

Kon Na Leti speech Ketu Koti Table KNAW

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I read that *Kon Na Leti* means in Dutch, *breng naar het licht*, bring to light... Kon Na Leti. The sound of those words, so the chime not what the words mean, awaken in me memories of good times. Of summers and winters with good folks listening to good music as we ate good food. I am talking *about broodje pom, shoarma, een frietje oorlog, sate cu batata, fong yong hai*. I am talking about Chaka Demus and Pliers, Keith Sweat, Biggie Smalls, El General, Mary J Blige and Janet Jackson. I am talking about hanging out with Mike and Kenneth and Hassan and Rachid and Cliff and Jason and Babiche and Mikaela, and Geertje and Karima and Alexandra. I am talking about good times.

Kon Na Leti. The ring of the words, so not what they are implicitly supposed to convey tonight, summons my experience of diverse Dutch folk learning in struggle and strife, with gayness and guile, in love and sleight, to be convivial. To *convivir*, to live together in a way that all feel critically recognized in their differences. And from there to demand the coming of a decent society, so a Netherlands and I would say a Kingdom of the Netherlands, where institutions do not humiliate people.

In my experience the fracas of demanding a decent society happens in a celebratory mode. Everything I have said so far about what Kon Na Leti indexes for me is positive and hopeful. Some may consider this too pollyannish, too rose-colored.

The question after all, which I was asked to respond to goes, “[h]oe heeft dit thema van de Ketu Koti Tafel zich gemanifesteerd in jouw leven?/how has the theme of the Ketu Koti table manifested in your life?” Ketu-Koti after all is about the horrors that were trans-Atlantic slavery and its lingering effects. Some tie the disproportionate amount of Surinamese women singled out in the *toeslagen affair/child-care allowance scandal*, the continuing blight of anti-black racism, and the phenomena of colorism, to the afterlives of slavery. Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence* and Philomena Essed’s *Alledaags racism/Everyday racism* are clear. To all these possible responses to the good times story with which I began I can only say yes I agree.

But if the genuine question is hoe heeft dit thema van de Ketu Koti Tafel zich gemanifesteerd in jouw leven, then I hope that my Kon Na Leti can be truly personal. I hope that the ritual enactment of this Ketu-Koti tafel honors the public expression of singularity.

Singularity is important to me because I was told from a very young age that public expression of selfhood never reducible to any collective is one of the cherished cultural ideals bequeathed to people in the West Indies. It is an inheritance from those people who survived slavery. In everything you do, I was told, make sure you express you. Alienation and self-deception is thinking you should be, or you can be, just like someone else; you can be the same as a collective. In the best creole English I was told that whenever someone addresses me with ‘all you’ they were trying to confuse me. Racism, as an ideology and practice, is treating ascribed group identifications as natural things. If you want to get rid of racism start respecting your singularity and that of every other.

So if singularity is one inheritance, let me now offer one more legacy handed down by those who survived slavery. Naming matters. Naming is political for those who descend from the downpressed. There has been a long struggle in this country against people being called the N-word. There are some who today capitalize the word *zwart*, so *Zwart*. I call myself Afro-Caribbean, which is solely a geographical identification without a whiff of racecraft (the witchcraft of racism). I began my life in the Caribbean and most of my ancestors have a link to Africa. I use the word 'Afro' to signal a break in whatever cultural continuities with the people from Africa. The signifier Caribbean ties me to people who can claim Indo-Caribbean, Sino-Caribbean, Carib-Caribbean, Euro-Caribbean, etc., descent. Afro-Caribbean as an identification says very little about culture, political outlook, or character. You only know this if you take singularity seriously, whatever is said in the discursive terrain of identity politics and identity talk. Afro-Caribbean as a geographical identification is smaller than the category *Zwart*.

Let me turn to the term *Keti Koti*. I do not regularly use the word. It is a Sranan word that has become a Dutch word that has influenced Papiamentu speaking activists on Curaçao that now refer to the 1st of July as *kibra kadena*. This is a credit to the power of activists in the Netherlands, many of Surinamese extraction. That we are doing a *Keti-Koti* tafel tonight is symbolic of that success. So too, is having the Prime Minister of the Netherlands and King Willem Alexander offer an apology for the historical wrong that was Trans-Atlantic slavery.

Since I lived for some time on the binational island of Sint Maarten & Saint Martin, the term *Keti Koti* was new to me. On Sint Maarten the 1st of July is known as emancipation day. Sint Maarten is only place in the Kingdom of the Netherlands where the 1st of July is a national holiday. What is celebrated on the 1st of July, however, is actually the diamond estate run where, on the 29th of May 1848 two days after the French abolished slavery for the second time, captured and coerced Africans and their descendants on the Dutch side of island ran to their freedom and became de facto free. 1848 not 1863 or 1873.

Emancipation day on Sint Maarten is a day of celebration, festivity, good food, good music, with good company. It is a preparation for August Monday when folks on both sides of the island join Anguillans as they celebrate their emancipation in the form of a rambunctious carnival. *Keti Koti* celebrations in Amsterdam and Rotterdam and now in more cities is about that. In banter, dancing, eating, and having a good time, lies revolt. Revolt against the naming by the downpressors, revolt against institutions that humiliate, and revolt against the denial of singularity.