



# The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past

Curating Heritage,  
Art and Activism



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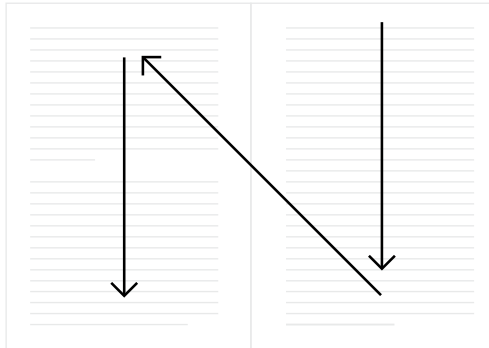
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# The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past

**Curating Heritage,  
Art and Activism**

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# Introduction



# Preface

BY PEPIJN BRANDON, KARWAN FATAH-BLACK,  
IMARA LIMON, WAYNE MODEST, MARGRIET  
SCHAVEMAKER, AND EMMA VAN BIJNEN



In the past few years some significant developments 11 have taken place in the social, cultural, and political landscape of the Netherlands regarding its dealings with the Dutch colonial past. From the protests against the tradition of Zwarte Piet<sup>1</sup> to exhibitions concerning the Dutch colonial past in museums such as the Mauritshuis, the Rijksmuseum, the Tropenmuseum, and the Amsterdam Museum. In addition, the investigations carried out by financial institutions such as De Nederlandse Bank and several city councils, including the city of Amsterdam, bring to light their roles in Dutch colonial history. On December 19, 2022, then Prime Minister Mark Rutte delivered an official apology on behalf of the Dutch State for the centuries of injustice. On July 1, 2023, the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, the King of the Netherlands, Willem-Alexander, followed suit.

**T**he plethora of activities that engage with the Dutch colonial past can be read as an indication of how, little by little, the process of decolonization is taking shape in the social domain and cultural field of the Netherlands. They show how Dutch society is slowly becoming more open and willing to admit that, as a nation, whose grand narrative is based on values such as tolerance and religious freedom, the Netherlands has been careful to omit its responsibility for exploitation and violence.

For those who experience racism daily, and have been doing so for decades, as well as for those who have been battling the lack of knowledge and the “white innocence” with regard to the Dutch colonial past and its afterlife, it often feels like “too little, too late”. Some argue that instead of these symbolic and self-congratulatory programs and words, further actions are needed, like financial restitution and a more fundamental transformation of those welfare institutions that are still based on exclusion and systemic racism, as the ‘toeslagen-affaire’<sup>2</sup> has made painfully clear. Even though there is momentum here to make long overdue changes to our institutions, we need to acknowledge the shoulders we stand on: the many activists, artists, and critics, such as The Black Archives, Gloria Wekker, Jeffry Pondaag or Kick Out Zwarte Piet, who under very difficult conditions challenged Dutch prejudices and started to change the discourse.

The book before you was borne out of a shared need to (self-)critically reflect on the ways in which Dutch museums, archives, and universities have been engaging with the Dutch colonial past. Our aim is to initiate and add to discourse, share ideas, and discuss the challenges and lessons we have learned. In addition, we aim to make this knowledge accessible worldwide. To achieve this, we are guided by questions such as: What are the colonial histories that have been represented (and critiqued) by our

cultural and academic institutions? How are they being represented and what is their impact on society? What role do we have as museums and universities in changing the narratives? And where and when should we make space for the voices of artists and activists?

The project “The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past” started in 2021 with a two-day conference organized in conjunction with the exhibition *The Golden Coach* at the Amsterdam Museum. The conference was a collaboration between the Amsterdam Museum, Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies (NIOD), the Rijksmuseum, The Black Archives, the University of Amsterdam (including research groups such as the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA)), the National Museum of World Cultures, and the Amsterdam City Archives, who are also co-publishers of this book. During the two-day event, research, exhibitions, and projects were shared that reflect on the Dutch colonial past and the ways in which this history is dealt with and continues to shape our society today.<sup>3</sup> Different sessions addressed topics like Dutch Colonial Heritage in a Global Context; Repair and Redress; Curating Contested Heritage, Decoloniality in Academic Research, Activism and Artistic Practice; and Rereading the Archive. Some of the contributions to the symposium have been rewritten and included as essays in this book. In the months following the conference we also sent out a call for papers, asking for contributions from international artists and academics on a range of related topics, some of which you will find in this reader.

The reader is structured into four chapters, each unpacking a topical theme relevant to the main question: What is the future of the Dutch colonial past? Each chapter opens with a short introduction outlining its theme and key topics, followed by a selection of essays written by authors from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds, including academia, the arts, independent curation and the museum world at large. Chapters are concluded with an interview with an important critical voice in the field.

To untangle a subject as complex as the colonial history of the Netherlands, and to further the conversation, the publication requires a discursive framework that allows for a multitude of voices and different perspectives, for arguments and counter-arguments to coexist, and for disagreement to become the starting point for dialogue. One way we tried to create this multivocal space was by including in each chapter at least one so-called “provocation” of sorts by various actors in the field.

Artist and designer Raul Balai provided the content with a graphical layer in which one of the most basic rules of Western bookmaking is being inverted, namely, presenting the texts from left to right. Furthermore, stock images of colonized landscapes create a visual narrative in which aesthetics and visual splendor take center stage, challenging the viewer to actively question what we are looking at.

Although there is much to learn from our past, and we certainly should, the operative term in the title of this publication is *Future*. What does—or do—the future(s) of our shared colonial past look like? Who plays what part, and how can we shape this future collectively? The essays, interviews, images, and texts collected in this reader envision a future while critically taking stock of the past.

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## Notes

1. Black Pete (zwarte piet) refers to the blackface helpers of Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas), the Dutch children's celebration, akin to Santa Claus, which is traditionally celebrated on December 5th. Traditionally, Saint Nicholas offers children who behave well gifts and sweets, whilst the bad ones are punished. Saint Nicholas is aided by his helpers in the form of 'black moors from Spain'; during the celebrations the Black Petes are played by Dutch people in black/brown facial make-up, curly wigs, bright red lipstick, golden earrings and colorful renaissance-like clothing (i.e., black stereotype and black face)
 

Rereading the Archive. Moderators included Valika Smeulders, Inez van der Scheer, Wayne Modest, Esther Peeren, Mitchell Esajas, Margriet Schavemaker, and Imara Limon.
2. The childcare benefits scandal (toeslagenaffaire; also known as the 'allowance affair') refers to a Dutch political scandal in which the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration (Belastingdienst) falsely accused childcare benefit claimants of fraud between 2005 and 2019. The false accusation meant that over 26000 parents had to pay back their (rightful) claim to the childcare benefits in full (often tens of thousand of euros) causing dire financial consequences.
3. The symposium "The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past" took place on November 25, 2021, and was organized by Amsterdam Museum, ASCA, NIOD, Rijksmuseum, The Black Archives, University of Amsterdam, National Museum of World Cultures & Vrije Universiteit, and Amsterdam City Archives. The keynote speech was delivered by Ciraj Rassool. Sessions included Dutch Colonial Heritage in a Global Context; Repair and Redress; Iconoclasm: Toppling Statues, Changing Street Names, Challenging Dominant Narratives; Curating Contested Heritage; Decoloniality in Academic Research, Activism and Artistic Practice; Artistic Practices and Reflections;

# The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past: A Round Table Introduction

BY PEPIJN BRANDON, KARWAN FATAH-BLACK,  
IMARA LIMON, WAYNE MODEST, MARGRIET  
SCHAVEMAKER. MODERATED BY EMMA VAN BIJNEN

Pepijn Brandon



Emma van Bijnen



Karwan Fatah-Black



Margriet Schavemaker



Imara Limon



Wayne Modest

**B**y way of an introduction to some of the key questions and topics we

encounter when dealing with the Dutch colonial past, the editors of the publication *The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past* gathered for a roundtable discussion. Representing the different partner institutions and a variety of backgrounds and perspectives, the participants brought different views and perspectives to the table, offering readers an insight into the roles and responsibilities they see their institutions tasked with, and delineating or mapping out the different positions in the field.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: Let's start this roundtable with one of the bigger questions: What is decolonialization to you?

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MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: This is a key concept in our present-day discussions on the colonial past and how to deal with its consequences in the future. The designer of this publication, Raul Balai, once remarked that real decolonization is burning down all our museums, heritage, and knowledge institutions, because colonialism is in their very essence. This is not what we want, obviously. What we can do is to question, contextualize, investigate, and make visible the afterlife of our colonial past in the present. Simultaneously, institutions have an obligation to become more inclusive organizations in terms of diversifying staff and how we operate in general. And decolonization can be used as an umbrella term for all these critical endeavors and developments.

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK: I agree with Balai in the sense that I don't think we can look at our colonial past without looking at the institutions and infrastructures of our society today. We cannot change and decolonize our future without changing these systems that we are leaning on. Imperial narratives can be found all around us: in museums, universities, etc.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: If we want to talk about decolonialization and think about the future of our colonial past, we need to understand what the infrastructures of colonialism are. How do they work? And how do they continue to shape the present?

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: One of these infrastructures is the division between the museum and academia. Another infrastructure we inherited from the 19th century is the division between disciplines: between ethnography, history, and art, for example, which does not feel contemporary anymore at all. When we define

those infrastructures, we can decide what we need to decolonize.

WAYNE MODEST: Personally, I don't believe museums are distant or different from academia. I see them overlap and inform each other in many ways, sharing the same conceptual infrastructure. But yes, I do think that the division between disciplines creates one of the biggest challenges if we want to truly embrace a decolonial project. I mean, isn't it strange that when an object from an ethnographic museum like the National Museum of World Cultures enters the Victoria and Albert Museum, it becomes design? And then, as design, seems to have a less problematic feel to it? We need to be critical and address the fact that we are still cultivating this sense of separateness in our students today, teaching them the difference between infrastructures. So, if we are going to talk about the future of the Dutch colonial past, I think this is the place where we should start.

PEPIJN BRANDON: The same self-reproducing divisions exist in academia too; each historical discipline operates in its own world, with its own traditions. For instance, if we think of ourselves as global historians, or as imperial historians, or as historians of the Netherlands, it immediately changes the academic domain and traditions we work within. If we want to rethink these divisions, especially in relation to our colonial history, we should look to the 19th century as a formative moment in our Western conception of nations. It is impossible to separate the creation of the museum from the creation of the academic field of history, and both cannot be seen as separate from colonial practices of administration and knowledge production. Many of the museums and archives were set up for practical purposes, to make sure that, as a nation, you know what you own. People started building archives for specific purposes, for instance, to gain a better understanding of the

local terrain by collecting maps of the region. Ethnographic collections aided anthropological study of local civilizations, which in turn served colonial powers to strategize in their dealings with subjected populations. That's why I don't believe you can easily separate the academics from the object gatherers in museums. Both have had a huge impact on public image-making, which was key to the building of a nation. I mean, much of our collective image of the Netherlands as a nation comes from literature, but this reading is stirred in a certain direction, molded by the paintings we have seen by Albert Cuyp and Rembrandt. The problem is that we don't recognize the colonial in them.

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK: From an academic perspective, as I see it, we have been telling the history of colonialism of the Netherlands in a certain way, and this is changing. We need to be critical of the fact that we are still building on very old traditions of telling that story and we should make those visible. A very small group of people receive and reproduce these narratives about the Netherlands. So, you don't have to teach a lot of people this kind of colonial history to have it then reproduce so many times in newspapers and so on.

EMMA VAN BIJEN: From the perspective of a curator, how do we break this cycle of authoritative voices from reproducing itself?

IMARA LIMON: I think decolonization is about critically questioning the authoritative voices that produce the dominant narratives in our universities, our museums, but also our media. Challenging the ideological, social, cultural, and racial frames that supported colonialism in the past, and which have endured into our society today, is the first thing to do. We grew up with these

narratives, and so do our children today. So, rather than looking at the differences between museums and universities, I would consider the thing they have in common: education. Both institutions have access to a young audience and therefore have an important role to play in shaping knowledge, and with this role comes great responsibility. But the problem I see is that the ones who are teaching the next generation are the same ones who run our institutions, and so the circle is complete.

WAYNE MODEST: I think we need to identify between different modes of decolonization. There is this mode of "equity building" that amplifies the voices of identifying narratives. But if the infrastructures don't change, and with infrastructure I mean the epistemological structure of what ethnography is, or what history is, or what art is, etc., then this mode is going to fail. The infrastructures that are in power will simply absorb and incorporate all those who were formerly colonized under a colonial system, without really changing anything. The core of our problem is that no matter how many new narratives and how much new whatever we do, there's still this fundamental belief in large parts of Europe and North America that the people who were colonized are not necessarily as human as others. And until that belief changes, I mean, fundamentally changes, questions around diversity and inclusion will always be maternalistic, or paternalistic, because it's always about helping those who are not as human, yet.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: Some of you navigate two worlds: the cultural sector and academia. What is your opinion regarding the common narratives that have been taught at universities and through museums? Could you reflect on this division?

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: The urge to raise awareness around the colonial past has mostly

come from activists, artists, and academics, not from museums. And in the Netherlands they had to work under difficult conditions, because we think we're a tolerant country. Think, for instance, of Gloria Wekker. For so long she has not been heard. The Dutch like to think they are a tolerant country and open-minded, but we have so many blind spots. It's only in recent years that some museums have started listening to these critical voices and understanding they need to change in many different ways. The same holds true for universities, where the discussion was started by individual academics, not by the university on an institutional level.

As a public museum, the audience is a key factor in all the things we do. People decide to come to the museum, to visit us for one day. In that sense, a museum is different from a university where students register and become part of a cohort of people, and to a lesser degree part of that institution. And by acknowledging the fact that museums are not neutral, they can become agents of change. Think, for instance, of the social discussion we triggered by asserting that the Amsterdam Museum would not deploy the term "Golden Age" anymore as a synonym for the 17th century. A major part of Dutch society was not ready for this and felt that something was taken from them. Something they were proud of. And of course, this brings in the responsibility to (self-)critically look at the ways we engage with our audience. And indeed, ask those important questions: "What is our impact on public discussions, but also, how do we relate to different audiences?"

WAYNE MODEST: Maybe I am being too negative, but I wonder, what influence do museums actually have on the public understanding of history? I mean, are the museums more influential on the public understanding and discussion of history than historians? It is

historians that have framed our narrative and image of, for example, the “Golden Age”. And that history failed us...

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: What I like about museums is that, by opening up, they have the ability to amplify the discussion. They have the power and position to educate a bigger, unaware audience, and to take the new narrative, as instigated by activists and critics, to a bigger stage.

at a young age; when a kid knows something, but this knowledge is not validated or confirmed by what you learn in school, or what you see in museums. It only takes one museum visit to understand, for example, the social position and framing of a specific cultural background. That is when you start to think that you don't fit in. Yet, educational institutions and museums are also places where youngsters from all sorts of backgrounds are brought together; kids who

# We need to be critical

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK: Yeah, but that makes the question of what changed, for example, in the Netherlands all the more interesting. Because I don't know what it is. I don't understand why we are invited into all these institutions to tell them their history is really dark. And then they say, “Oh, yes, we'll apologize”. Still, they would never have done that fifteen years ago, twelve years ago, ten years ago. That, to me, is strange.

IMARA LIMON: I believe the impact of museums lies with the youngest audience, our next generation. Educational institutions are not just places where young people are introduced to our shared knowledge of, for instance, our colonial past. It is also where they learn the methods to access and acquire knowledge, where you are taken to the museums, whether you have access or not, and become part of the hierarchy of the educational system. The problem is that the culture clash we are talking about among adults already happens

are raised by parents who may have roots in different cultures... That is an enormous value, we just need to learn how to benefit from it.

PEPIJN BRANDON: I would say there have been individual artists and individual people in museums who have done some important things, but I also agree with Wayne that we grant these institutions a lot of influence and power. As Imara points out, we are in a position to educate a wider public, but we are also, at least universities are, inherently conservative institutions, despite the fact that there are individuals who challenge its premises and take on the responsibility to try to change some things. I mean, where does the momentum come from? From students who come in and tell us that what we teach about the past really does not reflect their perception or experience of that reality.

LIMON: In the Netherlands, especially, it seems to have been very hard to recognize that dominant narratives exist, and which ones they are. There has never been a general awareness that there may be a different side to the story in other places in the world than the one we have learned. It's one of the recurring themes in the essays in this book; many writers share that they start from a difficult discourse, that there was no discourse to start from.

PEPIJN BRANDON: Yes, maybe that explains why it is such a long and slow process for museums and universities to change and adapt to the demands made by the students, and why we are so behind in this conversation that has been going on for so long...

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: What is so different, then, in the Netherlands, from, let's say, France, Germany, or the United States? Is there a difference?

tolerant, and slavery happened "over there", not here, and we are in the process of correcting this flawed perspective, but at the same time, with this new discourse, it's easy to buy into this narrative of progression and become self-congratulatory. I do think we need hope, and progress is possible, but that doesn't mean that it has already happened. Let's not forget that there is still a big part of society that is proud of their colonial past. This goes for every former colonizer country. This sense of pride appears in different shapes, but the common denominator is the conservative narratives that underpin it. And as long as that fundamental vision doesn't change, I don't believe there's anything that can be shifted through better knowledge about the past, better education, etc.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: What does it mean for the future, if that fundamental vision does not change?

# Counter dominant narratives

IMARA LIMON: It's not about who is more colonial. It's about the dominant narrative that determines what can be talked about, about how we converse about inequality and racism. This is different in the Netherlands; it is different in each country.

PEPIJN BRANDON: So, we have our blind spots, and we, I mean Dutch society, think we are

WAYNE MODEST: We have known for a long time that colonialism is cruel, violent, brutal, and racist. But this knowledge alone doesn't change the mind of the racist. I know this sounds very pessimistic, but no one at this table thinks change is not possible. We all agree it is essential to include different voices into the institutions, and that absorbing these voices is extremely effective, especially when we allow





them to be disruptive, rather than comply with pragmatic governance. Another point we agree on is that there has been some progress. What is being discussed today is already very different than what the narrative was in, say, 2010.

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK: The changes we see happening now were not possible ten or fifteen years ago. So yes, I would cautiously agree that that counts as progress. The constant and larger-scale anti-racist activism that is taking place today is different from the situation before, which is exactly something that grassroots activism has made possible. By now, their early struggle has been amplified and has gained much more attention through social media, raising awareness among a growing number of people.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: There is another point I'd like to bring to the table, and that is the idea of a multitude of voices, which is a central theme of this book. The Amsterdam Museum works with this concept frequently. Could you reflect on why this is important?

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: When we speak about the colonial past and its future, we need to acknowledge that there is not just one voice, or one perspective. I am a strong advocate of multivocality as a method in everything we do at the museum, as personally, I feel that the decolonial debate runs the risks of becoming univocal, and too often this dominant voice is male. So, we need to make room for other voices, female voices, non-binary voices, etc., within the decolonial perspective and prevent it from turning into yet another hegemonic discourse. For instance, we use the term "we" very easily, but who is included in this we, and are we well enough equipped to speak for all of them? Just as it is important to define what makes the past the past, it's necessary to acknowledge that there are different perspectives on what the future is, and at which future you are looking.

IMARA LIMON: The acknowledgement of different perspectives is indeed crucial. The starting point in my curatorial practice at the Amsterdam Museum is the question of which expertise we can bring in that is currently missing or underrepresented. We always collaborate with people who are not affiliated with the museum, knowing that museum staff is not an adequate representation of society. For example, this concerns artists who counter dominant narratives embedded in the collections through commissioned works, or people with knowledge from experience on certain topics who give guided tours—leading to alternative information on collection items, and experts from different fields who are part of a curatorial team for exhibitions. An important part is that each collaboration is evaluated: What can we change in our museum practice, in the programs, and in other aspects of the organization to become more inclusive? What are our institutional responsibilities (and possibilities) in dealing with ongoing inequalities? A common misunderstanding is that a multiplicity of voices would lead to an overload of opinions on each issue, but actually it is a tool to move away from one dominant narrative being presented.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: Is progress also visible in our current society, besides utilizing a multitude of voices? Regarding the way we talk about colonialism.

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: Deciding whether or not there has been progress is a personal matter. Take, for instance, our exhibition surrounding the newly renovated Golden Coach and its contested colonial panels: some people were angry, saying that it was not enough, and progress was too slow. And at the same time Ruben La Cruz, a visual artist and activist who already expressed his grievances against the Golden Coach back in 1990, was crying during the opening. He stated in an interview that he couldn't believe that this

was happening during his lifetime. So yes, it's about the difference in speed, and maybe also about anger and the expectations people have, and about a certain realism about what is needed to change the system.

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK: But how do we sustain the changes that have been made? It is easy to slip into a self-congratulatory mode, to pride ourselves on our good efforts and everything we have achieved in the last few years. The idea of progress presents its own set of pitfalls.

PEPIJN BRANDON: I am also a bit ambivalent about the progress you all see. Some things have been recognized, and that does shift the terrain in a way that can be built on, but there has also been an element of flattening. What I see is that some of these changes which were the result of a long and hard struggle are equated with a certain kind of mainstream politics of diversity, which is like a soft shell that absorbs all struggles for equality and, in the worst case, turns diversity into a branding strategy.

IMARA LIMON: There is so much pressure implied in the concept of progress. We label it as something positive because as an institution you get funding to do more progressive projects. I am talking about the myth of progress. We see progress as something small, like a box you tick off and then move on. In a way, the idea of progress creates this constant state of crisis, this worried feeling that something is awfully wrong if we don't progress, if we don't move forward.

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK: In the Netherlands we were used to the very sort of paternalistic, colonialist vision. What we are maybe shocked by is that there are different kinds of racist colonial narratives. First, there is this sort of combative narrative: "This is our local problem, and we have to fight here". But also, there is the shock, or the clash, between this paternalistic

"let's go overseas and help people" racism and the "let's drive them out of our country" racism. I don't want to choose between those. That's not a choice I would like to make, even if the one that wants to drive me from the country is, of course, a more immediate threat than the "let's go overseas and help people" attitude.

WAYNE MODEST: Perhaps what has changed in the Netherlands is the narrative of racism. It was always something that happened "over there", in the United States or South Africa, and therefore the narrative of anti-racism was a narrative that was over there as well. That has changed. The constant anti-racist activism such as Black Lives Matter and Kick Out Zwarte Piet, which takes place here, and not over there, has raised awareness locally and forced people to look at our own history with colonialism and slavery.

PEPIJN BRANDON: The recent events you mention are not the first moments of acknowledgement in the Netherlands. It is important to understand that these developments have a history, too, and are the result of a struggle with long historic roots. For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s there were massive struggles by so-called guest workers, and those protests forced people to confront their prejudices and racism. And those anti-racist actions happened here and have shifted the narrative for a time.

WAYNE MODEST: I agree, but I still want to point out that this "self-loving" feeling of progress is a dangerous thing. When the self-congratulatory marketing of success takes over, and we don't do the actual work that needs to be done, we have a big problem. We need to shift our notion of humanity to one in which all of us can participate without having to battle. We need to change that framework. And perhaps that has to do with power, because once I have enough power to include, then it's a problem of how

power's inclusion does not accord humanity to people. But that doesn't help to have much hope. It's not easy to be a part of institutions where it's not always easy to see the change. It's much clearer that the institutions like to celebrate, but not to change. So, something

they're not dangerous to the status quo and don't affect or threaten anything fundamentally. They have become part of a consensus. Maybe that's something that is specific to the Dutch discussion of the colonial past, the need for consensus. **23**

# There is hope in this anger

has changed and we also must acknowledge that, and I think it is not that I am saying that we should be hopeful or happy. I'm just saying that we should fight. It means that we need to fight more.

PEPIJN BRANDON: I agree, but does that mean we shouldn't be happy with the progress that has been made, like the apologies for the country's participation in slavery? Of course, an apology is not going to resolve anything, but it does make the contradiction sharper and more visible; that is something we should celebrate. And again, I think that's where institutions like museums and universities have their task cut out for them, to make these contradictions visible. It's too simple to say that colonialism is something from the past, and that we live in a different time. We must keep pointing out that this way of talking about a past doesn't resolve separation, but affirms the status quo.

IMARA LIMON: I think the reason that all these things are possible now, and we can say there is progress, is because we're always a few steps behind. Things are possible as long as

PEPIJN BRANDON: There's a very strong history of incorporating dissent in the Netherlands, of saying: "Okay, we have a disagreement, now let's see how we fix this". And you fix things by getting a number of voices, include them in the discussion, and then absorb them into the institutions without changing the institution.

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: It certainly is a good thing that the contradictions are more visible and sharper than before, and for me that is progress. But I agree that there is danger in celebrating progress. The apologies by Prime Minister Rutte are a good start, "a comma, not a full stop", as he phrased it. I really hope this means a long-term engagement with the topic and a more radical open and self-critical attitude.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: What should happen after that? How are we going to deal with the traumas of our colonial past and slavery in the future?

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: Younger generations will become more and more angry, I suspect. And furthermore, we cannot separate the much-needed repair and healing of these

traumas from other crises the world is facing today, like the climate crisis or the continuing discrimination against women; they are all interconnected. How are we going to deal with those pressing issues and how are we going to repair them? We all agree that there is hope in this anger, but most importantly we need the acknowledgement that this hope is necessary to keep on fighting and change our infrastructures.

WAYNE MODEST: Native Americans have been angry forever. The climate crisis that we know has been framed as something special and urgent for us now, but it has been killing other people for a long time. Colonialism links to climate justice, and the fact that this is now becoming so clear to all of us means we are all being initiated in that anger. So, I think that anger is a good thing; it's a great thing, actually.

EMMA VAN BIJNEN: How can we create new kinds of sustainable infrastructures that could actually change the big disciplinary systems and big institutions at their core? How do we really, fundamentally change?

