; and to end discrimination in employment and immigration. Through these collective claims, the participants stated at least a symbolic sense of sisterhood, and thus a collective identity based on their shared experiences of multiple oppressions globally. In sum, Black-European women used the WUR consultation to speak out on their local experiences of oppression and resistance, but they also utilised the space to broaden the scope of their claims to a European and global scale and to affirm multiple overlapping identifications. For Lydie Dooh-Bunya, the experience was going to be renewed in 1990.

The WUR became more significant for Black-European women's transnational activism from 1989 onwards, when it started planning a women's pre-session of a pan-European PCR consultation on racism in 1990. At that time, racist attacks and murders were hitting the news—especially in a reunifying Germany that was sparking violent nationalism—and added to ongoing fears of a spread of racism if Europe should be united in 1992. In parallel, Black-European women continuously practised transnational networking. For example, Helga Emde and Marion Kraft, both Afro-German women and members of ADEFRA, attended the 3rd International Feminist book fair in Montreal (Letter from Emde to Sindab 1) and took part in the Cross-Cultural Black Women's Studies Summer Institute in Zimbabwe in 1989 (Florvil 92). For women like Emde who grew up isolated and in a state of self-hatred in Germany (Opitz et al. 101), transnational encounters were highly valued

> [The 3rd International book fair] was a very important event for us Black German women, because we could establish contacts to women from all parts of the world, exchange experiences, information and ideas and convey a sense of the particularities of our lives in Germany to our Black sisters from other countries...we think it very important to continue the exchange of experiences and ideas with Black women from other parts of the world and to set forth the dialogue with our Black sisters who are leading different social and political struggles. (Letter from Emde to Sindab 2)

This statement testifies to Afro-German women's search for transnational spaces that enabled encounters, consciousness raising, networking and further self-reflection on their own local struggle and positionality. It also indicates a sense of Black global sisterhood which overlapped with Black German identifications.

This internationalism thus preceded and was further supported by the PCR and the WUR at the latter's pre-consultation from May 27 to 29, 1990 in Paris and Chantilly which convened 75 women from 14 countries and from diverse minority groups, occupations, socioeconomic backgrounds and beliefs. On the occasion, the WUR's main goal was for "women of colour [to] meet to build a women's network ..." (Funding request by Jean Sindab to ELCA 3). Among the Black-European women present at the Paris-Chantilly pre-consultation were Philomena Essed, Helga Emde, Lydie Dooh Bunya, Black-Dutch Rita Naloop from the National Surinamese Women's Organisation, Afro-Italian and community worker Esther Haile Jacobson, Black-Belgian socialist parliamentary Paulette Fuller, and Afro-Briton Mukami McCrum.

The consultation was first a space to encounter each other. Then, in the same manner as in Geneva in 1986, participants came with their knowledge and shared it during single interventions, panels, regional working-groups and informal exchanges. In this respect, language played an important role, and the women who could seize the occasion the most to express themselves were the ones who could speak English, leaving others frustrated (Report of the Italian Delegation to Chantilly Conference). While Fuller presented a socialist critical analysis of the implementation of the Single European Act, Emde and Dooh-Bunya gave speeches on the oppressions and struggles of Black women in Germany and France respectively. Their interventions were also opportunities for claim-making. For instance, Emde's adherence to the WUR's mission and insistence on the need to network at a global and European level in order to overcome isolation and enable Black consciousness-raising was restated in the German women's report

> We Black women in the Federal Republic of West Germany are confronted with sexism, racism, isolation and marginalization. For us, it is necessary and important to share and exchange our experiences and political work with other European women, in which we too urge in building a network. (The Chantilly Report 75)

As to Bunya, she denounced structural racism against women and minority communities in France namely in employment, housing, education, health care, immigration legislation and politics. Building upon an analysis considering the cumulative effects of racism and sexism, she stressed that "foreign, immigrant, refugee women…especially from the southern hemisphere" (The Chantilly Report 55) were the most affected by the situation:

> In the patriarchal societies in which we live—in this case, France—we women from other countries, take fourth place in society, behind French men, French women and immigrant men. It does not seem far-fetched to say that what is true in France is true also in the rest of the EC. (The Chantilly Report 55)

Bunya's last statement is revealing of an attempt to link a domestic situation to the larger EEC context and thus testifies to a Europeanisation of her discourse. In fact, she concluded her intervention by voicing her fears and doubts on the impact of the 1986 Single European Act on immigration wondering whether "the countries of the EC [will] choose to follow the model of the country with the most favourable regulations for immigrants or that with the least favourable" (56).

Additional proofs of a Europeanisation of the struggle against racism and sexism can be found in the "Women Call for Action Against Race, Sex and Class Oppression" as well as in the "Declaration of the Women's Meeting on Racism in Europe" which was a condensed version of the latter. Both benefited from the knowledge shared by Fuller on European integration and its impact. For example, participants stressed the need for their working together in an intersectional and collective struggle which placed the contestation of the single market as a priority

> In our search for justice, liberty and equality, we must combine together the struggles against racism, sexism and classism and in unity, we must face the impact of 1992 and the Single European Act. (The Chantilly Report 27)

They also seized the pre-consultation to make a collective demand stating that:

> …we have a right to and, therefore, demand freedom from poverty, hunger and economic exploitation, the right to decent housing, education, training, legal status; to fair representation in the media and in every other forum. We, therefore, issue a call to local national governments, international organizations, churches, Human Rights groups and all others who would stand in solidarity with us to listen to our collective voice… (The Chantilly Report 27-28)

Their target audience reveals the importance they attributed to national and international institutions, as well as to civil society in shaping their lives. Moreover, through this statement and its further development in the Call, they proved their agency in contesting European governments and international organisations by explicitly framing their access to political, economic and social resources as "basic human rights" which they considered as inalienable no matter their sex, civil status or any other differentiating mark (The Chantilly Report 28-33). With regards to people of colour, the Call legitimised the right to abode and to have their human rights respected based on their historical contributions to the economic development of Europe. Furthermore, and contesting anti-immigration agreements whether at a national or European level, the Call demanded the free movement of people independently of their status, and for policies' harmonisation to be beneficial to migrants and asylum seekers. Overall, the participants strongly emphasised on the material, social, political and legal resources that racism and sexism prevented them from having access to, in addition to demanding their physical and psychological integrity. The document concluded with their call for the establishment of a "European women's network" to follow up on the pre-consultation and to be named "Blacks, Refugees, Immigrants and Migrants (BRIM)" (The Chantilly Report 33). This demonstrates the importance given to transnational networking and strategic coalition building with regards to common struggles and goals.

As for their identification, participants considered themselves as "women," "living in Europe" and who were "racially oppressed" (The Chantilly Report 27-28, 33). Nonetheless, simultaneously to these collective identifications, they also stressed the need to recognise their differences

> As we have gathered together we have come to recognise, affirm and strengthen the power we have in unity. We recognise and celebrate our cultural and ethnic diversity, and as racially oppressed women from many experiences, we also recognise that we are not a homogenous entity ... Any recommendations effected by us should take this into account. (The Chantilly Report 33)

This statement testifies again to overlapping and multiple identifications, and most importantly to the fact that their collective action did not necessarily require one fixed collective identity or the negation of simultaneous identifications. And, although political blackness had been discussed and embraced to some extent as a collective identity, not all participants considered it to be relevant to their context (Report of the Italian Delegation to Chantilly Conference).

While the WUR's pre-consultation marked the spirits of participants (Letter from Essed to Sindab) and stressed the need to create a European women's network, the latter was only concretised after 1992 through the establishment of SISTERS as I will show in my next section. In the meantime, Black-European women who attended the pre-consultation followed up and continued to network like in the case of the 5th Cross-Cultural Black Women's Studies Summer Institute organised in Berlin and Bielefeld in 1991 by Afro-German women. Emde was amongst the co-organisers and played a crucial role in linking up Marion Kraft with participants (Kraft email). As an outcome, Essed and Dooh-Bunya were invited to give presentations which were then edited and assembled in a collective book co-edited by Kraft and published in 1994 under the title *Schwarze Frauen der Welt. Migration und Europa*. Not only is this volume an important contribution to European women's intellectual history, but it is also a testimony of the diffusion of political blackness as exemplified by the inclusion of authors of Turkish and Asian descent.

Black-European Women and the SISTERS Network

Jean Sindab left the PCR in March 1991, and Marilia Schüller started as Programme Executive in January 1992. Schüller was born in 1957 in Santana do Livramento in Brazil, a city that shares a border with the Spanish-speaking Uruguayan city of Rivera. From a young age and in a context of military government, she got involved in the struggle against racism and discrimination through Protestant initiatives in a majorly Catholic country, namely the Pastoral to Combat Racism of the Methodist Church—which had been initiated by Afro-Brazilians—as well as the National Ecumenical Commission to Combat Racism (Schüller email). In 1979, her faith and dedication to social justice led her to undertake a BA degree in Theology at the Methodist School of Theology in Sao Bernando de Campo, followed by an MA in Social Science and Religion at the Methodist University of Sao Paulo. In the course of her MA, she travelled to Geneva for a six-month theological training at the WCC Bossey Institute from October 1984 to March 1985.