IMARA LIMON: I think it is important to have different perspectives embedded in those institutions in a structural way. Prioritizing inclusive hiring practices and reflecting on the organizational culture can help with that. It will take continuous work, but to me, a sign of a decolonization would be when they are no longer predominantly white institutions, governed by straight, male, and able-bodied people in power.

PEPIJN BRANDON: To me, it seems that all these overlapping crises with their deep roots in colonialism and capitalism call for forms of systemic critique that overcome the tendency to address each of them in separation. This of course is a huge challenge for people working in institutions and academic fields that are themselves part of this overall structure and

share its fragmentation. But we can all try and make these connections in our own work.

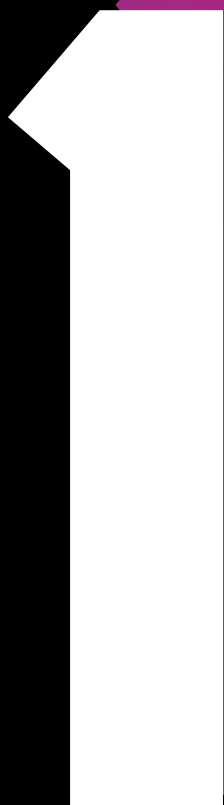
WAYNE MODEST: I think that we need to find a way to understand this moment, because I would never, ever, have anticipated that we could have this kind of a conversation when I arrived in the Netherlands in 2010. What has changed is the narrative of our activist thoughts, which at that time was based on "the crack": making a crack in the system. Today, the activist movement has become more centralized on the question of race, which has become something we can articulate, which wasn't the case in 2011. The question, though, is how do we try to understand that 2011 moment when Quinsy [Gario] was on the ground with the police, and what happened since then? Because something else has happened, and I don't know what it is.

IMARA LIMON: Don't you think it has to do with our perception of time and our expectations? I mean, in 2011 many people were not thinking change would happen in five years or in ten years, we were looking at 50 years... And now we're looking at changes in the summer of 2021, and we expect it to automatically keep progressing. It is possible, but not without many more clashes and major transformations regarding institutions.

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK: But then in a sort of programmatic sense, what are the ways we should look at the future, and how should we, for the next years, talk about history of Dutch colonialism, whether it is in our lecture halls or in the museums or another space. And knowing that progress doesn't exist, but good things happen and how do we sustain them, and seeing the kind of threats of this very easy return to the older or the more dangerous or violent or cruel narratives of that history.

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER: I agree it is quite a challenging dance where you have to move agilely between sustaining good things and combatting negative developments, without getting trapped in the old modernist colonial paradigm of the tradition of ruptures that in the end keeps the powers that be in place. I notice many brave initiatives and institutional workers who facilitate and create space for those struggles: exhibitions, hosting conversations, alternative methods of collaboration, the launch of new institutions, artworks, and ongoing research. This reader shows that things have been and are happening regarding the Dutch colonial past. Hopefully, this book will fuel critical research on this recent output and inspire a new generation to, again, bring in other perspectives and remodel our cultural and academic institutions.

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# Curatorial Practices



**T**he focus of this chapter is on questions surrounding curatorial practices in relation to the colonial past. By discussing the creation of different recent exhibitions, the authors contemplate their respective processes. By asking which persons are involved in the process of curating exhibitions (or, who should be), the reader is invited to reflect on how heritage should be engaged with; now, and in the future. For example, issues surrounding the Golden Coach as Dutch heritage are explored, and multivocality in curatorial practices is recognized as crucial when engaging with coloniality. In all, this chapter offers various perspectives on the museum's role in engaging with the Dutch colonial past.



Give  
it new  
purpose



Whose Heritage,  
Whose Canoe?  
Curating Beyond  
the 'Savage Slot'  
in the Bijlmer,  
Amsterdam

BY RITA OUÉDRAOGO

ABSTRACT: Oft ignored in anthropology is the importance of the ethnographic museum. Most recently, in a project Imagine-IC and the Research Center for Material Culture at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam 'curated,' we were confronted with the question of who had the appropriate expertise to determine which objects should be part of the project. Associated with the celebration of 60 years of Ghanaian independence, we asked members of the 'community' to look at the Ghanaian objects in the collection. One of the persons we consulted with chose a Fanti-canoe, which was stored in a depot. The question then became whose expertise to honour? That of the museum experts or that of the experts we had invited to advise us? Drawing on philosopher Lewis R. Gordon (2018), this paper then asks the question: Who decides what is 'valuable' and what is not, and how does such a decision affect our futures?

*"Across a range of social science disciplines, including economics and political science as well as sociology, we have witnessed the emergence of "the new institutionalism", concerned precisely with how we can understand institutions as processes or even as effects of processes"*

(SARA AHMED, ON BEING INCLUDED 2012).

**A**s feminist writer and scholar, Sara Ahmed states in the above epigraph, there is a certain kind of promise that lies in "'new institutionalism' [that is] concerned precisely with how we might understand institutions as processes or even as effects of process" (Ahmed 2012: 20). Ahmed's words suggests an opportunity as well as a responsibility for institutions to play a role of promise, actual locations where change (for the better good of the greater society) can take place. An institution might then function as a meeting place for revision and change on its way to becoming 'decolonized'. As such, the museum is not only a process, but also a place where process can be influenced and through which (new) Black appropriations are constructed or debunked.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing theoretically notably on Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Lewis R. Gordon, as well as Wayne Modest, the present paper discusses the project that Imagine IC and the Research Center for Material Cultures (RCMC) at the *Wereldmuseum* 'curated' at the *Tropenmuseum*. Since the exhibit in early 2023, the Tropenmuseum has been technically renamed the *Wereldmuseum*.<sup>2</sup> Throughout

the paper I use the term *Tropenmuseum* since it is the term used in 2017, at the time of the collaboration. It also reflects a certain 'tropicalisation' that the name of the museum reflects and which inflects the ethical conundrums that emerged throughout the collaboration. The project forced us – as curators and advisors to the project – to confront the troubling question of 'Who had the appropriate expertise to determine which objects should be part of the project?'. Associated with the celebration of sixty years of Ghanaian independence, this paper then asks the question: 'Who decides what is 'valuable' and what is not, what can or cannot be appropriated (and by whom)? And how does such a decision affect our futures?'. If the role of a curator/programmer is to ask the question of whose expertise matters, then the future for ethnographic museums might shift to that of facilitator, whereby the experts are increasingly becoming those who, for now, mostly are conceived of as *outside* the museum. And which inequalities take place when the experts are not fully part of the institution? From these questions, follows yet another: 'What might we curate within ethnographic museums, beyond Michel-Rolph Trouillot's notion of "the Savage Slot"?: Does the case study present a more just representation of 'Africa' or is it impossible for us to escape such a representational conundrum? Does the case study presented in this paper exemplify an example of co-creation, or a shared authority and 'decolonial' practice? And what are the struggles and obstacles when working with (*source*) *communities*, a term which as author, I vexingly grapple with as a museum professional of color, especially one who is of White Dutch as well as of Black Burkinabe heritage. As such, here, I purposely choose to move from the more academically objective third person to the first person "I" and "we", as I am obligated to engage myself in the first person for questions on the relationship between and among various members of the community and the museum while thinking through all modes in which they interact with each other.

Firstly, this paper sets out the context in which the case study took place: notably the *Tropenmuseum*, the *Research Center for Material Culture*, and *Imagine IC* in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Secondly, the present essay examines the theory around these practices and what the obstacles are when aiming to work 'decolonially', questioning if the translation of such an ethical stance into practice is even possible. Finally, I conclude with the findings and some new and still unanswered questions.

## Why do sixty years of Ghanaian independence matter? Why and how does such a commemoration matter to the Dutch public sphere?

There is large group of Ghanaian-Dutch people in the Netherlands, of whom the majority live in the capital city, Amsterdam, and more precisely in the Bijlmer, in the city's Zuidoost district. Ghana celebrated its sixtieth year of independence on March 6, 2017. On this occasion the RCMC (which is affiliated with the four ethnographic museums collectively since 2023 named *het Wereldmuseum*), sought to create a relationship between the *Tropenmuseum* – one of the four museums, which is located in Amsterdam— and the biggest Ghanaian-Dutch community in the Netherlands, which also lives in this part of the country.

Before outlining the circumstances of the collaboration between the museum and the Ghanaian-Dutch community, it is important to note that as the author of the present piece, I take a specific stance in regard to *terminology* used in this paper. By intentionally deploying the term *community* and/or *source community*, my present essay takes account of vehement and also grounded



criticism of the term *community* as a false assumption of communality. Professor of Museum Anthropology Laura Peers writes, “the concept of ‘source communities’ [thus] essentialises identities and communities, implying that there is a homogenous thing called a community, bounded and uniform in terms of identity, from which an object arises, and that such objects are expected to be purely English, or Haida, or Lakota” (Peers 2019: 42). Even if some scholars have shied away from the term because of this statement, I use the term here since it persists as a fundamental organizing principle in social sciences, as well as popular usage among museum professionals. For his part, Gerd Bauman puts forward a similar argument in his ethnography, *Contesting Culture: Discourses of Identity in Multi-ethnic London*: “Community was a concept to be used and redefined contextually, but certainly it could not be written off as an irrelevancy” (Baumann 1996: 4).

The initial concept for the collaboration was to put the Tropenmuseum’s collection in dialogue with ‘the Ghanaian-Dutch community’. The RCMC wanted to link up with people from the Bijlmer (Amsterdam Zuidoost) and see who in the neighbourhood ‘felt connected’ to the Ghanaian collection of the Tropenmuseum, as well as to Ghana’s independence. In order to engage this affective relationship to the collection as carefully as we could, the RCMC and the Tropenmuseum partnered with the organization Imagine IC. This organization is located in the Bijlmer and has been active in the neighbourhood through ‘community work’, which they prefer to be referred as having “work[ed] with local networks” for over two decades.<sup>3</sup> Their bonds with people in the neighbourhood are strong and their sustainable way of working appealed to us. Imagine IC works with partners in the (international) heritage field. Moreover, Imagine IC develops participatory collection methodologies. They describe themselves as an organization that is “involved with and aims for heritage democracy”.<sup>4</sup> The specific objective of the Tropenmuseum and the RCMC was to bring the Ghanaian collection closer to source communities, that is, the “African” diaspora in Amsterdam, Ghanaian-Dutch people, and people who feel connected to Ghana and its (im-)material heritage.<sup>5</sup> What becomes clear is that the work of our partnership, instead of stereotypically imagining and conflating source communities as diverse as Ghanaian-Dutch, Afro-Surinamese-Dutch, Afro-Antillean-Dutch, and so on, sought a co-creation with a more specific group: the Ghanaian-Dutch communities.

Since Ghana’s independence in 1957, the Republic of Ghana has figured as an important historical beginning for the wave of independences among countries across Africa and more generally globally, with Kwame Nkrumah’s crucial role in the Non-Aligned Movement. In the context of commemorating Ghana’s independence, the RCMC along with Imagine IC organized a year-long series of events. To mark this anniversary, and to tie in with UNESCO’s declaration of the Decade for People of African Descent, this series included interrelated events spread over the year. The program began with a kickoff event on March 7, 2017 (one day after the official Independence Day), and concluded on May 19, 2018, with an event that welcomed a Ghanaian Fante canoe to the OBA-Bijlmerplein (public library) and Imagine IC.<sup>6</sup> Stored in one of the Tropenmuseum’s depots, this object became rather relevant because of the interest of one woman. But first, let us return to the initial meeting which took place between ourselves (RCMC) and Imagine IC, which this article narrates because the tensions, the struggles, and the sensitivities are essential to understand the context and difficulties of the practice.

## Meeting on March 7: 60 Years of Ghanaian Independence

Imagine IC's practice includes organizing *Verzamelbijeekomsten* (gathering meetings – or collecting meetings). In these meetings Imagine IC invites people to come and bring their material and immaterial heritage. In March 2017 a meeting was organized to reflect upon Ghanaian heritage in Amsterdam, which was therefore named *Beleving van Ghanees erfgoed* ('Experience of Ghanaian Heritage'). In their invitation for the event, Imagine IC wrote:

*"We are curious about the role of objects and traditions from Ghana and their meaning in everyday life. Do they have the same meaning as they had in Ghana? Were new traditions added since the arrival in the Netherlands? And what is the meaning of these objects for younger generations? The Ghanaian heritage is also of interest with a lot of Afro-Surinamese youngsters. What does this heritage mean to them? And how do they give meaning to this?"*

*(IMAGINE IC, 2017).<sup>7</sup>*

Present at the meeting, were experts who self-identified as: Afro-Surinamese-Dutch, Afro-Antillean-Dutch, White Dutch, and Ghanaian-Dutch (several different Ghanaian ethnic groups were represented), as well as people from different generations and with varying connections to Ghana, whose narratives emphasized the legitimacy of their presence. Some Afro-Surinamese-Dutch people mentioned their *Ghanainness* several times while referring to their ancestry, colonialism, and the enslavement of their forebears.

There were tensions between and among Ghanaian-Dutch people from varying Ghanaian ethnic groups, Afro-Surinamese-Dutch people and Ghanaian-Dutch people (de Witte 2018), and between and among generations. The uneven power relations and marginalization among generations and ethnic groups led to a complex situation in which the difficulties of co-creation become clear. Empowerment through co-creation proved from the get-go to be a contentious process that would be nearly impossible to realize. There are so many more divisions than what is imagined in the dichotomous perspective envisaged by institutions that pre-define which source community they shall *target*, keeping present the connotational, whereby as an author of this piece, I wish to keep present the violence of the literal meaning of 'targeting' as one associated with hunters 'targeting' their prey or military forces 'targeting' their enemies. In holding close the etymologies that inform our day-to-day language – even and especially in our so-called 'decolonial' work, I point to the fact that, at best, co-creation in practice is a complex process that finds itself at a loss as how to deal with the manner in which power is deployed, how to do justice to the realities of persistent inequities, and how to avoid reproducing prejudice through the very collaborations that are meant to dismantle it (Mithlo 2004; Prins 2014). The position of the museum as a powerful institution, as an authority, plays an important role here. Moreover, the role played by an RCMC staff member is therefore ambiguous. The museum professional, such as myself, finds herself in a strategic role in allowing their hopes and dreams for the museum to become reality—*top dog* as well as *underdog*. Additionally, the role that racial characteristics, cultural background, and ancestry play, how they legitimize (or discredit) one's position relative to those with whom a museum professional hopes to potentially collaborate (Abu-Lughod 1991)



The meeting referred to above, brought together many visions and made clear that the topic was very much alive in the neighborhood: that is, the importance of Ghanaian art in the Tropenmuseum's collection to (source) communities in Amsterdam's Bijlmer district was discussed with urgency among the various advisors and experts with whom we consulted. Eventually we decided to continue the conversation and the project with a smaller group of people who were still interested in working with us. Throughout the year, together with Imagine IC, the RCMC organized depot-and-collection visits at the Tropenmuseum for people of African descent, especially those who felt connected to the Ghanaian collections. In this series of meetings, visits, and conversations, which we titled *Diasporic Connections: Ghana 60 Years After*, we asked a few Ghanaian-Dutch people, and people with diverse backgrounds who in some way felt and feel connected to Ghanaian heritage, to look at the Ghanaian objects in the Tropenmuseum collection. We invited them to speak with us about which objects spoke to them the most. After several months of talks, meetings, and depot visits, at our location as well as that of Imagine IC, one person became especially intrigued by a certain *Fante canoe*. This canoe was not displayed in the current exhibitions but stored in one of the museum's depots. In order to acknowledge the interest in the object, we started to think about how the object might be made accessible to a larger group of people who consider the canoe to be important.

Interest in this particular Fante canoe provoked important questions and conversations about exhibiting and belonging, as well as working together with communities and sharing authority. As a result of the interest, together with Imagine IC, we organized a discussion about the canoe and the possibility of exhibiting it in the Imagine IC 'huis' (house) at their Bijlmerplein location in Amsterdam Zuidoost. As previously mentioned, Zuidoost is the heart of the Ghanaian community in the Netherlands. Thus, showcasing the canoe there might give it new purpose, or at least give it visibility outside of the depot where it had been housed for over forty years. Doing so brought to the fore the following question: 'How can the museum share the collection and 'bring back' to a source community that shares interest and heritage with it? Especially considering the many schisms that seem to divide this community, perhaps even bringing people together?'. Additionally, 'Could we revisit and rethink the ways in which we collect and store objects?'. The group of people who wanted to continue working with us were interested in the artistry and wanted to expand their knowledge of the artistry and Ghanaian heritage. Some were first-generation Ghanaian-Dutch, others second-generation, and some were Afro-Surinamese-Dutch.

## Who decides value?

*"Museums are managers of consciousness. They give us an interpretation of history, of how to view the world and locate ourselves in it. They are, if you want to put it in positive terms, great educational institutions. If you want to put it in negative terms, they are propaganda machines"*

(HANS HAACKE).

As a German artist and leading exponent of institutional critique Hans Haacke's statement suggests, museums have a significant socially and nationally oriented responsibility because they "are managers of consciousness".<sup>8</sup> As such, museums set a standard for consciousness-making

in choosing content and deploying narratives that allow a given community to understand their place within a larger social world. Haacke cogently summarizes the role of museums in distilling complex and copious information, so as to offer “an interpretation of history, of how to view the world and locate ourselves in it”.<sup>9</sup> Given the central role museums play as brokers of local, national, and even international narratives, it is no wonder that, because of their powerful institutional role, the public as well as the governments that must manage the public are calling upon museums to take on the role of world (re-)formers.

Within this context of museums holding power to mold (and even control) narrative production, and their desire to do so conscientiously, the question we had to deal with as initiators of this project became one of whose expertise we should honor. Was it possible to honor both the source community and museum professionals trained in the academy, decades before the Ghanaian community played such a crucial role in the Amsterdam public sphere? Should we pay more attention to the Dutch-based pedagogy of the museum experts, or should we honor the more cosmopolitan pedigree of the experts we had invited to advise us?

If Haacke insists that museums are “managers of consciousness”, then in choosing whose expertise to promote, we as museum professionals are ultimately working through a consciousness to privilege as we think through a given narrative. In this case it concerned how a group of approximately twenty members of the Ghanaian diaspora, as well as about fifteen members of the African diaspora, understood what the commemoration of Ghanaian independence meant to them for an exhibition space in their neighborhood. To answer this question, I draw on philosopher Lewis R. Gordon’s article “Black Aesthetics, Black Value” (2018), because it forces us to evaluate whose judgement system has value (or is consistently disqualified) in a given social context. As such, the overarching gesture of this paper has been the lead-up to the following central question: *‘Who decides what is “valuable” and what is not, and how does such a decision affect our futures?’*

Museums are, in the words of anthropologist and political scientist Benedict Anderson, “institutions of power”, precisely because they have the powerful position to form the historical consciousness of a community. “[In the past], they profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its domination—the nature of the human beings it ruled, the geography of its domain, and the legitimacy of its ancestry” (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 164). Lewis R. Gordon asks us to think in the “now”, asking for other forms of human practice that take into account, despite our best intentions, how racialized the very structures of our value-making still remain, which is informed by the violent colonial histories to which Anderson refers. Gordon writes:

*“What ultimately is the point of calling for democracy if we cling to models that don’t groove—that is, don’t exemplify the people’s living engagement, participation, and responsibility for institutions of power and their creative transformation?”*

(GORDON 2018, 25).

Gordon hereby calls for different ways of working, which in our case would be rethinking the very institutional role of the ethnographic museum. If the current system is in need of change, then our ways of collecting, the ways in which museum professionals collaborate and make exhibitions, needs to change too. The system, the situation, requires we play the instrument differently (Gordon

2018). What does it mean to truly work 'decolonially'? Is honoring the voices of people from certain source communities or networks that connect to the heritage of particular museum objects a way of doing decolonial work? Do we thereby actually acknowledge their expertise as well as their authority as being more valuable than that of a museum curator?

The challenge is that the more pedigreed institutions from which many of us as museum professionals emerge carry with them what Anderson refers to as a 'museumizing imagination' that is strongly political (Anderson 2006 [1983]). Our project with the Ghanaian community in the Bijlmer underscored how difficult it is for museums to let go of the imagination, a heavily colonially informed one, that besets museums. Even as they try to disengage from the colonial museumizing imagination, despite all their good intentions to decolonize, they more often than not reperform value systems that privilege the museum professional's knowledge over that of the experts they have invited to collaborate with. The specific way of representing and materializing the colonial domination in museums is still, many years after the official abolition of slavery, after Ghanaian independence, very present and powerful. Museums still imagine the "colonial state's peculiar imagining of history and power" (Anderson 2006 [1983]: 185). For Gordon, aesthetic regimes, informed by an intellectual genealogy of the 'aesthetic' as deliberated from a Western tradition, cannot but be highly racialized and colonial. As such, those who are not part of this regime also cannot see themselves in most 'National Heritage' projects. For Stuart Hall, it follows that those who cannot see themselves reflected in its mirror cannot properly "belong" (Hall 2005: 22). The national Self as presented by the museum is, thus, when exclusionary of people formerly seen as, and presented by the ethnographic museum as, 'the (colonial) Other', a way of excluding people from the nation. Gordon reminds us that our conceptions of the Enlightenment and modernity ride on the literally dehumanized backs of "black people", and such genealogies of institutional value systems carry over into our present day. Gordon writes, "Under neoliberalism, black people thus become collateral damage of its conceptions of liberties, the person, and rights" (Gordon, 22). How, then, to disentangle the museum from the very valuing systems that establish it as the "purveyor of all things legitimate" (Gordon 2018: 26)? Furthermore, considering Gordon's inquiry as pertains to our work in the Bijlmer, how can we ensure that the experts we had invited become *purveyors* of a *legitimized* narrative themselves?

Perhaps not an answer, but a possibility lies in sociologist Paul Basu's use of the term "museum affordances" as a way of decolonizing museum archives (Basu 2018). Museum affordances are aware of ethnographic archives and collections assembled in the colonial era and activate them as catalysts for intercultural understanding, recovery of lost histories, reparation of past injustices, the building of relationships, the exchange of knowledge, as well as creative engagement across social and cultural boundaries. The theory of museum affordances suggests that an object can afford different possibilities: it can engage an object from the perspective of the former colonizer, who, even today, even if innocent of the actual crimes of colonialism, remains "implicated" in the Rothbergian sense through their privileged position (Rothberg, 2019). It can engage an object from the position of those who produced the object, even if the archives for understanding a more complete provenance of the object remains obfuscated; or (probably) it does its best to do the latter while grappling with the former. In a sense, Basu's notion of museum affordances is in line with Gordon's notion of "Black aesthetics" versus "black aesthetics", a distinction which designates what it means to have value from a certain epistemic location. What does it mean to create art from a space that is less constantly

under the direct epistemic oppression of a white order? What does it mean to think of the object from the epistemes that inform the pedigree of those experts in the Bijlmer, rather than the specialists at the museum? Or to at least think veritably alongside each other? **40**

The Fante canoe can afford knowledge that informs about navigating it along a river, but it can also inform us about its role as a bench on a dock, or how it can serve once its life as a canoe is complete (for various reasons, including the process of museum collecting), whether this means it sitting idle in a depot or mounted on a wall as a piece of art to be contemplated, taking up space of value for those who gaze on it and engage with it visually. All of these affordances give the object varied meanings. Basu sees museum affordances as a way of going beyond the colonial. The object can mean something else when somebody, not the curator/collector (often white or actively reliant on discourses of whiteness, for whiteness is as much about skin color as it is about how bodies are read and privileged [or not] in institutional spaces) who collected the object in colonial times, gives it another meaning. What does it mean when one Ghanaian-Dutch woman affords the canoe with a meaning the museum professionals have not given the object? Can such historical collections transcend the colonial contexts of their collection and be used as resources for decolonization? In other words, can we go beyond anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's notion of the 'Savage Slot'? This degrading way of thinking and organizing art not-European, was not created by anthropology, but anthropology became the discipline through which 'the West' studied the racialized other it had imagined—the "savage or the primitive was the alter ego [that] the West constructed for itself" (Trouillot 2003: 18). In other words, an alter ego as a way of denying a part of 'the Self' one does not want to acknowledge while creating a Self that is an illusion and in need of 'the Other' to be able to exist. The idea of the Self as civilized, good, and innocent (Wekker 2017) is dependent on an Other who represents its opposite: barbaric, in need of civilization, knowledge, and guidance. The rhetoric of the Savage Slot is what ensures that the voice of the "native" remains completely dominated by the voice of the anthropologist (Trouillot 2003: 132). These discursive traditions, even if our moral intentions do not agree, carry forward racism that many museum staff refuse to grapple with. The ethnographic museum has played a huge and important role in maintaining this image by exhibiting the colonial Other as uncivilized, or as an exotic resource of limited, but sometimes useful and rarely unmodernly sustainable, knowledge systems (i.e., craft, indigenous knowledge). The museum has had a long history—even now theorized by esteemed scholars of Africana, thinkers such as Gordon and Trouillot, as failed histories—of such representational practices, mired in a broader discursive and representational economy that presented Africa through a Eurocentric lens and positioned Africans, along with their religions and ritual practices, as in need of civilization, so as to justify economic interests. Let us not forget that the Tropenmuseum served as the space to showcase the products produced in the colonies for profit and consumption by Dutch society (van Duuren 1990: 24). The *civilizing mission* justified again what Haacke reminds us is the mission of the museum: to create consciousnesses that a given society can imagine itself through. Can we, then, ever move away from the representation of the (colonial) Other in ethnographic museums? Can we, by co-creating and sharing authority, create a practice that is truly decolonial? And, if this is possible, how do we categorize the affordances that people give to objects, especially those whose heritages are more closely related to the production, use, and initial value given to a certain object?

Is the fact that Stephanie Quaye told us that the Fante canoe stored in a depot was of such significance to her that it should be on show, enough to make this happen?<sup>10</sup> Do we honor her

expertise, her wish over that of the museum professionals who determined the exhibitions that do not show this particular object? Society is asking museums to write narratives that grapple more honestly with colonial pasts. Since this is the case, it seems only obvious to honor the expertise of people from source communities who take the time to help us rewrite these narratives. However, am I the person to give or deny this authority? Does this not create a similar unequal power relation in which the museum professional, myself, decides what has value (Gordon 2018), what matters, and whose expertise to honor? What is the relation here between power and domination? **41**

Museums, like many other institutions, need more people of color working in them. Any person who suffers, whether it be sometimes or often, from marginalization must be constantly alert to how power can be useful and transformed. This is not to say that those who have experienced marginalization are warranted privilege or do not have any blind spots. For the social contract, as per Haacke, is that museums are places to which a society affords power, but this does not mean there are different ways to deploy power; of course, power is never easy or good, but leaving power in the hands of the same people is perhaps worse than letting it change hands. My role here as a museum professional might be to nurture the humility as well as the confidence to negotiate between experts—while knowing that power should always be questioned, for it can also afford the chance to change the narrative of institutions still dominated by colonial thinking.

If the role of a curator/programmer is to ask the question of whose expertise matters, the future for ethnographic museums might mainly be in the role of facilitator to the experts who for now are conceived of as *outside* of the museum. Does the case study present a forerunner in representing 'Africa', or is it impossible for us to escape this representational conundrum? As Audre Lorde stated so profoundly, "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde 1984).

## Conclusion

*"Also, I think the thing about the current moment and loss is the sense that we don't yet have the thing, but we already fear losing it"*

(JAY BERNARD, SURGE 2019).

In the poem above, poet and writer Jay Bernard states the struggle we are now going through in the world, and thus also as museum professionals. Here, they explain the exact struggle between, on the one hand, the feeling of having to grab the moment and its possibilities and, on the other, the fear of losing something we are used to but also cannot quite grasp. Bernard highlights the uncertain and sometimes unsettling in-between moment in which we live and work.

In this paper, I posed a series of important critical questions: 'What does a case study such as the one discussed here, say about museological 'decolonial' practices?'; 'Who decides what is 'valuable' and what is not?'; 'How does such a decision affect our futures?'; 'What does it mean when a single person from outside the museum states that some object from the collection is of importance to them?'; 'What does it mean when they have another opinion than the museum professionals who

are responsible for the collection?'; 'When do you honor an opinion and when do you not? In addition, 'Why are you, as a museum professional, the person governing these decisions and 'granting authority?'; 'Are we not reproducing the same power structures in a new form?', and 'Are we ever able to escape this representational conundrum?'. **42**

I am afraid that, for ethnographic museums, escaping the representational conundrum is not only challenging but perhaps wholly impossible. Perhaps what we, museum professionals, need to do is increasingly facilitate 'Others' who wish to represent from or for the institution. Perhaps ethnographic museums could and should be places to mourn; memorial spaces where we visit the objects, reflect on what has happened, and acknowledge the very contested histories of the institutions. Perhaps then, all citizens can see themselves reflected in the national Self, not as the Other but as part of the national Self that is/was excluding them from the nation. A nation that is now seeing them and their histories as part of the (memorialized) history. Then, a contested ethnographic museum could function as a place for (source) communities to come together and memorialize, mourn, as well as (perhaps) laugh, enjoy, sit, rest, and be together. Could the museum be a place where experts from outside govern just as well? Could the museum be a place where museum professionals help facilitate and care for the objects as well as the people who are interested in them? If so, this case study could be seen as a way of decolonizing archives, sharing authority, and co-creation; while at the same time being aware of the power granted to museum professionals as they facilitate this process, since power is never good and should always be questioned. However, this might only be the beginning of developments within museum practice. A beginning of which we do not know the end.

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## Notes

1. I would like to thank Amal Alhaag, Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Wayne Modest and Marleen de Witte who helped me work through many of the questions posed in this essay.
2. See <https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/tropenmuseum-gaat-met-drie-andere-musea-verder-als-wereldmuseum~b3feea93/?referrer=https://www.google.com/>.
3. The four ethnographic museums in the Netherlands referred to here are: *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam, *Volkenkunde Museum* in Leiden, Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal and the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam.
4. V.Y. Mudimbe explains in his ethnography: *The Invention of Africa* (1988) the 'invention of Africa' as a Western invention of Africa as the ultimate opposite of Europe. He states that the invention of Africa is a result of the narratives that have been told throughout history that created the ultimate opposite.
5. Here again, being fully aware of the impossibility to refer to a group of people as representatives of Ghana as a whole or even the Ghanaian-Dutch community or the African diaspora for that matter. Nonetheless, I choose here to use the term to refer to the attempt done of doing so.
6. Fante (old spelling Fanti) or Mfantsefo are an ethnic/cultural group in the Central Coastal part of Ghana and are an Akan people.
7. Paraphrasing and translated from the Dutch text: 'Wij zijn benieuwd welke rol objecten en tradities uit Ghana nu nog spelen in het dagelijkse leven hier. Hebben die dezelfde betekenis en invulling als destijds in Ghana? Zijn er nieuwe tradities bijgekomen sinds de komst naar Nederland? En welke waarde heeft dit erfgoed nu voor de jongere generatie? Het Ghanese erfgoed staat ook in de belangstelling bij met name Afrikaans-Surinaamse jongeren. Wat betekent dit erfgoed voor hen? En hoe geven (Ghanese en Surinaamse) jongeren hieraan vorm?'. Imagine IC, Verzamelbijeenkost Beleving van Ghanees Erfgoed, 6 maart 2017 (see <https://imagineic.nl/verzamen/verzamelbijeenkost-beleving-van-ghanees-erfgoed/>).
8. See <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/09/arts/at-the-met-with-hans-haacke-peering-at-a-wide-world-beyond-works-on-a-wall.html>.
9. Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken drawing on the Barnard College Africana Studies Department designates 'Africana as a "multidisciplinary approach to the study of the history, politics, cultures, and literatures of Africa and of the African Diaspora in the Americas, Caribbean and Europe", whereby the experience of African-Americans, Africans in the Americas, the notion of diaspora, as well as research taking place in Africa, come together. The gesture of the word Africana is not to privilege any one place of intellectual production over another, and to privilege the relationships between and among scholars, regardless of whether or not they are diasporic. Barnard College, Africana Studies Department. "Africana Studies". *Barnard.edu*. 25 September 25, 2017 <<https://africana.barnard.edu/africana-studies> (accessed September 25, 2017):'
- 10 I have chosen to name her only here, because I hope that if the reader has remained with me up to this point, that I can trust the reader to project Ms. Quaye and honor and offer real legitimacy to her pedigree.





# Provocative intervention

BY ROCHELLE VAN MAANEN  
(DE)COLONIAL CURATORIAL PRACTICES

Today there is a trend where museums want to decolonize their exhibitions. We should applaud this effort and welcome the change. Unfortunately, there are a few issues.

Let's take a look at *Revolusi!* at the Rijksmuseum. Bonnie Triyana, an Indonesian curator, was asked to work with the Rijksmuseum for the exhibition. While the Indonesian diaspora were hopeful that the Rijksmuseum would pursue a different narrative, the Indo-Europeans were not. For context: Indo-Europeans are mixed-race persons from Indonesia who left that country after its decolonization in the 1950s. They were socialized as Dutch.

The news of an Indonesian curator was met with criticism. These "Indo-activists" felt that, because

Bonnie is Indonesian, he would portray history from a biased point of view.

There were also protests from Papuan and South Moluccan freedom fighters, for other reasons. They were left out of the narrative completely.

The director of the Rijksmuseum, Taco Dibbits, distanced himself from Bonnie Triyana by doing an interview with *NRC*: “Bersiap stays, and Rijksmuseum is not woke”. Dibbits did not know how to negate the disapproval by the Indo-activists. These groups hold a privileged status in the Netherlands, and were seen as a threat because they had the means to pursue lawsuits against the Rijksmuseum and its curators.

All these events created a tolerance paradox. The (Dutch) curators tried to cater to everyone. We can argue that is impossible. It erases all the power structures under the racial hierarchy in Indonesia. Is it possible to equate the violence of an independence war to more than 300 years of European occupation and colonialism?

Multi-perspectivity does not mean that BIPOC stories should be equally shared with their oppressors.

Another problem with these exhibitions is that they are temporary. Both the exhibitions *Slavery* and *Revolusi!* were short-term. While both these subjects are part of Dutch history, they are not anchored in museums. Lastly, museums shouldn't include BIPOC based on

the funding structures; there should be motivation from within for systemic change. What we see in the field is that BIPOC are mostly included because they are needed for diversity quotas. If there is change, it creates a false sense of security by implying that the work is done. It's not seen as something you must actively keep doing, every day. This leads to BIPOC becoming overworked and burned out within two years, because they are doing all the work alone and are met with resistance along the way.

Decolonization is continuous work.

Another example is when museums think of diversity, they think of white women. Women who want the job because it gives them a position of power (white feminism), while not understanding the power of a curatorial position. The difference with BIPOC curators is that they immerse themselves in various modes of culture — “the high, and the low”. We should understand that curating, if done well, can change the world.

In conclusion, we would like to see powerful curators being actively involved in dismantling the systems that have been put in place. Museums should be spearheading the decolonial movements—by creating spaces for BIPOC and realizing that it's time for a breath of fresh air.

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Heritage  
in  
limbo





# The Museum as a Researcher: Learning from the Golden Coach Exhibition

BY ROWAN STOL, ANNEMARIE DE WILDT,  
MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER AND PEPIJN REESER



**ABSTRACT:** From June 2020 until February 2021, the Golden Coach was on display at the Amsterdam Museum after a five-year restoration period. This royal carriage with clear ties to the Dutch colonial past has long been the object of public debate, most prominently in the question whether the coach's ceremonial use should continue or not. In this article, members of the research team of this exhibition reflect on how they dealt with the complexities of this piece of colonial heritage and the many opinions that surround it. The museum's ability to initiate and conduct research was one of the methods used to find new outcomes to further the debate, as well as to push a relational rather than a definitive approach for audiences to relate to the coach. With this method, the Amsterdam Museum underwrites the importance of multivocality and the ability of museums to play a valuable part in social issues.



The Golden Coach was given by the people of Amsterdam to Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in 1898, on the occasion of her inauguration. Throughout the 20th century, it transported members of the royal family for their weddings and appeared annually on Prinsjesdag, the opening of the parliamentary year. The Golden Coach is arguably the most visible object of Dutch colonial heritage. After all, for its late 19th-century creators, it was evident that the entire kingdom, including the colonies in Asia and the Americas, should be symbolically represented on both the interior and exterior of the Golden Coach.

The coach's door panels were decorated with allegorical paintings by Nicolaas van de Waay, including *Hulde der Koloniën* (Tribute from the Colonies) on the left-hand side. The panels depict inhabitants of the Dutch colonies, some scantily clad, laying the products of their colony at the feet of a female personification of both the Netherlands and the ruling House of Orange. It is because of this colonial imagery that the Golden Coach has recently become the subject of heightened debate. A growing number of people find it inappropriate that the head of state uses a vehicle depicting this type of imagery during national celebrations. Others argue that this colonial heritage is part of our history and society, and should be accepted, not contested.

An opportunity to advance this discussion arose when the Golden Coach, after more than a century of use, was required to undergo major conservation efforts. The initial goal of the restoration work that began in 2015 was to continue the vehicle's use as a state coach during Great Ceremonies of State, such as Prinsjesdag and royal weddings. The royal family offered the opportunity for a museum to temporarily put the coach on display following this restoration. The Amsterdam Museum

was keen to do this, and submitted a proposal. We considered the museum a befitting destination, not only because the coach was originally a gift from the people of Amsterdam but also because we strongly believed we could facilitate further discussion about its future. We wanted to show “that this kind of emotionally charged heritage does not have to be divisive, but rather provides an excellent opportunity to cultivate mutual understanding” (Schavemaker 25), as it was later formulated in the exhibition catalogue. The museum’s ambitions managed to convince the King, and from 15 June 2021 until 28 February 2022 the Golden Coach was on display in the courtyard of the Amsterdam Museum as the centerpiece of a major exhibition.

In this essay, four members of the project’s research team share their experiences. The team consisted of eleven people with various backgrounds. We can therefore only account for our own experiences. However, we will attempt to generally reflect on the Amsterdam Museum’s experience of making this exhibition. First, we discuss the principles formulated for this project, in which “research” was key—hence the title of this essay. Second, we will consider the translation of these principles into museum practice. We conclude with a number of observations and recommendations.

## The Golden Coach as Conversation Piece

The starting point in our approach to the Golden Coach was an ambition to further the conversation about the future of what in recent years had become arguably the most well-known and controversial colonial object in the Netherlands. From the outset, the museum intended to make an exhibition that would facilitate multivocal perspectives on the Golden Coach, including the perspectives of those who initiated its construction, the royal recipients of the gift, the coachbuilders and the painter, the jubilant spectators of the coach, and those who, from the beginning, contested it for various reasons. We were aware that, in order to initiate genuine, sincere, and profound conversation about the Golden Coach and its associated colonial past, everyone should feel welcome to join the discussion. To achieve this, we could not limit ourselves to a project that remained within the walls of the museum building, nor to more traditional roles such as curators and experts. This change in practice is currently being observed by other curators, such as researcher Emily Pringle, who states, “Institutions are becoming more responsive to their audiences’ sensitivities and aware of the diverse set of knowledges that can productively shape certain exhibitions and displays” (*It’s all about trust*, 171). This awareness expresses itself in the desire to (re)consider the role of the curator as one who is becoming increasingly attuned to research practices, in order to develop these many forms of knowledge that audiences bring with them. In our particular project, we also needed to acknowledge that inequality manifested itself in the discussion about the future of the Golden Coach—different perspectives did not receive equal treatment.

The “Zwarte Pieten debate” offers a relevant comparison in this respect. For decades, criticism of the blackface helpers of Sinterklaas, the key figure of annual festivities aimed at children, was largely ignored. The criticism took on a more public character in 2011, around the same time the criticism of the colonial imagery on the coach was voiced in a national newspaper. In November 2011, Quinsy Gario and Jerry Afriyie were arrested for wearing T-shirts that said ‘Zwarte Piet is Racisme’ during the annual arrival of Sinterklaas – a repressive response. Genuine interest in the criticism and its argumentation remained limited. Critics of Zwarte Piet were often dismissed and accused of seeking to forbid everything fun. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly, it was expressed that critics

with a migratory background should know their place in society; this was, they stated, a Dutch tradition, so those who do not agree with it “should go back to where they came from”. The debate concerning the criticism of the colonial Golden Coach, although not as prominent, had a similar dynamic.

Also relevant is what the Amsterdam Museum experienced after it decided, in September 2019, to stop using the term “Golden Age” as a synonym for the 17th century. Criticism arose among people who, again, felt something was being taken away from them, but there was also praise from people who preferred the more neutral “17th century,” among whom some whose ancestors had been enslaved. The accompanying argumentation, that the term “Golden Age” was a strongly nationalistic label conceived in the 19th century that did not do justice to the complexity of the period which saw the foundations laid for the Dutch colonial empire as well as human trafficking and slavery on a large scale, received little attention. It is evident that, in discussions about the future of colonial heritage, it is often not the strength of the argument that matters. It frequently depends on who raises the issue. Media reports and public responses to the discussion suggest how the critique surrounding the coach is often framed. For example, in one article the debate on the Golden Coach is used as an example of a “dictatorship of the shouting few” (de Wijk), meaning the demand for change is because of the criticism of a small group of highly vocal protesters. Another opinion piece in a newspaper again assigns the critique to a small-numbered group, contrasting it with the “quiet majority,” which is implied to be in favor of the coach, but less vocal about it (Admiraal). The use of (synonyms of) the word “minority” to refer to the people who are protesting is remarkable, though unsurprising. The connection is easily made to another definition of “minority,” meaning racial or ethnic minorities within a certain dominant group, to which the critique on Dutch traditions is more commonly assigned (Duyvendak). Other articles are more subtle, but still make remarkable choices in the words used to describe people critiquing the coach. Journalist Kemal Rijken names the “woke movement” as the perpetrator of this critique, stating that “anti-slavery activists” are the ones critical of the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel. Though Rijken does not diminish the arguments made by assigning them to a “shouting few,” his choice of words still suggests that critique comes from a specific group that is othered through the specificity used in referring to them. The majority-minority narrative is thus still reproduced in this narrative. In short, an equal and respectful conversation cannot be taken for granted, but must be organized.

We were convinced that, in dealing with controversial colonial heritage, the way to bring people from different backgrounds and viewpoints together would be to offer them a chance to have their say and be heard and respected. The Amsterdam Museum thus aspired to be multivocal, but not neutral. In an uneven field, we saw it as our role to highlight the voices that usually receive less attention or appreciation. However, a mere collection of perspectives and points of view does not generate a conversation. To stimulate the exchange of views, it is vital to see these perspectives as a starting point rather than a conclusion. More than offering insight into the many ways in which people think about the coach, we wanted to take on the role of an intermediary: “Others see the coach in this way, but how do you feel about it?” This meant showing a wide range of perspectives, not only from the Netherlands but also from the former colonies, as well as including both cultural-historical and artistic perspectives. Our non-neutrality was also expressed in the perspectives we chose to address. The Golden Coach has been exhibited before, as a royal wedding coach and as the symbol par excellence of Dutch democracy, but never as a vehicle that also represents Dutch colonialism.

In our approach, the word “research” became the leitmotif. Of course, every museum performs research as part of its exhibitions, but that does not necessarily automatically engender an inquisitive attitude in all aspects of the project, from start to finish. We follow a variety of authors who further question the meaning of research within the context of museums (Pringle, *Rethinking Research*; Rito and Balaskas), while ensuring that research is a fundamental part of our exhibition projects, from the project’s genesis until well after the exhibition has ended. Our exhibition on the Golden Coach was not a definitive assessment of the coach, but rather a conversation starter. Seeing this project as “public research” intended to help others—and ourselves—formulate more complete views on the Golden Coach and its inevitable colonial history helped us to keep focus and make decisions. It also opened the way for wide-ranging programming in which we not only offered a platform to a large number of perspectives and initiated research on the origin of the gold on the coach but also toured the country to investigate how people view the Golden Coach. An unusual step for a museum, but a necessary and valuable approach for an institution seeking to explore the many perspectives on the Golden Coach together with its audience, in order to advance the discussion about the future of this complex object.

## Multiple Perspectives: From Principle to Practice

How can we give multiple and sometimes opposing perspectives on the Golden Coach their rightful place? To address this question, the Amsterdam Museum decided to work with a multidisciplinary research team that included curators, educators, administrators, and colleagues working in public relations, marketing, and public programs. Ideas and results were shared with a diverse group of professionals who were encouraged to give their opinion. Initially, the research team also intended to share this process with visitors in an exhibition hall transformed into a research center. Here, the audience could stay up to date on the exhibition’s development, offer feedback, and share their ideas and questions. In practice, however, this hall only opened for about a week before we had to close the museum temporarily due to COVID-19.

For the entire duration of the project, members of the research team presented storylines, questions, and (design) proposals to an external sounding board group in a monthly online meeting. The 25 members of the sounding board included historians, sociologists, linguists, activists, artists, and representatives of formal organizations both in favor and against the House of Orange. During the lively sessions, we debated which objects should be featured and what kind of words should be used. This approach sometimes slowed down the process, but it also deepened the debate and strengthened our awareness of perspectives we might have otherwise neglected.

The working method gathered the many perspectives of the Golden Coach’s initiators and their critics, the makers, the people depicted on the coach, and the spectators and protesters. It resulted in an exhibition that illuminated the multiple and constantly shifting significances of the Golden Coach: a symbol of the House of Orange, democracy, the proud capital of Amsterdam, the fairy tale or golden cage of royal existence, the relationship between the ruling monarch and the people, and the colonial past. With these and other perspectives on the coach, the tough question became where to give them a place. For instance, we found it very important to include contemporary perspectives from the former colonies, for example from artists with backgrounds in these regions. Combining works of art with historical objects can, however, result in the artwork being underexposed, in turn



**Figure 1**  
*R'Entourage*, a series of the people playing a role in the rituals  
 of the Golden Coach by Erwin Olaf, 2021,  
 (Photograph by Amsterdam Museum, Jan-Kees Steenman)



**Figure 2**  
 Sarah van Sonsbeeck, *The Pedestal for the Imperfect*, 2021,  
 (Photograph by Amsterdam Museum)

possibly detracting from its own story. Therefore, we chose to incorporate a small selection of works into the cultural-historical track and use some additional rooms, the courtyards, and the large Civic Guard Gallery to exhibit artistic perspectives on the Golden Coach. The emphasis of the seventeen artists who created works for this exhibition was mainly on the colonial past connected with the coach. Iswanto Hartono, for example, who replicated the scene on the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel in an artwork using lines that cast a shadow on the wall, in reference to the specter of colonialism in Indonesia and the Netherlands. Zimbabwean-born artist Sithabile Mlotshwa created an installation and collages as a symbol of the Dutch empire. Others provided critical reflections on the coach's materiality, such as Sarah van Sonsbeeck's *The Pedestal for the Imperfect*, or on rituals, such as Erwin Olaf's series of portraits of the people involved in the ceremonial aspects of the Golden Coach.

In the exhibition's cultural-historical track, we believed it important that contemporary protesters and admirers of the coach were equally represented. In fact, this served as a counter to everyday society where, as indicated above, critics are often not taken seriously. In this regard, we were confronted with a practical and museological issue, as an imbalance exists in the nature of the objects. Many objects that testify to the love for the House of Orange and the rituals surrounding the coach are kept in the Royal Collections and other museum collections, while critical voices have been preserved to a limited extent. Ever since its inception, the iconic vehicle has had fans and critics. The Amsterdam socialists who thought the Golden Coach was a waste of money were certainly not alone, but the only remaining evidence of these critics are some brochures. Other perspectives we can only guess. What did the Indonesian sovereigns who were present at the inauguration of Queen Wilhelmina think of the Golden Coach, which they were invited to see at the *Paleis voor de Volksvlijt*? Did they recognize themselves in the personification of the Javanese monarch on the right door of the coach? In this case, we invited speculation from researcher Maria Rey-Lamslag, who specializes in Indonesian history, and asked her to share her thoughts in the audio tour and exhibition catalogue (Rey-Lamslag, 82).

We concluded that such imbalances were present in most themes. The pomp and circumstance were easy to present with magnificent dresses and uniforms, but no "protest objects," such as the smoke bomb thrown at the coach in 1966 or a banner protesting the colonial imagery, have been preserved. Fortunately, we were able to present protestors' oral histories. Furthermore, we chose to include an additional text in which we shared these dilemmas with the visitor in each exhibition space. This brings us back to our leitmotif: ongoing research. By being transparent about these museological dilemmas, we wanted to show our audience that the material we found might not be conclusive, and even encourage them to come up with new stories and sources. The final space in the exhibition was therefore entirely dedicated to collecting stories and thoughts from visitors, as we were aware that colonial history is predominantly an orally transmitted past, often with limited documentation and problematic physical objects.

This posed a particular dilemma for the display in which we explored the link between the 1883 world's fair in Amsterdam, dedicated to "the colonial world," and the Golden Coach. This connection was unmistakable, as Nicolaas van der Waay, who painted the state coach with colonial imagery, had also created decorations for pavilions at the world's fair in a similar visual language fifteen years earlier. The builders of the coach, the Spyker brothers, were also present at the world's fair. Objects displayed at the colonial exhibition in 1883, since kept in the collection of the Tropenmuseum,





**Figure 3**  
Nelson Carrilho, *Deep in me a passionate dream*, 2017,  
(Photograph by Amsterdam Museum, Jan-Kees Steenman)

made it possible to form an idea of what Van der Waay, Spyker, and others saw at the time, and how this potentially affected how they envisioned the design of the Golden Coach. At the same time, we wanted to avoid repeating and confirming the image of the colonies as presented in 1883. Here, too, the choice was made to make this dilemma explicit and share it with our visitors. In addition, through visual art we wanted to honor the people who were exhibited in 1883, who perhaps also served as archetypes for the personifications on the Golden Coach. This was done by incorporating the work *Deep in me a passionate dream* by artist Nelson Carrilho, which consists of an altar dedicated to Carrilho's great-grandmother, Elisabeth Moendi, one of the people exhibited at the world's fair.

In short, at the most controversial and emotional points in the exhibition, we chose to be explicit about what we do and do not know, and about the difficulties we faced. We deliberately avoided presenting a finished story, but rather showed research in progress. The reasons for this were already mentioned above, but one addition should be given. Colonial history has long received little attention, and research into the colonial past is in many ways still a young discipline. It is significant that museums have not presented the Golden Coach in its entirety as a colonial object before. Documented information regarding what people in the Dutch empire thought about the coach and its colonial imagery is scarce. In fact, how people think about it today has also been studied only to a limited extent. From these conclusions followed one of the most important insights we had during this project, which is probably relevant for dealing with colonial history in general. If, as a museum, we want to contribute to new connections concerning contested heritage, we need to give underexposed perspectives a more prominent place, but the material to do this is often lacking. To change this, we must make this a priority in our collection policy and ensure that additional research is carried out. This further emphasized the need for us to take this exhibition as an opportunity to not simply provoke responses, but document and analyze them as well.

## Research in Progress

In this project, the Amsterdam Museum did not limit itself to presentations that might be best described as "research into the different perspectives on the Golden Coach". Rather, we set up additional research through which we aimed to find results that were not previously mapped. Two examples deserve attention in the context of this essay: the origin of the gold on the coach and the national public inquiry into the future of the Golden Coach.