This journey marked the beginning of her involvement within the WCC and her international antiracist activism. Indeed, in December 1985, she participated at the WCC's and South African Council of Churches' meeting in Harare which gathered local and international religious leaders as well as representatives of the ANC and PAC to discuss strategies against Apartheid. In 1986, as stated previously, she participated in the WUR's Global consultation in Geneva as a representative of the Afro-Brazilian struggle. Schüller was thus familiar with the WUR and its mission when she took over. She also benefited of the women's database and contacts Sindab and her assistants had formerly established.

Nonetheless, the PCR had been through changes in the early 1990s due to the announcement of elections in South Africa which led to a significant decrease in the PCR's funding. As a result, relatively few antiracist organisations and local initiatives continued to be financially supported, and resources could not enable as many PCR-sponsored global events. Additionally, the focus of the WCC and the PCR had shifted from combatting Apartheid to supporting more significantly the rights of Indigenous People in light of the 500 years' "commemoration" of European colonisation in South America in 1992 (Schüller, "Her Name is 'Sisters'" 105). In fact, Schüller's principal mandate was on Indigenous People rights and the WUR was secondary in her specifications. Nevertheless, given her own trajectory and her experiences as an Afro-Brazilian transnational activist, as well as her linguistic proficiency in Spanish, she further supported the expansion of the WUR's constituency to include more significantly indigenous women and women of

African descent from South America and the Caribbean.[2]

The WUR's second Global gathering thus took place in Port of Spain in Trinidad-and-Tobago from October 25 to 30, 1992. Its main goal was the creation of a global network that would be called SISTER—an acronym for Sisters In Struggle to Eliminate Racism—and which would aim to sustain a network of women fighting against the triple oppression of racism, sexism and classism. Essed, Emde, McCrum, Haile, Fuller and Sindab were among the 81 participants.

As it had been the case in Geneva in 1986 and Paris and Chantilly in 1990, Black-European women seized the occasion to present their specific contexts and make claims. For example, McCrum, an activist based in Scotland, gave a presentation on women of colour's activism in the field of housing in the United Kingdom. As to Fuller, her intervention carried once again on the impact of the Single European Act on Black people. Both interventions speak of the different levels of Black-European women's activism, and the extent of their Europeanisation as McCrum focused on Britain whereas Fuller emphasised on socio-economic developments within the EEC. Essed, on the other hand, started her presentation by looking at the denial of everyday racism in the Netherlands, but she then extended her analysis to Western Europe more generally and further moved on to stress the similarities that were likely to be observed at a global level (Essed, "Implicit Racism..." 5). Above all, she concluded on recommendations that are informative of the importance she attributed to internationalism and global coalitions between women of colour:

> It must be seen that the struggle against racism cannot be restricted to the national levels. International networking is an urgent need. Thereby, we can create the space for intensive dialogue. It does not make sense to compare bad to bad or worse to worse...We need women who live in the South as allies outside, women in the South can use us as allies within the North. (5)

By these words, not only did Essed adhere to the general goal of the WUR, but her inclusion of Third World politics demonstrates the impact of global encounters with participants from the Caribbean, Southern America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific. Also, her statement is informative of the multiplicity and overlapping scales of her activism, and she, in fact, continued to meet participants after the 1992 consultation—when she happened to travel to their countries—and to interview them (Letter from Essed to Schüller). Nevertheless, although she was globally satisfied by the meeting in Port of Spain, her feeling was that the consultation had not allowed enough time to share about solutions and successful efforts against oppression encountered (Letter from Essed to Schüller). Consequently, she suggested a follow-up of the consultation in the form of a book that would gather testimonies of women of colour within SISTERS (Letter from Essed to Schüller). These are examples of how international gatherings such as the WUR's stimulated Black-European women's transnational activism.

As an outcome of the 1992 consultation, the network was launched under the name SISTERS—Sisters In Struggle to Eliminate Racism and Sexism—in order to acknowledge the importance of the latter. This signalled a shift from the WUR's initial priority on racism as the SISTERS network's constituents were more readily inclined to state that sexism mattered as much as racism. In fact, although the WUR remained the secretary of the SISTERS network, the latter was regarded as autonomous. Its visual communication even let go of the WUR's militancy and rather opted for a more reassuring and personified message.