Among Surinamese people, it has often been said that the gold for the coach was mined in Suriname. Yet there were no archival traces to prove this assumption. In the exhibition and in the sessions we organized in the museum to discuss aspects of the Golden Coach, we could only point to the rumor of Surinamese gold. It would, of course, be in line with the makers' desire to use as much material derived from sources within the Kingdom of the Netherlands as possible (Rössing). To find answers, the Amsterdam Museum cooperated with Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands Institute for Conservation, Art and Science (NICAS) and Naturalis Biodiversity Centre in Leiden. It took researchers from NICAS, under the supervision of professor Gareth Davies, many months to clean a miniscule piece of gold leaf from the Golden Coach so that its lead isotopes could be compared with historical samples from the Naturalis collection. The research was so complex that the results were not clear until August 2022, long after the exhibition had ended.



However, the findings left no room for doubt. Not only does the gold originate from Suriname, but it has similar characteristics as a sample from the gold mine *'t Toeval*, at the foot of Brownsberg in the district of Brokopondo. This research connects the coach with the story of mining in Suriname, a story that has received limited attention in Dutch historiography to date. Mining turned out not to be an alternative to the plantation economy at the time; the unfinished railway leading to the gold mines in Brokopondo recalls the rapid rise and fall of the gold rush around 1900. The fact that *'t Toeval* was owned by Amsterdam investors illustrates the strong ties between Suriname and Amsterdam around the turn of the century and offers leads for subsequent research, and possibly even new exhibitions. These results make it clear that, as a museum, initiating research into colonial history is important; many objects with a link to the former colonies are poorly documented in collections, yet are in fact connected with histories that are relevant for a great number of people today.

A second investigation we undertook during the exhibition was the question of the future of the Golden Coach. Its arrival, dramatically hoisted over the roof and into the courtyard of the museum in the middle of the night, seemed symbolic of its status—heritage in limbo. Online and in most media, opinions regarding its future seemed to be firmly established, with little room for change. Our whole project, however, was based on the hope that learning about the Golden Coach and its many aspects might cause some of these opinions to become less firm. Gaining insight into the reasoning behind some stern opinions on the coach could help us understand what was at the core of the discussion. Therefore, we wanted to map how people in the various provinces of the Netherlands thought about its future. Data was collected in two ways: at the museum and locally. Museum visitors were requested to share their opinion at the end of the exhibition and, using a “mobile research installation,” we traveled to the provincial capitals of the Netherlands. In both instances, we framed the question as: “What would you advise the King?” We understood this was a hypothetical question, as we were made aware by jurist Hans Ulrich Jessurun d’Oliveira in a publication in response to the exhibition that the government would also weigh in on the matter (82).

In January 2022, at the exhibition’s conclusion, the King announced he would postpone any official use of the Golden Coach until “the whole of the Netherlands is ready for it” (RVD). To what degree our project was responsible for this outcome remains a palace secret. The wording, however, reflects the approach we used. The ongoing research into the different meanings of the Golden Coach, with emphasis on previously underexposed aspects such as its status as a colonial object, served to stimulate constructive discussion and new connections. From this starting point, the museum has also researched how people viewed the future of the Golden Coach. At this point, we would like to shed additional light on this research and its outcomes.

## Toward Effectual Dialogues about Colonial History

Almost 3,000 visitors (Amsterdam Museum 5) took the time to share their view on the Golden Coach with us by leaving a written comment in the last room of the exhibition. Though the mobile research installation did not manage to reach the same numbers, with a total of about 900 total responses (Amsterdam Museum 4) gathered in sixteen different cities, most results in this case were gained through lengthy, in-depth conversations between representatives of the museum and interested passersby. These conversations, however, did not always result in people submitting a response.

Considering the fact that these responses were gathered outside of the museum walls, more time was spent on providing context on the coach and the exhibition, as it was not a given that people were aware of it. Other people, with stronger opinions and less curiosity, opted for shouting their opinion on the coach as they passed by, but did not take time to document this response. This could therefore be a possible explanation for the lower amount of responses.

Museums more often ask visitors' opinions during or at the end of their exhibitions, to the point that we consider it a recurring practice in the museum world. The answers often remain visible to other visitors, which might help them formulate their own opinions. However, an analysis of the results is rare, in part because of the methodological difficulties involved. For reasons of privacy, little or nothing is usually known about who left their point of view. The opinions of those who did not take a moment to fill in a card are also missing, so the opinions of all museum visitors are not represented. Potentially, this means that only people with a stronger opinion feel the need to fill out a card. What the gathered data does make possible is an analysis of the argumentation of the comments we did receive. How do people actually reason when it comes to formulating their opinion on contested heritage, and what does this teach us?

We decided to code every answer and found two most frequently occurring points of view that reflect the debate: either the coach belongs in a museum or the coach should remain in use. These answers accounted for about half of the responses, with 1,568 responses associated with either one or both of these codes (Amsterdam Museum 6). When looking into the argumentation, however, we surprisingly found a lot of common ground. Both points of view used the argument that the Golden Coach should be preserved as a historical object, albeit with different conclusions. Whereas both "sides" seemed to often agree that it is important we continue to learn from the past, the only difference was that they disagreed on the optimal location—on the streets or in a museum. This turned out to be closely linked to the desire, shared by almost everyone, that the Golden Coach remains visible. But where some believed the museum to be ideal because it could offer the desired context, others preferred ceremonial use because of its large outreach, partly due to television. Some contributors even tried to conciliate the two positions and came up with ideas like "The coach should drive once a year on Prinsjesdag, and then spend the rest of the year in a museum," or "The coach could continue to drive, but the old door panels should be placed in a museum". Responses such as these demonstrate that, even though it might initially seem that people take a certain side in the debate, this comes with conditions that do not fully subscribe to the statement made regarding the coach's future. People who say the coach should continue to be used are not necessarily uncritical of the panels, as the argument that followed in several cases still specified that these panels should be replaced or covered. On the other side, people claiming the coach belongs in a museum do not necessarily argue that the coach should disappear altogether, but instead wish to be able to learn more about this part of Dutch colonial history by seeing it placed in its historical context. All in all, many of the responses analyzed included conditions for the chosen opinion on the coach, therefore making many of these responses not as clear-cut as they might initially seem (Amsterdam Museum 6). These insights into the argumentation offer important nuance in terms of how the debate is more broadly recognized.

This is especially important when looking at the way the media reports on the debate. As stated earlier, these insights seem to disagree with statements on how only the "shouting few" critique the coach (de Wijk). It also disagrees with journalist Kemal Rijken's interpretation of early results from a study

conducted by research institute Motivaction, which was the first of a two-part investigation into public knowledge about and opinions on the Golden Coach and its future. The first part of the study, which was conducted among a representative group of the Dutch population, revealed that 46% believe the coach should continue to be used unchanged in its appearance, while 12% want it to be used under the condition that the panels are changed and 32% believe the coach should be placed in a museum (Amsterdam Museum 9). Rijken discarded the nuance of the condition which specified changing the panels, stipulated by the 12%, and added this segment to the 46% of people who would like the coach to remain in use. The article therefore concluded that 58% believed the coach should be driven again. Though this number is not inaccurate, it does seem like a deliberate choice to leave out the important nuance that a considerable percentage did require some kind of alteration to be made to the coach. Furthermore, this article did not report on the second part of the study, which was conducted at a later time. It showed that, by March 2022, the balance had shifted toward 43% stating the coach should be permanently placed in a museum, 8% wanting the panels to be changed, and 38% believing the coach and its function should remain unchanged (Amsterdam Museum 9). However, rather than focusing on which category is the “majority,” we would like to consider the many factors at play in deciding which choice people favor. The change in balance revealed in the second part of the study further suggests that contested colonial heritage might not always be the divisive issue it seems to be, and it is therefore worthwhile organizing projects to connect different points of view and stimulate dialogue. These results show that people are not as firmly set on their ideas about the coach and might be open to multiple outcomes.

As a final remark, we would like to widen our scope. In our case, when trying to organize a meaningful debate on colonial heritage, metaphors proved to be extremely helpful. Seeing ourselves and our institution as a space where every point of view should be welcomed gave inspiration for public programming and opened doors to artists. Understanding the debate on the Golden Coach as valuable and ourselves as intermediaries who could provide a platform for less visible or widely popular positions to be highlighted seemed to be appreciated by our audience. And for our ambition to connect rather than divide people, Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation* (1997) was a great source of inspiration. His relational approach to identity, the totality of which can only be imagined, as it is constantly shaped in its relation to other things and places, can motivate us to approach societal discussions in different ways. Rather than thinking in terms of stable narratives, in this case those opposing or supporting the use of the coach, we propose considering the factors which shape individuals' relation to the coach. By creating an environment that takes people seriously and invites them to participate, seemingly strong contradictions can be better understood, and perhaps even bridged. In light of the sometimes fierce discussions about colonial heritage, this is a positive conclusion.

Besides offering metaphorical value, the work of thinkers such as Glissant is something to which we are indebted, as their writings have (indirectly) laid the foundation for the multivocal practice we applied in this project. In order to consider the decolonial potential of the work we are doing, we must credit the thinkers who gave us the theoretical language to think about these practices.

## Conclusion

The Golden Coach exhibition was made with great inquisitiveness. From the multidisciplinary research team to the sounding board group, the many artists, and the curious audiences—each

contributed a bit of their knowledge to the discussion. In order for these many voices to come together, the Amsterdam Museum took on the role of a public forum, understanding that it could only do justice to the depth of this discussion by highlighting some of the voices that are often dismissed. Within the context of the exhibition, we found many ways to channel these voices into different spaces and media. As a result, we now have a large body of work that only invites further engagement and research, in the form of texts, publications, and data sets containing the many opinions shared with us on the Golden Coach.

In each of these aspects, what has been most important for us is creating space for people to relate to the coach in personal ways. Rather than supporting methods to divide the public into stable groups which favor or oppose the coach, we presented the available information and invited people to engage from their own positionality. Besides that, we attempted to put our abilities to good use by proposing research into some lacunae in the available information. Examples are the provenance research into the coach's gold and the qualitative analysis of the reasons why people argue in favor or against the use of the coach. The museum can thus be an instigator for academic research as well as a platform for audience engagement, the outcomes of which can be studied to learn more about how they individually relate to the contents of an exhibition. In its multidisciplinary approach, the Amsterdam Museum sought to embed its multivocal ambitions by proposing multiple ways of relating to the coach in the versatile outcomes the exhibition was able to facilitate.

In this way, the museum reaffirms the gray area of contradiction and complexity that is often the reality in discussions such as the one surrounding the Golden Coach. This is not to say that the many hurtful aspects which form an integral part of it should be diminished, nor that the museum should be considered a neutral ground on which discussions can be held. Following the initiative "Musea Bekennen Kleur" (literally translated: Museums Admit Color), which refers to museums taking responsibility for their own voice, rather than pretending to be an unbiased, unitary entity, especially in relation to topics such as inclusivity ("*Over ons*"), we instead believe most work can be accomplished by admitting we do not know everything, thereby positioning ourselves as seeking out the full story to the best of our ability. This project taught us that the museum is a site where multidisciplinary research can be formulated, conducted, and critically approached. Only when museums understand themselves as researchers, with the goal of better understanding different ways of relating to a topic or theme, do we believe they will be able to realize their multivocal ambitions.

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Past  
injustices



# Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach

BY ROSEMARIE BUIKEMA  
AND ASTRID KERCHMAN



ABSTRACT: In this essay, Rosemarie Buikema, project initiator of MOED Museum of Equality and Difference, and Astrid Kerchman, former project coordinator of MOED.online, elaborate on MOED's exhibition Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach (2022). This exhibition took the form a virtual dialogue between the much-contested Golden Coach's panel Tribute from the Colonies and the work of contemporary artists of color. Bringing contemporary artworks in conversation with the panel, the aim of the virtual exhibition was to initiate a decolonial dialogue on three different narratives articulated on the carriage: 1) the Dutch history of colonialism and the stereotype of the "noble savage"; 2) the present-day socio-political position of immigrants; and 3) the nexus between colonialism, capitalism, and environmental destruction. The exhibition asks what it means when national icons, such as the Golden Coach, continue to reproduce stereotypes and stigmatizations. The authors reflect upon the curatorial and methodological choices that were made in the online curation process and demonstrate what decolonizing cultural heritage could possibly entail.

*"Vision is always a question of the power to see—and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?"*

(HARAWAY 1988, 585).

**B**etween June 2021 and February 2022, the Amsterdam Museum organized an exhibition to mark the restoration of the Golden Coach. The Golden Coach (Dutch: *De Gouden Koets*) was a gift from the people of Amsterdam to Queen Wilhelmina—the first woman to ascend the Dutch throne, in 1898. For over a century, the coach fulfilled a ceremonial role and was used for royal inaugurations, royal weddings, and the State Opening of Parliament. Cherished by some, questioned by others, the Golden Coach became a symbol of Dutch tradition, the Constitution, and the Dutch royal family. However, from the outset, the coach has also been the subject of protests, almost always related to the discrepancy between its original intention, to unite the nation by means of tradition and symbols, and the divisions it inevitably epitomizes—the rich and the poor, royalists and republicans.

The latest such protests, however, concentrated more specifically on the way in which the coach was perceived as a symbol of systemic racism. The Golden Coach is decorated with four panels painted by Nicolaas van der Waay. One of the panels, entitled *Tribute from the Colonies* (Dutch: *Hulde der Koloniën*), depicts a seated white woman being presented with gifts by people of color. The panel is an allegory of the ties between the Netherlands and its former colonies in the East (present-day Indonesia) and the West (Suriname and the former Dutch Antilles, including Curaçao and Aruba). This overtly colonial and racist depiction of that history, upon which we elaborate below, fueled the latest protests. By exhibiting the coach and documenting its turbulent history, the Amsterdam Museum aimed to stimulate public debate on a variety of aspects connected to the history and appearance of the coach (Schavemaker 2021).

Perhaps most importantly, the subsequent restoration of the coach that started in 2015 raised the question of what to do with this artifact of Dutch national history once the work was complete. Should the vehicle, so unreflectively intertwined with a contested past, still function as an icon of the nation, and should it still be used as a mode of transport by the Dutch royal family? The reigning monarch, King Willem-Alexander, agreed to support this public revision of the history of the coach and cooperated by loaning it to the museum to further explore these questions. In January 2022, in the midst of the exhibition and the concomitant debates, the King announced that, after a further period of restoration, the Golden Coach would no longer be used by the royal family, primarily due to the controversy around the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel. He expressed that the coach could be used again when the nation was “ready for it”. Until then, the coach would be stored in the Royal Stables (Rijksvoorlichtingsdienst 2022). As such, the King tried to reconcile those who cherish the coach as an emblem of tradition and cultural heritage and those who contest the enduring and unrecognized racist connotations of this heritage and of this conception of the celebration of democracy. His assumption that there would possibly be a moment in the future when the racist imagery could be considered as a historically situated representation of a colonial past—one which by then would have been sufficiently contended with—was received by both proponents and opponents of the coach as a rather unconvincingly phrased compromise.

The societal debate surrounding the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel provided the incentive for the Museum of Equality and Difference (MOED) to enter into the discussion of how best to come to terms with a legacy of systemic racism by means of staging a visual dialogue with items or practices that are contested or disputed. MOED is a collective of critical cultural researchers and activists dedicated to the creation of a society based on equality and inclusion.<sup>1</sup> We are particularly interested in developing ways to decolonize cultural heritage by means of telling history differently and finding ways to visualize equality and difference. Artistic practices hold the potential to negotiate the performance and opening up of our cultural archive, as well as develop different imaginings of difference, offering previously unexplored modes of resistance, celebration, and survival. In the words of cultural theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987): “Nothing happens in the ‘real’ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads” (87). Following Anzaldúa, MOED invests in the creation of a visual archive in which the concepts of equality and difference are brought into dialogue with one another, contested, and materialized. For us, equality is both a necessary fiction and an inspiration. We understand equality and inclusion as referring to the continuous contestation and negotiation of geopolitical and sociocultural diversity and difference. MOED aims to develop new ways of imagining, looking, and speaking that, on a structural level, contribute to the process

of thinking about the present differently. MOED therefore asks: What happens to equality and inclusion if we move it from the state to the domain of culture? What do we see when we open ourselves up to the unexpected? What do equality and difference look like—and for whom, where, when, and why? **71**

In this chapter, we elaborate upon our virtual exhibition, *Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach* (2022), marking the end of the Amsterdam Museum exhibition. Our exhibition took the form of a virtual dialogue between the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel and contemporary artists of color. By reflecting upon the curatorial and methodological choices we made, we hope to contribute to the discussion of what it means to decolonize symbols of national heritage, and what decolonizing cultural heritage could possibly entail. For us, the core of undertaking decolonial work is to foreground the importance of listening. As decolonial thinker Rolando Vázquez profoundly puts it, listening “is about becoming open to the radical diversity of Earth-worlds, as an enriching experience that remains always in excess of the self, and that should not be subsumed and reduced through forms of appropriation and representation” (Vázquez 2020, 157). In this sense, listening opens up space for reception, owing, and gratitude. In *Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach*, we tried to listen to the work of prominent artists of color and to learn from what they could show and teach us about the effects of stereotypes and one-sided perspectives on history. Bringing a selection of contemporary works in conversation with the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel, our aim was to initiate a decolonial dialogue on the different narratives it articulates.

With this exhibition, our hope was to build upon the work of our colleagues from the Amsterdam Museum (Schoutens et al. 2021), while nuancing not only the exhibition but also the panel through the lens of the work of prominent contemporary artists. We sought to highlight and unpack some of the iconographic stereotypes and narratives depicted in the panel that reverberate to this day, reflected both in the systemically racist makeup of some of our national institutions and collective modes of thought. These stereotypes are all tensioned by the recurring binary between those who rule and those subordinate to them—the colonizer and the colonized. By revealing how these configurations are not only omnipresent within the many symbolisms detectable in the panel but also how they permeate the present, we hope to highlight and destabilize the binaries they represent. Simultaneously, *Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach* provides the spectator with alternative views and imaginaries by means of a dialogic trajectory in which artworks speak to each other, evoking a non-linear and non-unitary conversation concerning the subliminal messages conveyed through the iconography of *Tribute from the Colonies*.

The contemporary artworks in *Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach* illustrate how the panel, while designed in the late 19th century, inevitably fuels contemporary debate. By using the way in which works by contemporary artists speak to the coach's panels as our point of departure, we discerned three interrelated themes that form the fabric of the exhibition: 1) the Dutch history of colonialism and the stereotype of the “noble savage”; 2) the present-day sociopolitical position of immigrants; and 3) the nexus between colonialism, capitalism, and environmental destruction. By initiating a dialogue between the panel and the work of contemporary artists, we sought to highlight how those artists oppose and dispute the myths of benevolent colonialism and white innocence that dominate the images on the coach.

The exhibition was conceived and staged in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The several lockdowns that ensued forced museums to close their doors to the public and find new ways of exhibiting their collections. Hence, we decided to create a virtual environment as both context and facilitator of the dialogue we wished to initiate. Yet, despite this necessary intervention, we firmly believe there is nothing that can replace a physical encounter with a work of art—something felt by many art lovers during this difficult time. The contemplation, the suspension of time, and the possibility of being moved and surprised cannot be transposed to a digital environment. Therefore, when envisioning this digital space, we decided not to replicate the context of the museum as it is, but to turn instead to a different format that could enable a new experience of engaging with art while also raising an awareness of the deeper meaning conveyed by the exhibited works. Freely available to anyone with an internet connection, our hope was that the exhibition would attract a diverse audience beyond the regular museum visitor. The immersive, dystopian character of the virtual environment designed by Louisa Teichmann and Noémi Biró captures the urgency of the many intersecting humanitarian, climate, and health crises that define our present. As such, the artworks function as seeds in a barren landscape, making the soil fertile again, starting anew.

## *Tribute from the Colonies* and the Invention of Benevolent Colonialism

The first vignette the exhibition unpacks in *Tribute from the Colonies* features the left-hand portion of the panel, in which a barely clothed child is handed a book by a white man dressed in Roman-style robes. This rhetoric—that of colonialism as a civilizing endeavor—and the image of the “gentle colonizer” present in *Tribute from the Colonies* persists to this day, permeating discussions around commemoration and cultural heritage in the Netherlands, including arguments around the possible futures of the Golden Coach itself.

Scholars Kwame Nimako and Glenn Willemsen (2011) note how, in the Dutch context, national narratives around colonialism were defined by the ideology of paternalism and benevolence. Dutch slave traders in the 17th century prided themselves on treating African captives more humanely, therefore claiming moral superiority over other settler-colonial countries. At the end of the 19th century, such discourses even entered administrative language with the so-called “Ethical Policy”, an “enlightened’ mode of colonial rule” (Nimako and Willemsen 2011, 39) introduced in Indonesia. The scene represented on the left-hand side of the panel epitomizes just such an image of the Dutch as the “gentle colonizer”. As suggested by curator Ghanima Kowsoleea, who co-curated the Amsterdam Museum exhibition *The Golden Coach*, the book handed to the child could represent either the Bible or the “Book of Knowledge” (Kowsoleea 2021, 146), therefore hinting at the two moral justifications for the colonial enterprise: religion and modernity, respectively.

This self-proclaimed moral superiority and the narrative of the “we were there to help” still permeates national debates, in particular those around narratives of commemoration and cultural heritage (Balkenhol and Modest 2019). Indeed, cultural anthropologist Gloria Wekker (2016) famously identified such narratives as being a defining sentiment of Dutch identity, constituting what she has labeled as “white innocence”. As Wekker (2016) puts it, “‘We are a small nation, innocent; we are inherently antiracist; moreover, we do not have bad intentions’ is a shorthand to sum up this white sense of self” (166). Wekker (2016) argues that innocence is at the heart of the image that



**Figure 1**  
Natasja Kensmil, *Floodland*, 2007,  
(Private collection).

the country has carefully constructed of itself “as free, emancipated, tolerant, a beacon of civilization” (108)—an image according to which the Dutch were only *reluctant* colonizers, almost unwillingly going along with an agenda set by other countries and doing so with compassion. **74**

However, thinking of an often-cited quote of the Australian Indigenous activist Lilla Watson (“If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together”), the traditional image of benevolent colonialism needs to be treated in such a way that its meaning will be structurally transformed. To debunk this myth of benevolent colonialism, we placed the panel in dialogue with the series *Floodland* (2007) by Natasja Kensmil (1973, Amsterdam). Kensmil is a Dutch artist whose work explores the relationship between myth and history, as well as the contrast between the tolerant image of the Netherlands and its colonial past. *Floodland* (2007) is particularly salient in addressing the role of Christianity in the colonial project. Although the paintings are not immediately related to the Golden Coach, this series nevertheless seems to respond to the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel. The imagery found in *Floodland*, in fact, could not be further from the peaceful and idyllic scene portrayed in the panel, or from the mythical figures of the “gentle colonizer” and the “happy slave” that the latter conjures. Whereas the panel lays out a quasi-utopian idea of society, in which everyone happily fulfills their assigned roles toward a “common good”, Kensmil’s drawings confront the viewer with haunting and tormented figures, messily crowding the frame. The calming and muted tones of the panel, as well as the hopefulness offered by its landscape, have no place in *Floodland*, in which the stark contrast of black and white constitutes the only setting.

## *Tribute from the Colonies* and the Noble Savage

Very much in line with the observations made above, on the right-hand portion of the same panel we see three young men from the Dutch East Indies depicted carrying boxes and produce. Their posture is stooped, suggesting the heaviness of the material they carry. Their servitude stands in stark contrast to the four white persons standing behind them, who are carefully observing the work performed by the young men. Also dressed in what appear to be Roman-style robes, these observers seem to be giving orders to the young Indonesians. Most notably, an elderly man and the woman behind them force the young men to continue their labor. If one zooms out of this scene and examines the rest of the panel, similar depictions come into view: colonized subjects, often dressed in nothing more than cloths, are carrying trading goods to lay at the feet of the Dutch Maiden, the national personification of the Netherlands, bringing her offerings and sacrifices.<sup>2</sup> They are depicted as significantly shorter than the colonizers, often bent over, assuming positions of subordination and servitude, obedient to the orders given to them. When one carefully considers this different portrayal of subjects in the panel, the question arises of what it actually means to depict colonized subjects in positions of subordination and servitude in nationalist symbols and, in particular, how these depictions persist in present day society. What material histories and cultural meanings are encoded in the panel?

Depictions of non-Western subjects as deviant and inferior to their Western masters in the panel are neither unique nor incidental. Instead, these types of portrayals can be placed in a larger Euro-American tradition that has conceptualized the non-Western subject as the “noble savage”: backward, primitive, the outsider, fit to be ruled, animalistic, standing in close relation to nature





**Figure 2**  
Nomusa Makhubu, *Omama Bencelisa*  
(*Mothers Breastfeeding*) (2007–2013),  
(From the *Self-Portrait* project 2007–2013).

and the origins of the human race.<sup>3</sup> This stereotypical portrayal and stock character can be traced back to European imperial and colonial missions, travel literature (e.g., Mungo Park), Continental philosophy (e.g., Jean-Jacques Rousseau), art historical movements (e.g., the work of Paul Gauguin and “Primitivism”), literature (e.g., Charles Dickens), and national symbolism (not only in the Netherlands but also, for example, in the Danish Royal Coat of Arms). Not only does this image of the noble savage feed into a violent stereotype of the non-Western “Other” that needs to be disciplined, but, just as importantly, it also installs an idea of the Self. Prominent feminist and postcolonial scholars have pointed out the relational nature of this Western invention of the “Other” (De Beauvoir 1949; Said 1978), namely that, by constructing the Other, the Self is automatically defined as its contrasting image, idea, and/or experience. This relationality is strikingly present in the panel, as it renders the colonizers as the justified bringers of civilization, development, and progress by portraying the colonized subjects as servile, backward, and primitive.

To explore how narratives of Self and Other are experienced today, the exhibition confronts the panel with the work of Nomusa Makhubu (1984, Grahamstown, South Africa); specifically, how it is hauntingly attuned to these echoes of the past. In her series *Self-Portrait* (2007–2013), Makhubu connects past and present South Africa by inserting her own portrait into several colonial-type photographs, the archival photographs allowed to seep into her own transparent body. Her work speaks to the power structures behind archival and visualizing practices in the shaping of history, memory, and identity. Through the portrait of Makhubu, the viewer receives an unsettling glimpse into South Africa’s colonial past and the ways in which black subjectivities were produced within and through these racist and colonial photographs. In line with the stereotype of the noble savage and the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel, these types of photographs infantilized Africans, depicting them in close proximity to nature, framing them against an unchanging background of flora and fauna. By combining both her own image and the archival photographs, Makhubu’s translucency not only addresses the ghosts of the past but also seems to address a sense of generational alienation and invisibility.

## *Tribute from the Colonies* and the Destruction of Ecologies

As well as contesting the depiction of benevolent colonialism and the noble savage, the panels of the Golden Coach’s homage to the colonialist urge us to explicitly address another colonial icon: that of the paradisiacal nature of *Mooi Indië* (“Beautiful Indonesia”) and the inexhaustible resources of the colonial soil. On the coach’s central panel resides the image of the Dutch Maiden, to whom the indigenous people are apparently only too happy to humbly offer the resources and treasures of their homelands. Juxtaposing the work of Zico Albaiquni (1987, Indonesia) and Hestu Setu Legi (1971, Yogyakarta, Indonesia) with the Golden Coach’s central panel allows us to reveal the hidden costs of these colonial “gifts” and resources. It is crucial here to zoom in on the calm and peaceful blue ocean painted at the top of the panel’s central scene. This ocean smoothly connects the colonies to the “homeland”. However, as both Albaiquni and Setu Legi thematize, the arrival of Europeans, both in the East and the West, had a profound impact on local ecological systems. Not only were forests cleared so that the land could be used for agriculture, the hitherto isolated habitats of indigenous species were also overrun by rats and other pests carried on ships. That very same ocean also served as the medium over which colonial treasures and the enslaved were carried to their destinations. Considered from such perspectives—those of profit and (the slave)



trade—the coach’s central panel reveals how indigenous workers and natural goods and resources form part of the same visual sphere as depicted in the lower portion of the panel, which depicts how those enslaved lost their homes, their bodily integrity, and their political status. As Achille Mbembe (2016) would say, they are “the living dead”, excluded from the human species, existing only in a kind of shadowland. Spectators of the Golden Coach thus witness how indigenous people and natural resources are equally situated as materials serving the economic interests of the colonial regime.

Colonialism and slavery thus not only refer to the history of how people treated other people but also how people treated the environment. Unveiling this nexus of slavery, capitalism, climate change, and global environmental destruction (Brown et al. 2019) motivates the work of both Albaiquni and Setu Legi. Both artists make tangible the effects of the changing geographies of production and consumption, as well as the shifting profile and intensifying nature of global pollution caused by colonialist and capitalist regimes. By exhibiting these works together with the panel, we trust the nexus between colonialism, capitalism, and the environment can no longer be overlooked.

Returning now to Haraway’s quote at this chapter’s opening—which poses the thought-provoking question “With whose blood were my eyes crafted?”—*Decolonial Dialogues with the Golden Coach* seeks to unravel how the supposedly innocent symbols of the Dutch colonial past reverberate in conceptions of the present and future. Understanding and interpreting the contemporary artworks presented in the exhibition and placed in dialogue with the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel, the exhibition provides the spectator a lens through which to reconsider the symbolism and meaning depicted in the panel. If we want to understand the national narratives that surround Dutch colonial rule as forming the background of contemporary debates on cultural heritage, we see how these understandings of the benevolence of Dutch colonialism act as a shield against processes of reckoning with past injustices and their present declinations. When the King announces that the coach will (at least temporarily) not be used and instead preserved in the Royal Stables, as opposed to a museum, history is not reckoned with. By not exhibiting the coach in a museum, where its meaning in society and history can be debated, hiding the vehicle in storage marks yet another failure of the Netherlands to accurately address and come to grips with its violent, imperial, and colonial past. With the exhibition *Decolonial Dialogues of the Golden Coach*—which, due to its online nature, can be visited indefinitely—MOED hopes to offer a contribution to the ongoing process and search for answers to the question of how to exhibit contested cultural heritage in a decolonial manner, as well as how to (re)consider the presence or absence of these symbolisms in society.

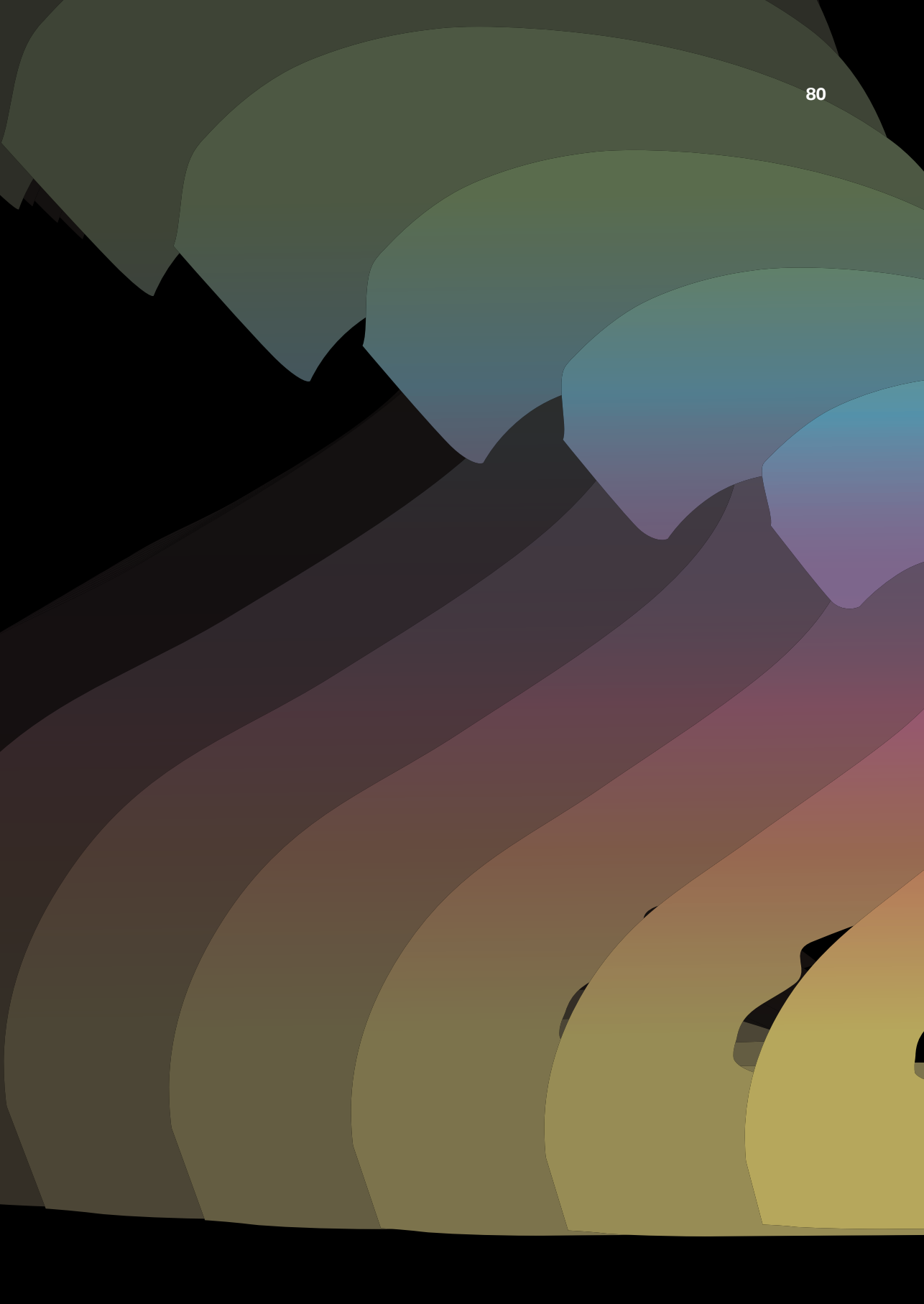
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## Notes

1. For this occasion, researcher and curator Giorgia Cacciatore joined our team.
2. This is except for one scene depicted on the panel: on the right side of the Dutch Maiden's throne a Javanese ruler is depicted with his retinue. They wear court dress made of valuable batik materials and bear personal gifts. For a further unpacking of the panel, see page 30–31 from the exhibition catalogue "The Golden Coach" (2021, Amsterdam Museum).
3. It is commonly understood that the stock character of 'the noble savage' has its roots in the work of 18th century French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who formalized and invented the myth of the noble savage as a personification of natural goodness, characterized by a glorification of backwardness and primitivism. However, ever since, this mythical figure has held a pervasive and firm position within academic discourse, juxtaposing the noble savage against the enlightened European. The stereotype has been an object of study, affirmation, and conflict (see for example the work of Ellingson 2001; Rowland 2004) and has mostly returned in the field of Anthropology, but also in bordering academic fields that look at ethnographic literature and the history of cross-cultural encounters between Europeans and non-Europeans.





# Artistic and Theoretical Practices



In this chapter the authors explore how contemporary art, curatorship, and performance shape a more inclusive understanding of history and challenge traditional dominant narratives. By amplifying the voices of historically marginalized cultures, these essays highlight the role of museums in representation. Decolonial approaches emerge as crucial for disrupting colonial power structures, as well as confronting colonial archival logic by using decolonial curatorship to reimagine the past. The contribution of artistic practices to societal healing by addressing historical trauma and envisioning alternative futures is explored. Performance, musicking, and affective methodologies foster dialogue and question power dynamics, creating space for alternative narratives. The essays are complemented by a provocative intervention on the future of cultural practice and an interview with Jennifer Tosch, founder of the Amsterdam Black Heritage Tours and co-author of *The Netherlands Slavery Heritage Guide*. Together the contributions embrace the importance of a future-oriented perspective, with artists, curators, and performers acting as shape-shifters, rethinking conventional histories and offering transformative possibilities.

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More  
than just the  
visualization





Shape-shifting:  
Contemporary Art  
and the  
Revisioning of  
the Amsterdam  
Colonial Past

BY INEZ BLANCA VAN DER SCHEER, IMARA LIMON  
AND MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER

**ABSTRACT:** The past decade has seen the Dutch museum sector navigate what could be called a decolonial turn. From interventions in racist collection presentations to groundbreaking exhibitions and grassroots collaborations, Dutch museum practices have committed themselves to redressing their erasure and misrepresentation of the (de)colonized world. They follow in the footsteps of the artists that have worked with/within/against these same institutions for decades prior, exposing the absence of the non-colonial subject and insisting on their presence. This chapter explores the meeting of these artists and museums, presenting an inventory of contemporary collaborations exploring the possibilities of revisioning the colonial past.

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ormer professional footballer Ruud Gullit is dressed in an 18th-century costume, impersonating Jacob Rühle (1751–1828). Rühle was of African origin and involved in slavery and the slave trade. Another large-scale photo portrait staged in a theater setting shows Sylvana Simons, leader of the anti-racist political party BIJ1 and the first Black parliamentary leader in the Netherlands. Simons represents Elisabeth Samson (1715–1771), born a free Black woman, a millionaire who acquired several plantations with enslaved people in the Dutch colony of Suriname. A third portrait shows Yosina Roemajauw, winner of *The Voice Kids (2018)*, seated at a table in Amsterdam Museum’s old Regent’s Room. She impersonates Christina van Geugten (1749–1780), born into slavery in Batavia (Jakarta) and known to have run away, as well as being later sentenced to imprisonment in the Spinhuis, a workhouse for women, after she was taken to Amsterdam around 1754.

These are examples from a photo series called *Dutch Masters Revisited*, conceptualized by Jörgen Tjon A Fong, at that time artistic director at Urban Myth. The first three works were presented in 2018, in collaboration with the Amsterdam Museum and Urban Myth, at art space OSCAM in Amsterdam-Zuidoost, a borough with many descendants from formerly colonized areas. In September 2019, upon invitation of the Amsterdam Museum, a series of thirteen works was curated amidst the semi-permanent exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age (November 29, 2014 – December 31, 2019)* in the museum’s deponance at the Amstel 51. This exhibition included over twenty monumental group portraits from the 17th and 18th centuries by Dutch Masters such as Bartholomeus van der Helst, Govert Flinck, and Nicolaes Pickenoy, from the Amsterdam Museum collection as well as from the Rijksmuseum. The group portraits of the city’s regents, archers, and merchants, commissioned by people in power, reflect their perspectives on the world and are strongly connected to national pride, wealth, and projected innocence. The juxtaposition of the Dutch Masters and the historical figures of color was striking. Tjon A Fong’s project made visible a part of the city’s history that had long been marginalized and opened up space to consider what that meant for society today, and for the future.





**Figure 1**

Stacii Samidin, Milette Raats, Humberto Tan.

Compilation of *Dutch Masters Revisited*, 2018-2019,

(Photographs by Amsterdam Museum).

In the following years, the Amsterdam Museum extended more commissions to contemporary makers to revisit and reimagine the Dutch colonial past. For the exhibition *The Golden Coach* (June 18, 2021 – February 27, 2022), fifteen new works were produced by a wide variety of artists offering critical takes on what may be considered the ultimate object of contested heritage in the Netherlands. Approaching the city's 750th anniversary in 2025, the museum believes that collaborating with artists is key: not only to dwell on the past but also to envision a future that is founded on social equity.

In addition to city museums like the Amsterdam Museum, contemporary art museums have also been displaying this work, as well as ethnographic and historical museums.

One of the first institutions to invite contemporary artists to work with historical collections was the ethnographic Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt. In *The Metabolic Museum* (2020), former director Clémentine Deliss describes how projects by artists such as Luke Willis Thompson made the museum collections more accessible for students and researchers from all cultures to study their heritage: “transforming repositories from nothing short of object-prisons to new spatial environments for experimental inquiry... basing all new research on the potentiality created by assemblages of artifacts, documents, and photographic archives” (88).

Such museum practices stand on the shoulders of the artists who have already been engaging in this work for decades and the grassroots organizations that have been supporting them to realize their major projects. Think of Kara Walker, addressing racial violence and misogyny with her black silhouette figures that she first made in the 1990s, as well as the racism and exclusion that are deeply embedded in American museums. Or Fred Wilson's exhibition *Mining the Museum* (Maryland Historical Society, 1992/93), one of the first major efforts to make visible that museums are not neutral and the way in which racism appears in the arrangements of objects, in language, and also in that which is not shown. Or, back to the Netherlands, Patricia Kaersenhout's research installations on sugar, *Bloed Suiker/Blood Sugar* (2017), and Lonnie van Brummelen and Siebren de Haan's film projects on Maroons in Suriname, for example. These artistic practices have had a major impact but have remained understudied for too long.<sup>1</sup>

If museums are part of a system that produces and enables imperial knowledge, then so is curatorial practice. As a dedicated team of content makers from the Amsterdam Museum in various stages of our careers, we feel a need to critically assess our own curatorial practices and collaborations with artists in order to arrive at a set of learnings and future prospects. Considering institutional power structures, what does it mean to invite artists whose work represents cultures and identities that have been institutionally marginalized, or even destroyed? Our collaborations are an attempt to no longer ignore and exclude these voices and perspectives. Our ambition to redirect our gaze to the future—the explicit aim of this reader—inspired us to take a new look at the artists we are working with. Unraveling the critical and at times mysterious ways in which they move back and forth between past, present, and future showed us that instead of angels in a storm, looking at the past with their back to the future, these artists are true shape-shifters: instead of writing history, what they are producing is an embodied science fiction in which all temporalities collide.

With the ongoing New Narratives program line, we in the Amsterdam Museum reconsider the stories that we tell and the way we present and interpret museum collections. In this context, we invited artists and makers to present their work within an exhibition, in dialogue with the group portraits from our collection that were presented in the exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age. Dutch Masters Revisited* (September 30, 2019 – September 13, 2020) was the first commissioned project. Recent archival research by Mark Ponte, historian at the City Archives, revealed that there was already a Black community in 17th-century Amsterdam (Ponte 59). Jörgen Tjon A Fong wanted to bring this information to the attention of a wider audience. Through his experience in theater, he used storytelling to shed light on people from all kinds of cultural backgrounds who lived in 17th- and 18th-century Holland. Tjon A Fong worked in an interdisciplinary way: he selected several historical figures in collaboration with scholars and brought together costume designers to compile the outfits, prominent Dutch people to pose as historical figures, and photographers to capture them in historically relevant locations. He even modeled for one of the portraits himself.

In the process of curating, we spoke at length about the relationship between *Dutch Masters Revisited* and *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*. What could be a relevant interaction? The Black presence of thirteen large-scale portraits in the space formed a sharp contrast with the situation before: a large space full of white people staring at you from the portraits. We decided the photo portraits should not be presented too small, nor in the margins of the space. Most important was the context: in order to make space for multiple perspectives, it would not make sense to keep the title *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*, thereby imposing the narratives of the so-called Golden Age on a project that emphasizes counternarratives: the 17th century was definitely not a golden age for people like Christina van Geugten.

In September 2019 the Amsterdam Museum changed the title of the main exhibition to *Group Portraits of the 17th Century* and decided to no longer use the term “Golden Age” as a synonym for the period around the 17th century. The decision was closely tied to the museum’s ongoing collaborations and dialogues with activists, grassroots movements, and other initiatives in the city that have been fighting for equity for a long time (Kiers, Judikje et al.). The announcement was met with widespread condemnation within national borders and was extensively discussed in the media. The former Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, responded within hours that it was nonsense and that he was actually proud of the term (“Rutte over weghalen Gouden Eeuw”). In this way, *Dutch Masters Revisited* contributed to the public debate on the implications of terminology, the meaning of Dutch identity, and how to include multiple perspectives that were often still topics discussed only in the margins of society. The national debate paved the way for next steps.

The second project in dialogue with the group portraits was *Monument of Regents: Natasja Kensmil* (November 20, 2020 – January 9, 2022). Kensmil is a leading Dutch artist, with an oeuvre of drawings and monumental paintings inspired by historical figures and events. She approached the Amsterdam Museum as she was working on a series of portraits, or archetypes, of female regents. *Monument of Regents* (2019) is painted with thick layers of dark paint, sometimes smeared and sometimes very detailed. The hollow eyes of the regents and the white tones accentuating the bone structure of their faces make them ghostly, almost zombie-like. This ghostliness enforces an alternative reading of the 17th-century group portraits.

For Kensmil, this regards especially the position occupied by female regents of 17th-century institutions. Although women at the time had no legal status to do business, they were allowed to serve on the boards of charitable institutions. Their families were connected with the East and West India Companies, which means their wealth came from the colonial system that was based on inequality, violence, and the exploitation of people in occupied territories. Kensmil is interested in this ambiguity between the regents' charity work and the people at whose expense they acquired their wealth. After we expressed the intention to exhibit *Monument of Regents*, Kensmil produced more works. The double portrait *Maria Munter and Isaac Jan Nijs* (2020) depicts an Amsterdam regent couple whose families were involved in the Dutch colonial trading companies. Maria Munter was also a regent of the city orphanage on Kalverstraat, which became the main location of the Amsterdam Museum in 1975. Kensmil's color palette is recognizable in all of her works, with thick layers of paint and a macabre look. *White Elephant* (2019), a large VOC ship at sea, and the landscape *Selva Amazone* (2020), refer to the territories and peoples affected by the colonial system, but remain unseen in the large hall of Portrait Gallery of the 17th Century.

Revisiting this heritage means moving between various contexts. Tjon A Fong plays with concepts of time and identities by pairing today's familiar faces with historical figures. He uses different media and strategies, from photography to archival research, curating, and a critical analysis of terminology. Kensmil's work unveils what has been omitted, and still she refuses a too straightforward reading of her work. The ghostliness could be seen as merely the specter of colonialism, but it also offers a glimpse into Kensmil's inner worlds, tormented by doubt and fear. In this way, their artistic practices blur the boundaries between now and then, here and overseas, inner and outer world, and good and evil.

## Embodying

In her work *BLOODY GOLD. TRIBUTE FROM THE COLONIES / WHAT ABOUT REPAIRING THE DAMAGE?* (2020), AiRich heavily reworks the *Tribute from the Colonies* panel that was painted by Nicolaas van der Waaij on the left side of Golden Coach in 1896–1898. In her photoshopped collage the young artist deploys illustrations made by John Gabriel Stedman, the 18th-century colonial officer who illustrated the abuses to which enslaved persons were subjected in great detail. Machine guns surround the white virgin representing the Netherlands and a stack of gold replaces the agricultural goods at her feet. AiRich also adds an image of herself sitting cross-legged, and looking fiercely toward a muzzled man to her right. The panel becomes a slave ship, making this collage, according to AiRich, "a struggle to balance the pursuit of beauty with the horror of these historical images" (AiRich).

The *Tribute from the Colonies* panel is the reason why the Golden Coach is one of the most contested pieces of heritage in the Netherlands. Until its restoration in 2015, the coach was used by the King for an annual appearance in The Hague on Prinsjesdag and for other royal celebrations such as marriages or baptisms. The Amsterdam Museum made a proposal to the King, the vehicle's official owner, to loan the coach to the museum once the restoration was complete, so it could be contextualized as part of a large exhibition in which people could learn about its history and use, including the contemporary debate surrounding its future.<sup>2</sup> As the coach was a gift from the city of Amsterdam to the first female queen on the throne in 1898, it was a strong case for us to make. The fact that girls who lived in the former orphanage in which the Amsterdam Museum was later





**Figure 2**

Natasja Kensmil, *Maria Munter and Isaac Jan Nijs*, 2020,  
(Photograph by Peter Cox)





**Figure 3**

Ai Rich, *BLOODY GOLD. HULDE AAN DE KOLONIËN, HOEZIT HET MET DE HERSTELSCHADE*, 2021,  
(Photograph by Amsterdam Museum,  
Jan-Kees Steenman)



**Figure 4**

Nelson Carrilho, *Deep in me a passionate dream*, 2017,  
(Photograph by Amsterdam Museum, Jan-Kees Steenman)

located contributed to embroidering the interior of the coach made the case stronger. Most significantly, the museum intended to investigate, together with visitors to the exhibition and people throughout the Netherlands, the future of this contested vehicle. Should it be driven again? Or would it be better off in a museum, where it can be contextualized and critical conversations can be facilitated?

When the King granted the loan in the fall of 2019, two months after the Golden Age discussion, we felt supported in our quest to decolonize our institution and contribute to the (inter)national conversation regarding social equity. However, we had only eighteen months to curate a presentation that, as we formulated our aim, would prove that contested heritage could bring people together rather than divide them.<sup>3</sup> We, therefore, invested time and energy in building an infrastructure that brought different people together in an interdisciplinary research team and a large peer review team (a "sounding board") of 22 specialists who represented a wide variety of voices.<sup>4</sup> Multivocality was a key concept in our approach, leading to an exhibition characterized by its multiperspectivity. The cultural history of the coach was narrated by hundreds of related historical artifacts and stories that formed a *parcours* of six large galleries leading up to the coach itself.

Increasingly, and a bit outside of or parallel to this process, contemporary art began to play a key role. Fifteen works, of which twelve were newly commissioned, were presented. Most were on display in a large additional gallery that was added to the exhibition route. For some visitors this area served as the beginning of the presentation, while for others it was its closing act. Other works were interspersed among the historical sections of the exhibition or installed in the two outdoor courtyards.

One of the participating artists, Raul Balai, critically asserted in the conference preceding this reader that museums should be careful not to let artists "do the dirty work". According to him, in lieu of making a big statement, bringing in contemporary makers risks giving them the task of visualizing and critically voicing what museums are afraid to say themselves. Although the Golden Coach research team was openly working from a decolonial and (self-)critical perspective, it might be relevant in the current context to focus on a moment in the curatorial process where art indeed played a key role in visualizing something the museum found difficult to reconcile. After an introductory gallery and a space devoted to the naissance of the idea of the coach in late 19th-century Amsterdam, a gallery space was devoted to the way in which people living in the Netherlands in the late 19th century viewed the colonies in both East and West. For that matter we decided to focus on the world's fair that was held in 1883 in Amsterdam, on what is today Museumplein. Besides its program celebrating artistry and craftsmanship, there were two sections where human beings were on display (the "human zoos"). Around 38 people from Indonesia were on display, made to imitate life on a fake kampong, while roughly 30 people shipped from Suriname were presented in a circus tent to the exhibition's over 1.5 million visitors. The Netherlands at that time counted only five million inhabitants.

Lengthy discussions took place among members of the research team and sounding board regarding how to present these dehumanizing displays. Should it be strictly text-based, in order to avoid repeating the painful practice? On the other hand, isn't the core message a dissection of the prevailing visual regime and its systemic inequities at that time? Curator Annemarie de Wildt introduced the work produced by artist Nelson Carrilho, who had recently found out that his great-grandmother Elisabeth Moendi had been one of the women on display in the circus tent. In *Deep in*

*me a passionate dream* (2017), Carrilho made an altar for her using an enlarged historical photograph that was taken at the time. Several statues are added, including one inspired by African forms with a cross in its head. It symbolizes how Africans' selfhood was destroyed by slavery and colonialism. With this acknowledgement, as the artist stated in the accompanying audio tour, also comes the liberation which is of great significance for the present and future generations dealing with this painful colonial past.