As regards to its actions, as much as its initial aim was to gather women globally, the SISTERS network took a regional approach which further participated in the ongoing Europeanisation of Black women's antiracist struggle. For example, with the help of Rita Naloop and Philippino activist Maitet Lesdema, a regional SISTERS-Europe workshop was convened from September 30 1994 to October, 2nd in Geneva under the theme "Racism, Economics and Migration." It focused on employment, economic exploitation and discrimination in immigration at a European level (Summary of the SISTERS workshop).[3]

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2 The WUR organised a pre-consultation of African-American, African Caribbean and Indigenous women in Rio de Janeiro on September 22, 1990, six months after the pan-European consultation on racism.
3 Due to the lack of information in the archives kept at the WCC, more research needs to be done to find out about the participants and if any resolutions were made.
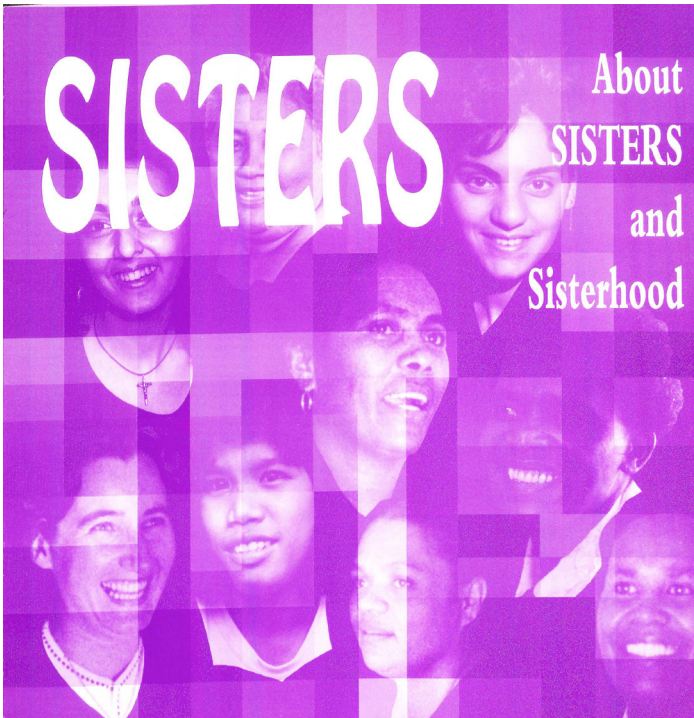
Figure 2: Cover of the official SISTERS flyer. SISTERS box. Image by author, May 2018

But unfortunately, this workshop was the last WUR-sponsored event facilitating the coming together of racially oppressed women in Europe (at least until 1998)[4]. This was partly due to the PCR's financial situation which worsened after the 1994 elections in South Africa and, in turn, affected the WUR's financial and human resources (SISTERS annual reports). At the same time, Schüller and her colleagues encouraged the members of the SISTERS network, rather than the WUR secretary, to develop and sustain the network. As a result, Naloop and Ledesma, who in the meantime became SISTERS-Europe coordinators, met regularly between 1996 and 1997 in preparation of the European Year Against Racism. They sought ways to come up with a SISTERS' action plan for Europe and increase the network's membership. They also promoted the SISTERS network during the events they participated in as representatives of their own groups. Nonetheless, I argue that their efforts, as dedicated as they might have been, could not further develop a strong regional network due to lack of human and financial resources. Furthermore, the initial demands directed at the WUR had been for institutional help and resource facilitation. Thus, I contend that when the WUR no longer had the means to provide such support and relied on its constituents, it ended its appeal and potential as a facilitator of transnational activism for Black-European women. How this activism developed after 1997 is food for another paper.

Conclusion

My aim in this paper was to highlight how the WUR and the SISTERS network, as well as their respective coordinators, have facilitated spaces that Black-European women used as sites to voice their experiences of racism, sexism, and economic oppression; to make claims; and to think of strategies to combat racism and sexism locally and transnationally. As a result of presenting the transnational and European scope of claim-making and political strategies that Black women endorsed, and by highlighting the multiplicity of identifications that they alternatively affirmed, I stress the importance of transnational networks and

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4 The temporal scope of the archives kept at the WCC end in 1998 as the policy of the institution is to enable the consultation of documents after 20 years.

insists on learning from precedents of collective identity formation that reveal overlapping strategic and non-essentialised identifications. These findings can thus provide insights into present-day activism in terms of their geographic scope and the question of political community building.

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