Opposite to this installation, the research team decided to present some additional historical photographs of the people that had been on display. Carl Haarnack, an avid collector of these images, believes there is also pride and respect in them, despite the late 19th-century racist scientific ideas that underpin this documentation. It is via his collection and narration in the audio tour that visitors also gained access to this painful history of displaying humans. In a sense, Balai is therefore right in his critical questioning of the museum's decision to refrain from taking a stand. Instead, we opted for a model which addressed sensitive issues via the voices of others, and an artist indeed played a decisive role in this multivocality.

Balai's own artistic contribution to the Golden Coach exhibition resonates with Carrilho's artistic strategy of bringing family to the stage. In an installation presented at the beginning of the large opening/closing gallery, fully devoted to art commissions and existing works rereading the Golden Coach's history, Balai presented 3D-printed miniatures of several of his own relatives on pedestals. Next to each figure was a deformed horse with twisted legs, multiple tails or heads, or missing body parts. The title of the installation is *JARLLAND or All crowns are bastards* (2021), a multilayered pun in which Balai questions the fact that eight "purebred" Friesian or Gelderlander horses from the Royal Stables normally draw the Golden Coach. His family members and their horse alter egos all have mixed backgrounds from Africa, Europe, South America, the Caribbean, India, China, and the Maluku Islands. These "bastards" challenge the nationalism and related racial ideologies which, in his words, "Hinder us from being able to embrace our intensely connected reality".

Several of the contributing artists used their own body as a key element of their artistic strategy. In the performance *A\_GOLDEN[R]AGE... (?)* (2021), Bernard Akoi-Jackson, for instance, reenacted the route traveled by the Golden Coach through the center of Amsterdam after the marriage ceremony of Prince Willem-Alexander and Máxima on February 2, 2002. The act of painting his own body gold resonated with the current discussions on blackface in the Netherlands and critiqued the mere celebratory function of the Golden Coach, playfully addressing the question—still unanswered at the time—regarding the origin of the gold on the coach. Might it have come from Ghana, where Akoi-Jackson lives and works? A playful quiz following his walk through the city and the installation of the performance in the exhibition (a takeover of the period room once used by the regents who administered the orphanage where the museum is located) ironically exposed our current lack of knowledge regarding Dutch colonial endeavors in Africa.

In two other performance pieces, we see a more religious embodiment. In Naomie Pieter's *Ayo No, Te Un Otro Biaha* (2021) the artist is dressed as a ghostlike figure standing next to the coach. An altar is formed in front of the contested panel with elements from Afro-Caribbean cultures, such as golden cowrie shells and candles, and the audience becomes part of a ritual intended to give the ancestors peace. The title of the performance refers to a Curaçaoan myth in which enslaved people uttered

these words while jumping from a cliff called Bulabanda to escape their brutal existence under slavery. By doing so, wings would suddenly appear which would allow them to fly home. It is therefore not a goodbye, but a transformation which allows for a reunion in time and space. **96**

The day before the Golden Coach was hoisted over the roof of the museum and placed in a glass vitrine on the Girls' Courtyard, as it is called, the aforementioned artist Nelson Carrilho performed *Dance of Creation* (2021). The performance is a ritualistic African dance based on myths of creation and destruction. Undergoing a metamorphosis between the mother, who represents creation, and the son, who represents destruction, the dance ends with the son returning to the mother's womb. This opens up a higher state of consciousness and leads to new sources for reflection and creation.

Brian Elstak's painted sculpture *GOLDIE* (2021) pays homage to the activists who for decades have been fighting historical colonialism, racism, and systemic inequities that still prevail in Dutch society. Painted on a canvas shaped like a wooden computer cabinet, the artist transforms the Golden Coach into an arcade racing game—an object from which music emanates that at first seems inviting, drawing you in. But if you stop, look closely, and listen to the soundtrack, you will realize that *GOLDIE* does not offer entertainment. There is no celebration at the finish. *GOLDIE* has a key message for you, voiced by rapper Kendrick Lamar: "Sit down, be humble".

For the Golden Coach exhibition, these artists did the opposite. They asserted themselves, claimed space, and used their bodies and those of their (historical) relatives to link different pasts with the now, offering knowledge about the interwovenness of the colonial past and present. "If you don't know, now you know," is another quote we can find on Elstak's *GOLDIE*, coming from rapper Biggie. The embodied knowledge these artists have produced should not be a parallel, we now know, but an integral part of the entire curatorial process.

## Regrouping

In exploring not only the colonial past but also our role in the decolonial present and futures of Amsterdam, the museum is embarking on a long-term collaboration with the artist Raquel van Haver. In her oeuvre, Van Haver has portrayed people in precarious social positions on various continents, but her current series is about Amsterdam. Van Haver's work breaks with the delicacy of the painting tradition that permeates our collection. It is strikingly decadent, with paint applied so generously that it is often still wet to the touch months after the work is mounted for exhibition. Van Haver trades in realistic detailing for an estranging excess in her portraiture, such that even the eyes of her figures go missing in the contours of their face. But there is one way in which van Haver's work and our collection of 17th-century paintings overlap: they are mainly group portraits.

*Group Portraits of the 21st Century* is a project in the context of the 750th anniversary of the city of Amsterdam in 2025. In that time, we are venturing into the nooks and crannies of the city with Van Haver to map the networks of unofficial 'caretakers' of Amsterdam, the people that have stepped up and contributed to our contemporary city from various fields of activism: education, culture, care (such as healthcare but also beyond this), climate, social cohesion, and housing. The portraits will correspond with these themes, culminating in a final large-scale portrait dedicated to the intersectionality and cross-pollination of peoples' activism.





**Figure 5**

Raquel van Haver, *Untitled*, 2020-2021,  
(Photography by Amsterdam Museum)

The project's unintentional pilot was a group portrait of fourteen activists, produced for our 2020 group exhibition of contemporary artists, *Refresh Amsterdam*. From her own experiences, Van Haver sourced the names of fourteen people instrumental in the Dutch struggle for Black emancipation, a movement ranging from protests against the racist blackface caricature *Zwarte Piet* and police brutality, to the establishment of institutions of Black autonomy.<sup>5</sup> The compositional mirroring of the museum's many group portraits did not go unnoticed and formed the basis for this portrait's elaboration into *Group Portraits of the 21st Century*. In our commitment to being a network museum, we ensured that this would not be a one-on-one collaboration with Van Haver and formed a cohort of multiple partners throughout the city: het Hem, the Rijksmuseum, the City Archives, the International Institute of Social History, and the University of Amsterdam.

The project's ambitions are twofold. The first and perhaps more evident goal is to pay tribute to the Amsterdammers who have shaped and continue to shape the millennial city. Unlike the figures in our 17th-century group portraits, whose portrayal was largely commissioned by virtue of their wealth and status in society, the 21st-century subjects are chosen by their communities. The methodology is democratic. To begin drafting a longlist of a few hundred Amsterdammers, we invited the subjects of Van Haver's first Black Lives Matter group portrait to launch this project with us in a brainstorming session, during which we ate and drank together and named every Amsterdammer near and dear to us who could not be missed. From those on the front lines at every protest to those doing the invisible labor of care for the community. We sought to remedy the overrepresentation of men in the first portrait by emphasizing the intersectionality inherent to activist Amsterdam. Names were later also contributed by partner institutions, and we developed an exponential networking research process: every person invited for a portrait recommended people from their own network for the next. In the artistic research phase for each portrait, we gathered the names per theme and interviewed them as a group, mapping their experiences and pinpointing the group dynamics. This process allowed us to avoid reproducing a top-down canonization process, as the communities of activists themselves were able to decide whom and what sort of work to honor and celebrate.

The second objective of the project incidentally emerged from our striving for a democratic and flexible methodology. During our launch with the activists portrayed on the Black emancipation portrait, the group expressed the urgency for something more instrumental than only the tributes we had initially envisioned. They pressed us to consider how we could produce more than just the visualization of these activist networks: How could we activate the networks we were mapping? To ensure the project would not end with the exhibitions of 2025 and absorption into the collections, we moved from the static construction of a new canon to an archive; a democratic archive housed at the City Archives that would be accessible not only for research but more importantly for networking, enabling Amsterdam activists to find each other across the time and space of their own contexts. This way, our extensive artistic research would culminate not only in the portrayal of existing networks but itself create new and multiplying networks. We invited the subjects of each portrait to share their stories—recorded and transcribed as oral histories—as well as any documentation such as photos, flyers, and protest signs to be stored at the City Archives. Significantly, the archive is stored independently of any of the partners, maintained separately as the *Group Portraits of the 21st Century* archive to honor the democracy of the project rather than privileging any single partner institution. The archive itself will be openly accessible once the project is concluded, with conditions protecting each activist contributor. They can decide if and when they want their participation to be

disclosed, whether their contributions are fully accessible or redacted, or perhaps only after a predetermined period of time has passed.

## Conclusion

At the opening of the exhibition *The Golden Coach* by the King (June 17, 2021), which was partly covered live on national television, the King spoke at length with the contributing artists. In the critical discussions they elicited, Willem-Alexander took his time, declared he was there to learn and listen, and made clear he would decide later what the future of the coach would be. And he did: on January 13, 2022 (six weeks prior to the closing of the exhibition) he released a video stating that he would no longer use the coach. For now, at least, “as society is not ready for it”. Although we can be critical about the wording of his statement, the decision to take it off the road was applauded by many.

Is it a decision inspired by the art as described above? Are artists helping to arrive at a future in which public space and national systems and rituals are more equal and less based on colonial and racist hierarchies? The blatant racism of the Dutch Tax and Customs Administration that was brought to light in recent years (the so-called “Allowance affair”) makes it hard to be overly optimistic.<sup>6</sup> However, times are also changing, as after ten years of activism against the Zwarte Piet tradition, the national public broadcasting companies and many key businesses and influential figures finally decided to abolish the blackface helpers of Sinterklaas in 2021. And at the end of 2022, the then Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte, and six months later the King of the Netherlands as well, made official apologies for the roles played by the Dutch state and the royal family in transatlantic slavery, respectively.

## Gearing toward a Different Future?

“This is science fiction to me,” was Kevi Donat’s emotional response after his visit to *The Golden Coach* exhibition. The founder of Paris Noir, the guided city walks in which the colonial past and presence in the French capital is being critically narrated, was struck by the fact that, in a publicly funded institution like the Amsterdam Museum, such critical decolonial curatorial and artistic practices were presented. The metaphor of “science fiction” alludes to an unreal practice that is beyond our current day and age. Perhaps, therefore, it is not the right term to define the temporalities at play in the work of the artists engaging with the colonial past, as described in the above.

On the other hand, the colonial past cannot be seen as something separate from the now and the future. Yet museums often treat history as such, as Ariëlla Azoulay asserts in her pivotal study *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Often these 19th-century institutions continue to act as if they are unable to change anything. We could compare it to the *Angelus Novus* (New Angel) by Paul Klee from 1920. German philosopher Walter Benjamin brought this image into play in order to define the relationship between past, present, and future. Written in 1940, the year of his suicide, he espouses a dystopian belief that a new future could not be envisioned: the angel of history, just like Klee’s depiction, is looking at the past and blown by the wind of progress toward the future—with its back to it. Transfixed and unable to turn around and cut itself loose from what it is forced to behold, the disasters from the previous period, the angel is moving away from paradise with great speed.

Although it may seem to certain critics that artists who engage with the colonial past are just as fixated on past debris, wreckage upon wreckage, unable to turn to a better future, we have shown in this essay that this is certainly not the case. Within the heterogeneous practices of these makers there is a much more fluid interconnectedness between the past, present, and future than the new angel of Benjamin and Klee. Using their various artistic methods of revisiting, embodying, and regrouping, these makers appeared to be nothing less than shape-shifters. Taking different roles, deploying different media and their own kin and bodies, to travel back and forth through time. Reshaping the future. **100**

As voiced by Afrofuturist thinkers and makers around the world, such futurism is a key element of the decolonial endeavor. The return to the pain of the past should be accompanied by new vistas of what the world could look like.

What this entails regarding the collision of temporalities in relation to a city can be found in N.K. Jemisin's novel *The City We Became* (2020). Here we encounter five protagonists in New York who at moments become one with specific parts of the city. These superheroes embody the past and present hopes, fears, and pain of both the built city and its inhabitants. They can feel everything and, when working together, can counter evil attacks and safeguard the city's future.

Maybe this offers a lead for artists like Tjon A Fong, Kensmil, AiRich, Van Haver, and the many others with whom we are working. They become the city. A city that is ever-changing, hovering between various temporalities and traumas, and a city that means different things to different people. The shape-shifting strategies of the artists is admirable and creative, and their work presents powerful alternative narratives. However, we should be careful with glorifying their struggles. Their art can be seen as a way of coping with, or resisting, an ongoing, violent erasure of certain histories and perspectives. Celebrating their struggles maintains the status quo. Whereas these artists almost become the city, the museums they work with are still often surprisingly outdated: white institutions in which colonial ideas are deeply ingrained and reproduced on many levels. Museums, especially those with public heritage, have a responsibility to hold relevance for as broad an audience as possible. In fact, it is the museums that should shape-shift. Museums must radically change to accommodate both contemporary artists and the ways in which their critical work contributes to reshaping the past as well as the future.

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## Notes

1. The past years these artists have found ways to analyze their work via the medium of writing dissertations on their own decolonial practices (Brummelen, Lonnie van, and Siebren de Haan).
2. The ownership of the Golden Coach is debated by emeritus professor Ulli Jessurun D'Oliviera in his essay 'Wie heeft er zeggenschap over de inzet van de Gouden Koets?' (Jessurun d'Oliveira).
3. As phrased in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue *The Golden Coach*: "In this way we can demonstrate together that a controversial history, and the heritage that is a reminder of it, does not have to be divisive, but rather provides an excellent opportunity to cultivate mutual understanding and work together on a society which more than before is based on equality and connection" (Schavemaker).
4. See the essay 'The Museum as a Researcher' (Schavemaker et al.) in chapter 1 of this volume as a (self) critical analysis of this process and its results.
5. Miguel Heilbron, Complex a.k.a Adeiye Tjon, Gita Jagessar, Roelof Jan Minneboo, Amenda Seelink, Jerry Afriyie, Raul Balai, Devika Partiman, Quincy Gario, Regina van der Kloet, Mitchell Esajas, Kunta Rincho, Patrick Mathurin, and Kirsten van den Hul.
6. For more on this, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch\\_childcare\\_benefits\\_scandal](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_childcare_benefits_scandal).

# Jennifer Tosch

**Interviewed by  
Annemarie de Wildt**



**I**n this interview, Annemarie de Wildt (curator and historian) helps Jennifer Tosch (heritage expert and founder of Black Heritage Tours) explore her dedication to uncovering hidden histories and promoting inclusivity in heritage and tourism.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: The co-authored book *Slavery Heritage Guide* that you worked on with Nancy Jouwe, Dineke Stam, Dienne Hondius, and myself was published in 2014. You started the Black Heritage Tours in 2013. Let us go back to the beginning, ten years ago.

JENNIFER TOSCH: It all came together very organically. I didn't plan it. It began with courses about these subjects at a Dutch university, but I found the narrative to be very focused on the glory of the "Golden Age". As I was researching the history of my Surinamese family and ancestors, it felt very strange that, in these courses, we were only talking about the "Golden Age" and its glory, and how the Netherlands rose to become one of the ten richest countries. The story I was told at the Black Europe Summer School, a very intensive two-week course, as well as my own research, was very different. The Black Heritage Tours were somewhat of an intervention on this contrast.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: Meanwhile, during this time, people including Gloria Wekker, Dienne Hondius, and Nancy Jouwe spoke out about this historical narrative being taught. Did their research inspire you in any way or help you shape the tour?

JENNIFER TOSCH: Their perspectives inspired me, as I had been building knowledge on this topic for years before I began doing research. When I was already giving guided tours in 2012, I suggested to my friend Ricki [Stevenson], who does Black Paris tours, that there should be a historical tour with a different narrative than the most dominant one. After I told her that the tours that were offered as part of the Black Europe Summer School were unsatisfactory to me in terms of telling the story of Black Europe, she was the first to plant the seed of a Black Heritage Tour. Ricki said: "Well, why don't you do it?" Because I wanted to provide a better historical narrative. And, after some thought, I replied: "Well, why not?" I wrote an easy business plan and then everything started to come together synergistically.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: And there was the momentum in 2013, the 150th anniversary of the legal abolishment of slavery. Various institutions, including the Amsterdam Museum, but also grassroots organizations were aiming to bring the story closer to Amsterdam.

JENNIFER TOSCH: Right, it was very much this historical distancing, you know, colonial amnesia. Not us, them, over there. So it was very much about making this narrative more central.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: What were the obstacles you encountered in setting up the tour?

JENNIFER TOSCH: I think foreign visitors are more surprised, because they come to Amsterdam expecting to see red light **104**

# To unpack and dismantle

JENNIFER TOSCH: Actually, the only real obstacle was my level of knowledge. As I was just beginning to learn the history, it was wonderful to have a fully functional research infrastructure with a beautiful community. I could write, create a marketing plan, and so on, but I needed people in the field, experts, and professionals in the cultural sector and museums to help me deconstruct it. I really had to do a crash course in Dutch history to get it right.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: The tours are more than just indicating places, saying "This was there, that was there". It's also a conversation. Therefore, it is not only about knowledge, but also about emotions, right?

JENNIFER TOSCH: It's a dialogue with history. That is why I consider myself a history teller rather than a tour guide. I couldn't get through a tour without falling apart at first. The tour evokes memories, both historical and colonial, as well as new ones. Guests' reactions range from very sad to angry to emotional regret.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: When it comes to the reactions and emotions that the guests experience, is there a difference between Dutch and foreign visitors?

districts, coffee shops, and windmills. When they take the tour, they discover that there is more to the city than the glory of the "Golden Age". Everything you say to most international visitors is met with: "Wow". For Dutch people, especially at the beginning, there was a sense of, like, not so much shame, but more like, "How did we miss it? How did we not realize this? Why isn't this taught in schools?" They felt cheated in some ways. Perhaps not so much now, given how much has changed in the last ten years. But there was more sadness than shame at first.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: Could you say then that the city's involvement with slavery and (Black) presence is visible on the one hand, but also invisible on the other?

JENNIFER TOSCH: Well, we're making the invisible visible. The most surprised visitors are those who are from Amsterdam, who have lived there their entire lives, passing by these spaces and buildings and never noticing the symbols. Many of these symbols have been there for centuries, but no one was looking at them as having a story or looking for what is behind the symbol. For example, African symbols can be found



in the city's built environment. Tobacco and other products once stored in warehouses were often depicted in the facing brick of that warehouse. We want people to look, notice, and then ask themselves, "Why? What? Who?"

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: Does the built environment have a large influence on the tour?

JENNIFER TOSCH: Yes, it does. I quote Nancy Jouwe, one of my co-authors and a friend, who says: "The city is an archive". The city's colonial heritage is well preserved in the built environment. Many of our cities still have that colonial feel due to their architecture and monuments, giving the impression that you've traveled back in time when you walk along the canals in Amsterdam, for example. However, in Rotterdam it is more difficult, as it is a much more modern city. You have the stories, but there isn't much visual representation. As a result, you really have to fill in many gaps with images.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: We have come a long way since 2013. What do you feel is the biggest change in comparison with ten years ago?

JENNIFER TOSCH: I think that what has changed in ten years is the level of awareness about the colonial past. Thanks to the early generations of activists, historians, artists, and curators who have paved the way to make what's happening in the present possible. We've been in a lot of different debates about the topic, we have our books and we have been in the media a lot. Moreover, social activism has really helped to accelerate peoples' awareness. I mean, we are doing all these projects with institutions, such as museums, that really want to open their doors to Black heritage tourism and say, "Please, come in and be critical".

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: So, you notice institutional change, but do you also notice

any changes in the people who take the tour? Do you think they're more aware now?

JENNIFER TOSCH: Dutch people are certainly more aware than they were ten years ago. International visitors, mostly Black Americans or diaspora visitors, tend to look for something where they know there's a deeper story and have thus always been more aware.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: Then, in 2016, the performance *Sites of Memory* started.

JENNIFER TOSCH: That was born out of my collaboration with Katy Streek, Afrovibes programmer and theater maker. Every year, visitors from all over the world would take the tour and attend the Afrovibes Festival. Katy remarked that the tour would be great as a theater production. Then we got an invitation from the theater school to do some kind of colonial theater type of project and we thought this was the ideal opportunity. Even though we wanted to unite all of these different cultures in the production, it was awkward at first to mix dancers of color and white performers from the theater school. The Black dancers pulled me aside and said, "Listen, we're not playing slaves", and I was like, "Why do you think you're gonna be playing slaves?" Because the dancers were all Black and the school performers were all white, and the play was about colonial history, that is what they thought. I immediately made it clear that this would not be that kind of performance. Right away we had to unpack and dismantle perceptions and stereotypes, which definitely improved the performance.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: What would you say is the difference between the tour and the performance?

JENNIFER TOSCH: What I love about it, is that we're talking about the same historical events that are written down in books. By using the theater's framework we can push the boundaries, as there is a little more expectation for being made uncomfortable, so there is more tolerance. With the tour, the city is our theater. When you are walking, you never know what's gonna happen next or who's part of the theater or who's just passing by. I love that because, wherever we are, we are intervening on the space of people who are simply walking by. In contrast to a formal guided tour that you have to pay for, they often linger and hear the beautiful, and sometimes painful, stories, allowing us to spread our knowledge to a large audience.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: We previously talked about multidirectional memory, as Michael Rothberg states in his book, *The Implicated Subject* (2019). Can you explain how multidirectional memory works in the tours or in *Sites of Memory*?

JENNIFER TOSCH: Often a more one-sided colonial narrative is given. The "Golden Age", the rise of the Dutch Empire, 17th-century, self-congratulatory. Despite our tendency to deny it, 400 years of colonial history has left its mark on every aspect of language and culture. A one-sided narrative has the potential to disempower people by convincing them that one group should be self-congratulating while the other should feel dispossessed and downtrodden. The concept of multidirectional memory is that a historical event is used as a framework to weave these stories together to form a more cohesive narrative. It is also calling for descendants of people who are descended from enslavers or investors. Gijs Stork is a good example. He and I are constantly engaged in this multidirectional memory. Because, for him, how does he tell the story of his ancestors who benefited financially while also telling the

story of the enslaved Susanna? So, it's trying to find a balance where we can both tell these stories without further trauma or reproducing any violence or pain.

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: In that sense, your tours and *Sites of Memory* are part of a larger cultural landscape, which also included a podcast called *The Plantation of our Ancestors*. This greatly aided the broadening of the discussion on the ancestors of the enslaved and the enslavers.

JENNIFER TOSCH: We're all implicated. There's not one perpetrator or victim. Everyone has a story, and every voice in that story must be heard. When one voice is removed, the story changes. The moment when institutions started to reflect on their own practices, in my opinion, was a crucial turning point. I hope museums track new visitors who were drawn in by these new perspectives. I'm sure there was some criticism as well. However, it raised the possibility that we might be able to tell several stories in the context of a museum space. I remember the first time I entered an exhibition, the first sign I saw said: "People like us..." I wondered who "us" was, because I couldn't find anyone who looked like me in the museum, but "us" wasn't meant for me as a Black woman. It was intended for white, European-centric people, which immediately calls into question awareness. Did they realize that not every visitor to this museum is "us"?

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT: In this interview, you discussed the visible and invisible histories, as well as the various historical narratives and social activism that helped bring Black history to light. What are your thoughts on the future of the Dutch colonial past?

JENNIFER TOSCH: The future of the Dutch colonial past is going to have multiple narratives. There will be more self-reflection

and multiple perspectives on historical events. I believe that the more willing we are to look within to see how we've developed the stories and what we can do to push the boundaries, the better. One way, I believe, is to co-curate history. Co-curated history implies that there will be no dominant narrative, that we will all be involved, and that we will all, I believe, lose a piece, but also gain something back. That is my hope: that history does not suddenly become esoteric or generalized, but that every person represented in the narrative can hear their voice.

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# The story changes



An aerial photograph of a tropical beach. The top half of the image shows a dense, lush green forest of palm trees. The bottom half shows a wide, sandy beach with a gradient of colors from light yellow to deep orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The text "Blurring the division" is overlaid on the right side of the beach area.

Blurring  
the  
division





# Rehearsing Decolonial Curatorship of Southeast Asian Sound Archives in Europe

BY MELÉ YAMOMO AND BARBARA TITUS

ABSTRACT: What are the critical implications of dialogic thinking and writing? Can we find clues in the collaborative possibilities of performance and musicking for sustaining such conversations? This chapter dissects and intensifies these questions through a dialogue between yamomo and Titus in outlining their respective positions in the gradual realization of their plans pertaining to Decolonizing Southeast Asian Sound Archives (DeCoSEAS, 2021-2024). Through the entanglements of our respective agencies in working on this project we reflect on existing constellations of power that also feature in our collaboration – with each other and with our Southeast Asian and European partners. Hence, we emphatically include ourselves in our critique of such power constellations. Our epistemic practices encompass performative, reflective, and artistic dimensions that we outline here in order to offer some suggestions for sustained decolonial practice in the arts and humanities.

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hat are the critical implications of dialogic thinking and writing? Can we find clues in the collaborative possibilities of performance and musicking for sustaining such conversations? These were the questions that theater maker, composer, and sound historian melê yamomo posed to introduce his already long-standing collaboration with cultural musicologist Barbara Titus in a joint article entitled “The Persistent Refrain of the Colonial Archival Logic / Colonial Entanglements and Sonic Transgressions: Sounding Out the Jaap Kunst Collection”. The article was published in 2021 in a themed issue of *the world of music* on postcolonial sound archives (yamomo & Titus 2021). The present chapter further dissects and intensifies these questions through a more direct dialogue between yamomo and Titus in outlining their respective positions in the gradual realization of their plans pertaining to *Decolonizing Southeast Asian Sound Archives* (DeCoSEAS), a three-year research and community engagement project (2021–2024) funded by the Joint Programming Initiative (JPI) on Cultural Heritage and Global Change, supported by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program. Through the entanglements of our respective agencies in working on this project, we are able to reflect on existing constellations of power that also feature in our collaboration—with each other and with our Southeast Asian and European partners. Hence, we emphatically include ourselves in our critique of such power constellations. Our epistemic practices encompass performative, reflective, and artistic dimensions that we outline here in order to offer some suggestions for sustained decolonial practice in the arts and humanities.

BARBARA TITUS: The ideas generated by our joint DeCoSEAS project are the fruits of years of thinking that meLê has already been engaged with. meLê is much better versed in reflections on and the practice of decolonization than I am. Our respective positions in colonial and patriarchal constellations of power are different, although there are certain overlaps. Yet it is fair to say that I became aware of those positions and constellations only gradually, not only through my previous academic work in South Africa between 2008 and 2018 (Titus 2022) but also through my friendship and collaboration with meLê. Social dynamics and interactions that I had not previously experienced as meaningful started to shine through my privileges—a process that is ongoing as we speak. Our togetherness makes things surface that really impact on the kind of decolonization we try to realize. Other contributions in this volume outline how the (after)lives of colonialism in the present are perceivable in texts and images from buildings and landscapes, and even at sea (Stelder 2023). Here we state that these (after)lives are also present in sounds. Coloniality is not only physical and visible, but also audible. At the same time, meLê will demonstrate how sound can be a method of decolonization.

Our joint project bears the ambitious title *Decolonizing Southeast Asian Sound Archives*. How do you decolonize an archive? If you look at it straightforwardly, you make it accessible. You enable new relations with the materials in the archives, new threads of connection, maybe new forms of intimacy, and you give these materials back to those from whom they were taken. However, with regard to sound, we instantly run into problems. Sound is vibrating air. Sound is not a thing that you give back, or that you take, even, although—as we will see—you can “take” sound by capturing it.

In our focus on sound, a first question could be: What is its materiality? A second question could be: What are the materials in a sound archive? What do we actually give back, if we intend to repatriate sound? These are ontological questions that point at crucial epistemic shift in the acts of sound archiving and in acts of archiving generally. This epistemic shift has been pointed out by my colleague Miguel García in his article “Sound Archives under Suspicion” from 2017. Sound that is being collected, García points out, can be removed from its context, alienated from its creator, lodged in containers such as files, discs, wax cylinders, diaries, shelves, and cases, and despite all these interventions by a range of people, these sounds-that-turned-into-“things” are supposed to be free of the collector’s influence, keeping the qualities they had before the collector’s intervention (2017, 14); what is “the recording of the song” becomes “the song”. This kind of epistemic shift is really important to observe when we talk about sound, but surely the shift reaches beyond sound.

In order to illustrate this, I refer to a short sample from the Jaap Kunst Collection that I curate at the University of Amsterdam. The sample can be accessed at <https://sonic-entanglements.com/2021/02/16/sound-bite-jaap-kunst-urbinasopen-1932>. In the 1920s and ‘30s, Jaap Kunst (1891–1960) was an executive member of the Dutch colonial administration of what was then the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia. Being part of the Dutch colonial administration brought him all over the Indonesian archipelago (Heins et al. 1994, 15–16). In his free time, he recorded all kinds of music that he encountered. His urge to record so much music stemmed from his great love for these musical practices. He observed that they were on the brink of extinction, but he did not question in any way the colonial presence that caused this extinction (yamomo & Titus 2021, 47). What he recorded was the kind of sound that appeared most exotic and most different to him from a European



perspective, and which he hence experienced as most pure and authentic. The fragment **113** under consideration contains two-part singing from the northeastern part of Flores, an island in East Indonesia. What you hear is an interval between two simultaneously sounding tones that is experienced as a dissonant interval in most European music (and also in globally distributed popular music), namely major and minor seconds. In globally mainstream repertoire, a second interval between two simultaneously sounding tones usually occurs in passing only. However, in the music from northeastern Flores, the interval is sustained. Moreover, at times, the voices approach each other in tighter distance than one would aurally expect from a second interval within European tuning systems (Rappoport 2021, 165). This is a sonic marker of difference that caught Kunst's ear. In his selection of such specimens signifying difference from European musical norms, the coloniality of it can be heard. There are many ways to hear coloniality, but this is one of them.

## Hearing as a Dialogical Mode of Knowledge Formation

MELÉ YAMOMO: Barbara and I are co-project leaders of this research project. We are colleagues two floors apart at the University of Amsterdam, and we've collaborated on various academic projects. When I first met Barbara, I was doing my research on "Sonic Entanglements", a research project funded by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) (yamomo 2017-2021). As a scholarly inquiry of epistemologies of sound, one of the questions that animated my research agenda is rooted in Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial question "Can the subaltern speak?" Spivak concludes that we cannot hear the subaltern, because if we do hear them, that is because they are speaking the language of the Empire—and would have therefore ceased to be subaltern (Spivak 1988). In our project of studying the archive of knowledges and languages that might have remained untainted by the Empire, we ask the question: Can they really not be heard, and is it really our intention to hear them? Because, in doing so, are we not just then incorporating them into what our colleague Rolando Vazquez is arguing as the universalization of knowledge (Vazquez Melken 2020)?

In this question, my interest, however, is ontological. I am interested in what disappears in history; those who are not written disappear in the archives. This disappearance transpired through the prioritization of certain senses in knowledge formation. The eyes have been given primacy since the Enlightenment. The very term Enlightenment is a visual metaphor—when light arrives, we can finally see. We see that there's a prioritization of the eyes to knowledge-gathering, and knowledge-construction began to be built around the eyes as a sense, as the source through which we understand the world through the European hermeneutics of knowledge. Ocularcentrism extends to the very literate way of understanding the world. My research therefore asks: Is disappearance in history in fact a symptom of our failure to hear? Is this disappearance due to these voices not being literate in the language of knowledge deemed universal? In this sense, how can we include the voices whose knowledge is embedded in sound, in speech and other forms of sound knowledges? These are the questions that I intended to examine in the Sonic Entanglements project.

To concretely address this question means to listen to sound recordings. I wanted to know what recordings exist. And more importantly, how can we consider sound archives as historical sources? How can sound recordings allow the audibility of marginalized histories (yamomo 2017-2021)? And even when I found these materials, I was confronted with issues of access. How can we make them accessible to the communities from whom they were taken? Expanding on these challenges

unrevealed by Sonic Entanglements, these are the theoretical thinking and practical issues that Barbara and I aim to address in the project *Decolonizing Southeast Asian Sound Archives* (Titus & Yamomo 2021-2024). **114**

## Unsettling Divisions between Academy and Art

MELÉ YAMOMO: I was born in the Philippines and came to Europe in 2008 to do my postgraduate studies: my masters in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, and my PhD in Germany. I wear several hats as a postmigrant artist and scholar of color (for discussion on postmigrant discourse, see Yidil and Hill 2014, Petersen and Schramm 2017, Sharifi 2017), navigating both the academic and artistic worlds. These two roles present different challenges brought about by implicit social dynamics framed by colonial histories.

I find that, even if I have managed to enter academia, the conventions of European academia are alienating to postmigrant academics and scholars of color. The academic practice of writing in the third person perpetuates an assumed universalized positionality that hides the gender, race, and social identities of the writer. When I was student, I struggled at how and why many of the canonical works by mostly white European male scholars we were reading were not resonating with me.

As a theater person and a music composer, I often find that my critical inquiries come from the specificity of my embodiment. I mention this here to outline how I extend the notion of the archive to what Diana Taylor calls the archive and the repertoire (Taylor 2003). Often, we think of the archive in the European sense: a building where official records are kept. Taylor argues that our bodies and our repertoire of performative acts—the way we sing, we dance, we eat, in our daily small acts, our movements, or the way we speak—all of these encompass an archive of centuries-old knowledge that has been passed down through generations.

In 2018, I received funding from the Berlin Senate Department for Culture and Europe to create a piece entitled *Echoing Europe – Postcolonial Reverberations* (Ballhaus Naunynstrasse 2022). It premiered in 2019 and remains in the repertoire of Theatre Ballhaus Naunynstrasse. For this performance, I worked with sound recordings, players, and historical materials from the Berlin Phonogram Archive, the Sound Archive of Humboldt University Berlin, the Phonogram Archive of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision. *Echoing Europe* is performed in a 19th-century ballroom where the colonial imageries are still perceivable in the architecture's interior decor. In the performance, I engaged the dramaturgy of the politics of sound and silence. Within the context of the long history of colonialism, the shadows of the historical discourse about my own cultural history and heritage looms over any present-day articulation. For the performance I was invited by the theater to speak about my research. However, rather than performing the expectation for me to speak, I decided to perform the violence of silence and silencing. A scene in the performance features the voice of the curator, a lecture about Southeast Asian musical culture. It was announced that, due to other engagements, he cannot be physically present and is therefore replaced with an audio recording of his lecture. Thus, even in his physical absence, we are confronted with the omniscience of the white male scholar's voice on the topic of formerly colonized culture.



**Figure 1**

*From the performance of "Echoing Europe*

*- Postcolonial Reverberations", 2019*

(Photograph by Zé de Paiva©)

In this process of making the piece, I also reflected on my role as a European-educated artist and scholar. In my artistic and scholarly practice, how am I not reiterating the colonial repertoire that history has been embedding in our bodies? How am I not just complicit in the extraction of knowledge from my own culture to be presented? Am I just becoming a translator of this knowledge to Europe? In one of the scenes, I restaged the image from a historical postcard (from ca. 1910). The drawn and color-painted image depicts an Igorot villager on the left and a white man in what appears to be military uniform, with a phonograph in between them. The phonograph horn is pointed at the Igorot man. A text on the upper side of the postcard reads: "A Subuagane's first experience with a phonograph, Mountain Province, Island of Luzon, Philippines" (fig. 1).

My entanglement with this violent historical colonial image is a critique of myself. How am I not perpetuating this same colonialist extractivist behavior as the American recordist a hundred years ago? I, therefore, constantly reflect on this and ask myself: How do I interrupt my own scholarship? This is why my artistic practice is an equally important aspect of my research. Through performance, I situate my thoughts and knowledge as they are embodied in my brown, queer body. Performance as research is a step beyond writing as a practice of scholarship. Writing is a technology of knowledge production embedded within the particularity of the visual sense. It is a technology that is not always necessarily accessible to communities with whom I want to speak.

*"As a European-trained artist and scholar who grew up within contexts of postcolony, how am I not replicating the colonial enterprise of extracting culture and knowledge in my work in the colonial archive? How do I disrupt the embodied habitus of my European education and of the imperialist economies of culture?"*

(MELÉ YAMOMO).

## De/Colonial Curatorship

BARBARA TITUS: Through my collaboration with meLê, I became better aware of my own multiple positionalities as well as personal and familial histories in the execution and formation of my profession as an academic with a permanent position. Trained as a music historian of music composed in Europe (often pretentiously referred to as "art music" or "classical music"), I decided to reorient myself toward musical expressions beyond Europe after my doctorate (Titus 2016). Between 2008 and 2018, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in South Africa, investigating the epistemic dimensions of Zulu maskanda music (Titus 2022). My experiences in South Africa confronted me with the colonial legacies of the epistemic tools in which I had received training and that reached far beyond historiography, ethnography, and comparative research into the technology of writing itself. Through my participation in maskanda practice, I experienced the potent epistemic agency of sonic modes of expression. Music does not only transmit conceptual stories and histories; it also conveys norms and forms of eloquence through its sonic capacities: vocal timbres, tunings, string resonances, scales. Through musical behavior, people are able to reconfigure experiences of time and place, being transported to real and imagined homes and pasts. It enables people to (re)gain agency over their own and someone else's bodies through gestures, dance routines, voice inflections, and playing techniques. Not only in KwaZulu, South Africa, but also in the City of London or in Amsterdam's pop temple, Paradiso. Hence, like meLê, I regard sound as a powerful complement and alternative to conceptual and visual modes of knowing that are all located in the body.



There was a motivation for me to look beyond European music after my doctorate. This **117** motivation was informed by white and colonial privileges that I only became aware of gradually. I spent large parts of my childhood in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, in the 1980s. My father grew up on a dairy farm near Surabaya and had never set foot in the Netherlands before his seventeenth birthday. By that time, in 1956, he was no longer able to settle permanently in that gray and cold little country by the North Sea, and he managed to get himself a university lectureship in human geography that necessitated him to be in Java for at least three months each year, for research and teaching at the Universitas Gadjah Mada. He always brought his family along, so I lived in Yogya for three months per year in the first twelve years of my life.

With my appointment as an associate professor of cultural musicology at the University of Amsterdam in 2013 came the curatorship of the legacy of Jaap Kunst. This legacy consists of a collection of sound recordings, photographs, silent film, correspondence, manuscripts, and a library with a wealth of material from the entire Indonesian archipelago, as well as of “ethnomusicology” as an academic discipline. Kunst is widely considered to be a founding father of this discipline, being credited with coining the name in the mid-20th century (Kunst 1950). I was thrilled and heavy-hearted at the same time. Engaging with Kunst’s legacy meant coming full circle for me. It also meant a confrontation with my own entitlements and agencies, founded to a large extent on the academic and colonial capital that I had inherited from my parents and grandparents. They had earned a living and gained their positions in Dutch and Indonesian societies through and thanks to colonial infrastructures of power and white privilege. I am earning my living and gaining my position in current Dutch and Indonesian societies by trying to criticize and unsettle the constellations that they built. This position emphatically questions my curatorship of the Jaap Kunst collection. Am I the person to curate this material?

Moreover, even in the 1980s, when Indonesia had long been politically independent from the Netherlands, the experience of colonial relations based on racist divisions of labor and capital seeped into my being as a white Dutch child. My parents had always told me and my brother that we were guests in this country without any special entitlements. Yet, we had a whole army of personnel—a gardener, maid, cook, cleaner, driver, and guard whom we then called “servants”. The white privilege we enjoyed translated into everything we did, covering the entire spectrum from indulgence to charity. In my collaboration with meLê and my Southeast Asian colleagues in the DeCoSEAS project, I need to face this personal and familial past that extends into the present through what I think I am able to do and say, in the time and space I think I am able to occupy, and in the themes and concerns that I prioritize in coordinating this project together with meLê.

## Decolonizing Sound Archives through Access, Agency, and Discourse

MELÉ YAMOMO: As outlined by Rolando Vasquez, decolonization is not a topic of research (Vasquez Melken 2020). With DeCoSEAS, we do not consider decolonization as a question of what, who, or when. It is a question of how. Decolonization is a method. We employ hearing and listening as dialogical modes of knowledge formation in order to negotiate, establish, and understand de/colonization.

There are three keywords in developing this method. (1) First is the fundamental importance of archives, museums and heritage centers, and institutions to provide access. However, providing access is only the first and most basic step, and the work does not stop there. (2) Even more pertinent is the transfer of *agency* over the curation of the sonic heritage. And this intertwines with a more pertinent concern: (3) Who gets to create the *discourse* about these materials? And therefore, how do we diversify the voices that create the discourse and dialogue about records that we have kept in our archives?

With these three agenda points, we centralize the needs and wishes of our Southeast Asian partners with whom we work in our project. We work with universities, archives, museums, NGOs, as well as individual researchers, artists, and activists in Southeast Asia. We want to bring to the fore what they need for their specific projects, their ideas, artworks or research, or what is necessary for the emancipation of their communities.

BARBARA TITUS: We intend to disclose a couple of seminal collections with music from Southeast Asia that are located in Europe. The project is a Dutch-British-French collaboration, partly because of the requirements of the funding body, but also since all these European nation-states continue to have considerable post/colonial interests in the Southeast Asian region. We decided to disclose the Jaap Kunst Collection, but also recordings from the BBC Empire Service in late colonial and early postcolonial times that were broadcast from the 1930s onwards up to the 1950s, and later recorded. They are now at the BBC Archive Trust with the metadata in the British Library and, like the Jaap Kunst Collection, they are largely inaccessible. With this corpus we see how important sonic records are as historical sources: voices, emotions, stances, ideas, sensitivities can be heard on these recordings that haven't made it into recent historiographies. Our British Principal Investigator, Cristina Juan, is going to handle this collection during the project, while meLê and I will deal with the Jaap Kunst material.

The third collection is entitled *Songs of the Thrice-Blooded Land* (Rappoport 2009). In the 1990s and early 2000s, our French Principal Investigator, Dana Rappoport, recorded ritual music of the Toraja people that is very much on the brink of extinction, mainly due to Christian mission. These are colonial impositions in the present (i.e., in the late 20th and early 21st centuries). The music, visuals, lyrics, translations, and scholarly annotations have already been published, but on media (such as DVDs) that are becoming increasingly inaccessible. In the context of DeCoSEAS, Rappoport migrates this material from the DVD to an online environment, in order for Toraja communities in the Tana Toraja region and other parts of the world to continue to use her work as a resource for their almost extinct rituals that are still practiced.

With these three collections, we want to establish an online platform that we call *Southeast Asia Hearing*. We want to make these collections accessible there, but also use the platform as a portal to collections in Southeast Asia. We also plan to facilitate data mirroring for researchers, artists, cultural diplomats, and activists from Southeast Asia to access the material in their own regions. This practical dimension of the project is not its ultimate aim. Rather, we regard it as a means to rethink acts of curation. Obviously, these digitizations are acts of curation in themselves; we'll need to think continuously about categorizations, taxonomies, and conceptual conventions that are at times genuinely painful to use, also through their potential inescapability. Thus, we use these disclosures as pilots to rethink and unsettle such academic conventions.

## Four Initiatives to Renegotiate Access, Agency, and Discourse

One way in which we want to unsettle this is to invite scholars from Southeast Asia to come to Europe for a couple of months, through funding provided by us, to access the archives we have under our curation and archives we work with, such as the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (NISV) in Hilversum and the Centre de recherche en ethnomusicologie (CREM) in Paris.

This Visiting Fellowship serves two aims. Firstly, it is important for the Fellows to see and be present in the places where these materials are stored and located, and to touch and hold these materials. Secondly, we would also like to ask these fellows to make an inventory of what kind of hurdles they encounter if they access the archives, since these hurdles are often invisible to me: I tend to overlook them, or I may be blind or deaf to them because they do not hamper me, thanks to my privileges. Once we have an inventory of hurdles (with regard to language, physical access, or additional ideological obstacles), we intend to formulate recommendations for other archives to make their collections more accessible. The second initiative is the digitization of the materials as an act of curation in itself, which we outlined above.

The third initiative is one of joint publication, in which we invite advice from our Southeast Asian partners. Often, European and North American scholars pose an idea about a volume and then invite scholars from Southeast Asia to contribute. This may seem like a suitably collaborative approach, but it is frequently still edited by a European or North American person. I also hear from my Southeast Asian colleagues that they read books by scholars from the United States or Europe about music from their country. What they read in these books is not particularly remarkable for them. In Java or Bali, everyone knows the things about gamelan music that Europeans and North Americans report on with surprise and amazement from their Eurocentric perspective. However, Asian scholars implicitly remain obliged to cite this Euro-American research in their own work in order to be taken seriously by their global peers. They are forced to reiterate Euro-American epistemic paradigms and observations as authoritative scholarly knowledge in global academic discourses, despite the limited remarkability of these paradigms and observations. With DeCoSEAS, we intend to turn that around. We want to make sure that being edited based on what our Southeast Asian colleagues think is important. Specifically, with regard to the music and sounds we discuss.

Our fourth initiative is a range of outreach projects that cover the spectrum from awareness projects in Europe to workshops for journalists and schoolteachers, but also outreach projects in Southeast Asia to ensure that the archive material is being brought outside the walls of the institution, outside the walls of the university, outside the walls of the archive. For instance, we came up with the idea of an Inter-Asian song contest that would allow artists and singers access to materials from the archive, in order to build new relationships with that material. As outlined above, meLé's work as an artist is central not only to outreach as such, but is one of the epistemic foundations of the entire project, blurring the division between art and academy.

# South-to-South Conversations and South-to-North Agencies

MELÉ YAMOMO: As a consortium involving different cities, localities, and regions, we employ a translocal approach in our research project. We do this through the different constellations of partnerships and connections within our network.

Our consortium is composed of different academic, cultural, and non-government organizations within Southeast Asia bridged by translocal interests to re-examine shared colonial and postcolonial histories. The use of the term translocal, as opposed to transnational, is a deliberate choice to describe how some decolonial processes are specific to localities and regions that might not be aligned with the interests of hegemonic nation-states or former colonial states. We aim to support conversations, repatriation of heritage materials, and transfer of technologies directly to or between local communities whenever possible.

Within Europe, we work with archive institutions that hold sound heritage about and from Southeast Asia. The realization within Europe for the necessity to address its colonial past cannot be separated from the individual national agenda of the Netherlands, France, and the United Kingdom. Our consortium aims to discuss collective actions across former colonial institutions and national polities.

Bridging Europe and Southeast Asia's relationship, we want to think about how colonialism historically framed and controlled the flows of knowledge between Southeast Asia and Europe. With decoloniality entering popular discourse in Europe, it easily becomes a "trendy" topic for European academic, artistic, and cultural institutions competing for grants and subsidies to perform social relevance. The danger of subsuming the decolonial agenda within the neoliberal economy of social capital is that this interrupts, if not outrightly hijacks the intellectual, artistic, and affective labor of thinkers, artists, and activists doing the groundwork in former spaces of colony. To many colleagues whose individual and social survival and sustainability is dependent on decolonization, this agenda has been their life's work. What happens if we take up the space of speaking over the intellectual labor of individuals and communities? How can we disrupt the colonial behavior of extracting the intellectual, artistic, and emotional labor of the formerly colonized to profit from the academic and cultural capital of their work?

With these questions in mind, DeCoSEAS intends to liaise with institutions that are already doing this work. We want to give them the space and we want to give them the stage. Our role in this constellation is that of what we might call in Europe a dramaturge: somebody who might assist, if needed, in reflecting about what our partners already know and do. In expanding the idea of dramaturgy through the lens of performance studies, we can consider our role as a social dramaturge in how we analyze and consider the role of individual positionalities, institutions, and—within social hierarchies—relations and social dynamics. One of these partners is the Laon-Laon network, a group of sound archivists from throughout Asia who have been working on grassroots archiving projects for the past fifteen years. In this way, we intend to foster an inter-Asian way of thinking and working as a form of Global South-to-South conversation.

Decolonial work also needs to disrupt the North-to-South production and flows of knowledge. As a legacy of colonialism, this way of thinking presumes Europe as the universal site of knowledge

production, and that such knowledge needs to be distributed to the rest of the world. In this epistemic logic, the playscript entails the theorization of “decolonization” in Europe that needs to be exported back to former spaces of colony—which means that Europe would also profit culturally, politically, and economically from this enterprise. **121**

Instead, we draw hermeneutic methods from sonic epistemological processes: How can we step back and be silent so that marginalized voices can emerge through the use of some of the resources that we have? Our resources aim to amplify these voices. With listening we allow flows of knowledge from the Global South to the Global North. How do we listen to the voices from the Global South in making decisions about colonial heritage? How might the colonial European institutions listen to their perspectives and needs in curating heritage materials taken from Southeast Asia and stored in Europe?

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# The moving human body





Feeling the Traces  
of the Dutch  
Colonial Past:  
Dance as an  
Affective  
Methodology in  
Farida Nabibaks's  
Radiant Shadow

BY LIEDEKE PLATE, VICKY J. FISHER, FARIDA  
NABIBAKS, AND MADELIEF FEENSTRA

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on Farida Nabibaks's dance-theatre performance *Radiant Shadow* to discuss how dance can be a means to create an affective understanding of the endurance of the Dutch colonial and slavery past. We build on the notion of the body as an incorporated colonial archive of feelings, explain how the dance performance "moves" and "touches" its audience, and explore audience responses to the location, performance, and workshop that we held at Castle Cannenburgh in Vaassen (Gelderland), as part of our research project "Feeling the Traces of the Colonial Past." We close by identifying three ways in which the public debate about the colonial past can be moved forward through the integration of bodily knowledge.



Imagine sitting in the richly-decorated 18th-century hall of Cannenburgh Castle (fig. 1). You have just settled down in your seat in anticipation of the performance *Radiant Shadow, Part I: Margaretha* that was created by dancer, philosopher, and artistic director of Reframing HERstory Art Foundation, Farida Nabibaks. You have taken in the surroundings, taken notice of the gold-framed paintings, the chandeliers with flameless candles, the massive marble-and-gold wall tables with marble vases atop, the ornamented wooden paneling. You breathe. A figure clad in traditional African dress enters the stage through a door in the far left-hand corner. Walking across the room while chanting, she literally makes place for the performance that has just begun, (re-) appropriating the space for the telling of another story: her story, as well as that of her people, the anonymous Black people who (have) lived in the Netherlands for centuries but whose (hi)stories are rarely recounted within such walls.

The experiences of the audiences of Nabibaks's *Radiant Shadow* form the backbone of the project "Feeling the Traces of the Colonial Past", which we carried out to inquire into ways that dance can play a role in the integration of feelings, affects and emotions into the public debate about the colonial and slavery past in the Netherlands.<sup>1</sup> We believe such integration is essential to achieving societal healing of the historical trauma that continues to inform the present in so many different ways and at different levels. In recent years, dance and performance have increasingly been used to address and counter the exclusion of Black people from cultural and heritage institutions, for instance, The Carters' 2018 videoclip "Apeshit" performed and recorded in the Louvre or Sonia Boyce's evening of performance and discussion that same year, as part of the "Whose Power on Display?" series at Manchester Art Gallery (Plate 2018; 2019). In the Netherlands, there is a lively culture of artistic practices in dialogue with the heritage of colonialism and slavery, for instance, the site-specific performances organized by the Sites of Memory Foundation. Dancers have also been exploring ways in which dance can be used to transmit emotions and affects about Black lives and histories, for example, the work of former Dutch National Ballet dancer Monique Duurvoort.





**Figure 1**

Farida Nabibaks and Yara van Fraeijenhove in  
*Radiant Shadow* at Cannenburg Castle,  
(Photograph by the authors)

In addition, dance companies such as Dance Theatre AYA make performances specifically targeted at children and adolescents in which they use the directness of dance to address societal issues such as racism and migration.<sup>2</sup> Here, we investigate how *Radiant Shadow* creates an affective understanding of the endurance of the colonial and slavery past of Gelderland and how it works toward the recognition and integration of the historical trauma in ways that might indicate a path toward societal healing. For this, we bring together perspectives from embodied cognition, cultural history, cultural studies, dance, theater, and philosophy. **129**

Key to our project is the idea of a bodily memory: an incorporated “cultural archive” (Said; Wekker) that is located not only “between our ears and in our hearts and souls” (Wekker 19) but in our every limb, fiber, and cell, as well as movements and postures; in the ways we hold our bodies, make space, and take place; and so, in our entire being, the way we are, and how that feels. Bringing together literature on social and cultural memory with theories of racism, colonialism, and dance of the African diaspora, we argue that bodies and the memories they hold, sustain, and transmit are integral to how a colonial archive of feelings continues to manifest itself, yet that they can also be the locus of its interruption. Dance performance and reflection thereon are our methodology for inquiring into this colonial archive of feelings. In our project, we had groups of participants attend a performance of the first part of *Radiant Shadow*, participate in a subsequent guided movement workshop in which themes from the performance were explored, and reflect on performance and workshop in questionnaires, short plenary discussion, and follow-up interviews. The performances and workshops took place at Cannenburch Castle in Vaassen, a Gelderland *lieu de mémoire* (Nora) that plays a significant role in the Dutch cultural archive and so, also in the archives of feelings as well as the senses of (out of) place it sustains. In what follows, we first describe the performance and the philosophy that informs Nabibaks’s artistic practice. We then expand on the notion of the body as an incorporated colonial archive of feelings and explain how the dance performance “moves” and “touches” its audience, using two different dance-theoretical frames. Finally, we discuss audience responses to the location, performance, and workshop, before suggesting ways in which the public debate about the colonial past can be moved forward through the integration of bodily knowledge.

## Nabibaks’s Artistic Practice

*Radiant Shadow* (*Schitterende schaduw*), which premiered in Arnhem in November 2020, is based on the findings of Erfgoed Gelderland’s project “Sporen van Slavernijverleden in Gelderland” (Traces of the Slavery Past in Gelderland), which aims to make visible and provide historical context for traces of the colonial and slavery past in the province.<sup>3</sup> Starting from an encounter between these tangible traces of the Dutch colonial and slavery past and her philosophical work on the need to become aware of the inner beliefs, patterns, and judgements one holds, yet of which one is not always conscious (cf. Nabibaks), the tripartite performance is an artistic inquiry into these processes. Described by some as “an emotional rollercoaster”,<sup>4</sup> and addressing themes ranging from the modernity/coloniality nexus to Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, the performance invites the audience to join Nabibaks on her personal quest into the historical trauma that marks her present, toward the complex of feelings attendant upon this legacy and what it means to live, think, feel, and be “in the wake” (to use Christina Sharpe’s trenchant term for contemporary Black life in the United States).

*Radiant Shadow, Part I: Margaretha* takes its point of departure in the 18th-century **130** portrait of Margaretha Elisabeth Sophia van Stepraedt (1740) that hangs in the great hall of Cannenburch Castle in Vaassen and shows a Black servant in attendance to the wealthy White lady (fig. 2). The performance centers on life at the time when the portrait was painted. Through the presence of White and Black people, the following themes are presented: first, the hierarchical system of institutionalized slavery, which brought about differences in status between White and Black people, superiority and inferiority; second, the justification of slavery in Christianity found in the curse of the Biblical figure Ham; third, colonialism as the blueprint of our present society and the multigenerational trauma that was inflicted on Black people during the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery; fourth, the position of women, then and now, Black and White; and fifth, the spiritual realm of the enslaved people, whose (forbidden) religion, encrypted in music and dance, was essential to their survival. In the performance, harmonious classical music contrasts with old rhythmic Caribbean songs.

Nabibaks's dance practice is informed by the principles that, firstly, the art of dancing has the capacity to manifest hidden depths in human beings of which we are not conscious or that we are unable to acknowledge. And secondly, reflecting on these manifested hidden depths would be most beneficial when related to one's own experience, behavior and the mental patterns of what one holds to be true. Presumptions, thoughts, and judgements that we hold in society are not only expressed in words but also in our actions, attitudes, and postures, which therefore provide us with a "mnemonics of the body".

That is, a bodily or "incorporated" memory, to use the social anthropologist Paul Connerton's term. As he explains in *How Societies Remember* (1989), in Western societies, bodily social memory is an essential though neglected aspect of social memory, one in which "the past is, as it were, sedimented in the body" (72). Though backgrounded throughout much of history, incorporated memories are essential, especially as they are tacit, long-lasting, and mostly unconscious. Postures and movements contain histories and are the sediments of inherited habits and power relations. As Connerton reminds us, "in all cultures, much of the choreography of authority is expressed through the body" (74). This corresponds with traditions of embodied thinking from the African diaspora, which "perceive[s] the body as a method and result of our ancestors, our own and our potential/divine beings [sic] output and input of energy, life force and purpose" (Prestø 64). As choreographer and Africana dance expert Thomas Talawa Prestø explains:

*"Through the body both divine and earthly experiences are processed and its ability to generate and tune with the energy of the universe allows us to embody knowledge and communicate with multiple planes of existence. One could say that the body is what makes sense of all that we are and allows us to interpret, interact, communicate and make sense of that communication, both with the seen and unseen world" (64).*

In consequence, for Nabibaks, it is essential to focus more on the role of custom or deed, ethos or praxis, rather than on the role of word or logos (cf. Pettit 320). In the Netherlands and elsewhere in the Global North, we privilege language and consciousness and overlook the importance of the physical and emotional experience of dancing individuals, but also of groups, cultures, or human





**Figure 2**

*Portrait of Margaretha Elisabeth Sophia van Stepraedt and Unidentified Young Black Man, 1740, (Photograph from Geldersch Landschap & Kasteelen)*

beings as a whole, at our peril. Instead, working from the idea that the moving human body has more meaning than we tend to realize, Nabibaks's performance explores how the embodied experiences offered by dance can play an important role in unifying the body and mind. **132**

## A Colonial Archive of Feelings

In *White Innocence*, Gloria Wekker explores the Dutch cultural archive that undergirds the construction and maintenance of whiteness as a way of being in the world. For this, she builds on Edward Said's concept of the cultural archive, which he understands as the narratives — "the cultural languages of literature, history, or ethnography" (52)—that sustain a nation or culture's sense of being in the world. Said focused especially on the English novel, which he believed "is where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in overseas dominion are made" (xxi): as "pictures of reality", "they elaborate and maintain a reality they inherit from other novels" and so contribute significantly to the "feelings, attitudes, and references and became a main element in the consolidated vision, or departmental cultural view, of the globe" (74). Transposing the concept of the cultural archive to the Dutch context and expanding it to include "many things, in the ways we think, do things, and look at the world, in what we find (sexually) attractive, in how our affective and rational economies are organized and intertwined" (19), Wekker describes this cultural archive as follows:

*"It is a "a repository of memory" (Stoler 49), in the heads and hearts of people in the metropole, but its content is also silently cemented in policies, in organizational rules, in popular and sexual cultures, and in common sense everyday knowledge, and all of this is based on four hundred years of imperial rule. The content of the cultural archive may overlap with that of the colonial archive ... but with the cultural archive I expressly wish to foreground the memories, the knowledge, and affect with regard to race that were deposited within metropolitan populations, and the power relations embedded within them" (19).*

Here, rather than focusing on the content of this archive, we wish to spotlight its bodily aspects while highlighting its affective dimensions. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said already recognized the affective dimensions of the cultural archive by stating that it "creates what [Raymond] Williams calls 'structures of feeling' that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire" (14). Likewise, Wekker defines it as a vital but "unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch imperial rule" that continues to play a significant part in Dutch society (2). Productive for our purposes is, therefore, Ann Cvetkovich's concept of an "archive of feelings", which she developed to describe the counter-public archives of memory and affective practices that emerged in response to sexual trauma in lesbian communities, "the many forms of love, rage, intimacy, grief, shame, and more that are part of the vibrancy of queer cultures" (7).<sup>5</sup> Documenting, representing, and commemorating such archives of feelings require new genres of expression and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances, Cvetkovich argues. We propose that dance can play this role in the context of the largely overlooked historical trauma of the Dutch colonial and slavery past that informs Dutch society and culture. Historical trauma has been described as "a complex and collective trauma experienced over time and across generations by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance" (Mohatt et al. 128). Joy DeGruy

coined the term Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) to explain the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African diaspora communities, which includes “vacant [self-]esteem, ever-present anger, and racist socialization” (105). 133

DeGruy asserts that this unresolved collective trauma has fashioned itself into a cultural norm that persists today. It has created a powerful encrypted message of disempowerment transmitted among the descendants of slavery but also resulted in a deep and collective denial of the past on the part of many White people, combined with an inability or unwillingness to acknowledge their race-based privilege. As if it were hidden in plain sight, this incorporated colonial archive of feelings has remained invisible, neglected, and overlooked and needs embodied methodologies to receive proper attention.

## Dance Moves

Importantly, a place, event, or cultural object is not just seen from different perspectives but lived, felt, and experienced differently by different (groups of) people.<sup>6</sup> This ontological multiplicity of reality is sustained by archives of experiences, knowledges, and feelings that are not only different but sometimes also incommensurable. For society to cohere, then, a crucial question is how to make these multiple realities hang together (cf. Plate 2018). As shall be illustrated below, through the performance, but also the conversations that ensued, insight was generated into, first, the fact of this multiplicity, well-known to non-dominant social groups but of which dominant groups can choose to remain unaware;<sup>7</sup> and second, the nature of these realities, which of course remain fundamentally opaque to one another, but of which some (embodied) sense can be gleaned.

Two principles that inform the (watching of the) performance exemplify this multiplicity. First, for people of African descent and with African diaspora ancestry, the meaning of dance often cannot be separated from one’s spirituality and the whole spiritual, animated worldview. Accordingly, as Prestø explains, the focus of Africana dance is “not on what the body does, but rather what it produces” (64). This “transportation or transformation in and outside of the body” happens through rhythm: “Rhythm is vibration, and its emotional, mental and spiritual vibrations would in an Africana perspective be as real and tangible as the clearly visible physical vibration or embodiment of rhythm”, Prestø writes (64). *Radiant Shadow* participates in the spirit of this tradition, using rhythm and body percussion and containing “dances of memory”. As a dancer and a choreographer, Nabibaks engages with her ancestral archive in “acts of artistic engagement which manage to both confirm community and highly individualized [sic] simultaneously”, to use the words Prestø employs to describe his own practice (61). Due to the performative character of the piece, through the dancing bodies in the space, stories from the ancestral archive are made present and become part of reality. As one of the participants remarked: “The meeting, that is the community, where you exchange, where you engage in dialogue with each other. And dance, song, music has always been part of it. In every ritual, these three disciplines”.

Second, the notion of kinesthetic empathy, which refers to a physically felt response to the movements of others (Foster), is another principle explaining how dance can have a direct impact on its audience. When we observe others moving, areas of our premotor and motor cortices fire in response, engaging parts of the same neural networks we use when performing such movements

ourselves.<sup>8</sup> Beyond neurological motor activation, Vukadinović and Marković found **134** an interplay between emotional responses and kinesthetic empathy. They noted that “spectators’ physical experiences and bodily sensations in response to an observed dance are the result of their engagement in the dance, the pleasure they draw from the dance, the emotions provoked in them, and their admiration for the performance” (1). Kinesthetic empathy reveals that humans have physical responses to the movement of others that interact with emotional responses, offering empirical evidence that we can have a direct, felt response to watching interpersonal relationships play out on stage.

Many of the research participants reported such direct responses to the performance, often using physical language such as being “touched” and “moved”, having a “heaviness in my stomach”, and taking over the tension of a dancer’s body in one’s own. The intensity of the experience was palpable for many, with one noting: “Power relationships, pain, connection. It came very close, also because the players were so close. Sometimes I found it too intense to continue watching, then it was too close [...]”. Eighteen out of twenty-eight participants indicated an increase in their intensity of feelings directly after the performance, while only two reported a decrease. Additionally, the ability of the dance performance to encapsulate and communicate multilayered and complex issues succinctly and directly was also recognized: “The performance touches all kinds of layers in the past and present in society. And in me. Layers for which words are hard to find, but it touches that which moves us, from which we move. That which for ourselves is often in the shadows, unconscious”.

## Sense of Place, Sense of Body, Sense of History

As mentioned above, the performances and workshops took place at Cannenburg Castle in Vaassen, a place that immediately evoked strong emotions in the audience and workshop participants. As one approached the remote castle in the early evening of a cold October day, the 16th-century building, built on the ruins of a medieval fortress, presented a rather forbidding facade. Inside, one found a richly decorated 18th-century interior, the splendor of which impressed some with its display of historical grandeur while oppressing others through its reminiscences of the trauma that took place there. Yet others experienced emotional unease with a sense of awe being tempered by the palpable “legacy of slavery, of oppression, of injustice”. Many participants commented that entering the hall felt like entering the story, stepping into history. One likened the experience to the so-called Droste effect (*mise-en-abyme*) of a picture recursively appearing within itself.

Paintings such as the portrait (fig. 2) remind us that there were Black people there, often children, who were treated differently than others. People of whom we know nearly nothing but whose presence in the painting, in the shadows of history and in anonymity, continues to suggest that they are insignificant. Whereas the castle’s website enjoins the visitor to “Taste the splendor of a nobleman’s house set in an elegant park”,<sup>9</sup> for Black visitors, this place is not about wealth and grandeur but pain and oppression. One participant reported being much affected by the location, at once offended by the paintings and the assumed history of the building, and distressed by an experience of out-of-placeness elicited by a lack of other Black clientele in the adjacent restaurant before the event, stating: “It somehow so touched on how I relate to the slavery past”.

Both the performance and the workshop intervened in this relationship between people and spatial settings, literally affecting their “senses of place”, as the anthropologists Steven Feld and Keith Basso term “the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over” (11). This fact did not go unnoticed: one participant acknowledged this shift from a “naive gaze [to a more] knowledgeable gaze”, and another recognized the shift from “passive spectator” to active engagement, a sense of increased ownership of space provoked by the performance and extended further by the workshop, which was reported by many. Yet another participant observed that, through the performance, “I felt like I was in Suriname. So, I had the feeling that that whole location was not in the Netherlands”.

The “presencing” qualities of the performance and the performativity of presence are key here. As Fischer-Lichte explains, “The ‘magic’ of presence, therefore, lies in the performer’s particular ability to generate energy so that it can be sensed by the spectators as it circulates in space and affects, even tinges, them” (98). Taking up the space and being completely aware of themselves, the performers reveal an embodied integration of body and mind that communicates a strong experience to the audience themselves and the situation at that moment. For our participants, this often came about through a deeply felt embodied experience. Some audience responses suggest that *Radiant Shadow* took its audience into a cathartic, transporting, or even transformative experience. One physically felt the impact of the location when they entered, stating that “it felt suppressed somewhere”, and after the performance, they needed time to recover and take a break, sit down quietly, so “then the feeling in my body became a little lighter”.

Turning the site of memory into a commemorative ritual for community forming, the performance transforms the castle’s hall into a site for “presencing” and sharing in the historical trauma of the colonial and slavery past and as a means of communally acknowledging that past as a first step toward collective healing. As one participant stated: “I saw the oppression and I felt the oppression. And I knew that there are ancestors that I have who have gone through this or at least fought to get rid of this”. Beyond such powerful recognition of ancestral heritage, the integrated experience of performance, workshop, and discussions was felt to offer a pathway toward change: “Everything just comes together in a way. You have seen it, you have discussed it. With other people... [including those who] have a different past and how they see this topic”.

## Conclusion

Recent scholarship in heritage studies has recognized affect and emotions as essential elements of heritage-making and experience (Dibbits; Smith and Campbell; Tolia-Kelly et al.). Nevertheless, how embodied emotions can be mobilized for a more capacious understanding of the colonial and slavery past remains under-researched. Focusing on Farida Nabibaks’s performance *Radiant Shadow*, and building on insights from our NWO-funded research project “Feeling the Traces of the Colonial Past”, in this article, we examined how dance can be a means to create an affective understanding of the endurance of that past.

Formulated audaciously, we ask: How can dance contribute toward what we would call a “trauma-integrated society”?<sup>10</sup> This future we imagine is characterized by, first, the societal recognition of the existence of the colonial and slavery past as a historical trauma that continues to animate life in

the Netherlands in the early 21st century and affect the lives of its citizens. In a sense, and **136** albeit in very different ways, we all live in the wake of the colonial and slavery past.<sup>11</sup> Second, this future recognizes feelings and emotions as integral to, if not at the heart of, the social fabric. It acknowledges the role of one's own affects and of those of others, and understands them to be different and differentially conditioned—differential positionalities that are crucially marked and made possible by the colonial and slavery past. Third, beyond mere recognition, this future is able to integrate these recognized and acknowledged feelings and emotions into public debate toward life in the wake of the wake. Because of its capacity to move (in both senses of the term), dance can transport, transform, and bring Dutch citizens back “in tune” (Prestø 2020: 63) with themselves and their inner patterns, beliefs, and judgments of which they might not even be aware, as well as the manifold and diverse others that make up their surroundings. As one of the participants in our project put it, “This is how it can be done, in terms of the next step”.

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## Notes

1. "(Re-)Tracing History: New Methodologies for Making the Past Tangible, Palpable and Negotiable". *NWO*, 1 Apr. 2021–15 October 2022, <https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/nwa141820013>.
2. See <https://en.sitesofmemory.nl/>; <https://www.mddance.nl/>; and <https://www.aya.nl/text/about-aya>.
3. It premiered on 28 November 2020 at Rozet in Arnhem, in a joint program with Museum Arnhem, as part of their exhibition: *Living, Forgiving, Remembering*, based on the themes of tolerance, reconciliation, and forgiveness.
4. In this article, we cite from the participant responses that we collected during the research event, which took place across two dates (October 17 and 31, 2021) with three different groups. In addition, a sample of the participants was approached for individual follow-up interviews, which took place digitally in February and March 2022. A combination of Dutch and English written and audio-visual data was collected, the latter of which was transcribed. Translations to English are our own.
5. Here we wish also to acknowledge Rosanne Kennedy's (2011) elaboration upon it in the context of the Australian Sorry Books campaign.
6. For a persuasive account of the multiplicity of reality, see Mol (2002).
7. E.g., W.E.B. Du Bois's "double consciousness".
8. Known as the Action Observation Network, these neural regions include areas sometimes referred to

as mirror neurons (Calvo-Merino et al.; Cross and Ticini; Poikonen).

9. See 'Cannenburg Castle'. *Geldersch Landschap en Kasteelen*, <https://www.glk.nl/seven-castles-and-houses/cannenburg-castle>.
10. Here we build on the work of Christina Bethell and Thomas Hübl, who argue for the need to become a trauma-informed and, eventually, healing-centered society. See Bethell quoted in Hübl, *Healing Collective Trauma* 21–24.
11. Here we extend the concept Sharpe developed to describe how Black lives in the United States are swept up and animated by the afterlives of slavery.

# Provocative intervention

BY HICHAM KHALIDI  
THE FUTURE OF CULTURAL PRACTICE

The urgency for more sustainable and just cultural practices is grounded in the language of an impending climate catastrophe. We need to question how this might shift notions of artistic autonomy or institutional neutrality and the modes of representation we have held dear for so long. Being out of time, way past the thresholds, what worlds will be built on the ruins of collapse, and how is this related to cultural practice? How could we transform the ways in which art institutions work and the ways in which cultural practice is conducted?

For this, it is important to understand the climate and social crisis requires not only administrative solutions but a profound transformation in our ways of understanding and doing. The question of enduring the Climate Collapse is, at heart, an ethical one,

seeking social, environmental, and ecological justice based on what Rolando Vazquez would call processes of mourning, healing, and restitution (Vázquez 2020). Is it possible to envisage an ethical life or an ethical cultural practice today?

Cultural practice as representation is implicated in the destitution and devastation of other worlds and other ways of being. By the mere fact that anything around us is designed or at least stems from thought and imagination, then anything is produced and created by thought. It is, in fact, as writer Amitav Ghosh explains so wisely, that our desires are the drivers of the crises economy by how we envision and design our systems, productions, and products (Gosh 2016).

Artistic and performance practices, for instance, as a derivative of cultural practices, are implicated through the necessity of mobility—moving people and infrastructure from one place to the other and the need for material representation. What is an artistic and performance practice from a sedentary point of view?

Climate Collapse is already here, exacerbating the already inherent inequalities between the ones that have contributed the most to greenhouse gas emissions and are merely witnessing the effects of it and those who in fact contributed the least to climate change, but have been experiencing the effects of gradual ecological decline for years. These inequalities are being reproduced in the flows of human capital around the world, by artists and designers traveling for their work.

A big rupture is emerging between the old and new world. A new world is opening up in which a large part of the precariat claims its share and wants to be restituted for the damage that has been done to it. Restitution is becoming the main focus point here, and area of war, but the conflict is now hardening. Restitution is more than giving back. It is also about giving back hope.

So let's flip the coin. If cultural practice, by its power to imagine the world, can imagine the world in this way (as we have found it, fueled by imperialist and colonial desires), it can imagine it otherwise, too. Cultural practices shape the world we inhabit, and actors within these practices should forego their position of innocence and strive to retribute and bring back what we have taken from the Earth, to position ourselves in relation to Earth as part of it, rather than beyond or above it.<sup>1</sup>

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Revealing  
the  
erasures






# The Crow's Nest and the Hold

BY MIKKI STELDER



ABSTRACT: In this essay, I deploy what Renisa Mawani (2018) has called an “oceanic framework and methodology” for the study of Dutch imperialism and its aftermath. A turn to the ocean allows for a different understanding of the breadth and depth of the Dutch colonial project. This chapter evolved out of the Amsterdam Museum exhibition *Golden Coach* (2021) and the *Futures of the Dutch Colonial Past* symposium. In the first part, I present an oceanic reading of the *Golden Coach* exhibition to show how Dutch maritime imagination formed the conditions of possibility for the panel ‘Tribute from the colonies’ emergence. In the second part, I turn to the oceanic imaginaries of Surinamese anticolonial and antifascist revolutionary Anton de Kom. In *Wij Slaven van Suriname* (1934), De Kom offers a poetic oceanic lens to critically examine Dutch maritime self-perception.

 In the Netherlands and its occupied territories, a Black, migrant, and refugee-led movement of activists, artists, and scholars has shown that coloniality is omnipresent—in architecture and public space (Hondius et al. 2019; Martina 2012); in education and museum collections (Jouwe 2018; Zeefuik 2017; Thomas and Modest 2020); in translation practices (Ndjako 2019); in legal culture and the politics of citizenship (Jones 2016); in popular traditions (Dipsaus 2016); in financial systems (Fatah-Black and van Rossum 2015, 2016; Brandon and Bosma 2021); in everyday practices (Essed 1991); and in the Dutch “cultural archive”, the heads, hearts, and desires of the dominant white Dutch culture (Wekker 2016). Over the past decade, these interventions have catalyzed a broader discussion on the aftermath of 400 years of Dutch colonialism, imperialism, and slavery.

In this chapter, I would like to complement these discussions by turning to Dutch maritime imagination.<sup>1</sup> I deploy what Renisa Mawani (2018) has called an “oceanic framework and methodology” for the study of Dutch imperialism and its aftermath. A turn to the ocean and the oceanic allows for a different understanding of the breadth and depth of the Dutch colonial project that does not position colonialism as a landlocked phenomenon or as separable areas and eras of study and instead looks to the intimacies between continents—the ocean.<sup>2</sup> I am interested in how the ocean and shipping are mobilized within the Dutch context. I understand Dutch maritime imagination as epistemological, legal, cultural, economic, libidinal, political, and ontological visions of the ocean, deeds performed at sea, how they are imagined and their impact on Dutch historiography, and liberal state formation and self-perception. For the project, I am neither simply interested in exploring the Dutch connection to the ocean nor the relation between Dutch trade,

navigation, and colonialism. I am interested in developing a different idiom of critique that begins at sea and draws on anticolonial oceanic imaginaries that undermine Eurocentric narrations of the past. In thinking about idiom, I have been inspired by the lectures of Gina Dent, who urges me to develop and be attentive to an idiom of critique that does not preserve the order of colonization.<sup>3</sup> My hope is that a turn to the ocean provides a different attention to breadth and depth that offers both evidence of the damage of colonialism and slavery while being attuned to how these come to the attention in the Dutch cultural and academic context. What questions might be asked? And, can we ask them differently?

The emergence of capitalism and colonialism has everything to do with the oceans, ships, and shipping. Ships were not simply vessels that brought colonizers, cargo, and captive Africans and Indigenous peoples from A to B. They formed, as Mawani's work shows, the very backbone of empire and their very own colonial-legal laboratories (Mawani 2018).<sup>4</sup> They are cornerstones of the (legal) architecture of coloniality. However, the productive role of Dutch maritime imagination has remained overlooked. Looking at the ocean sheds light on how the plantation, the metropole, the colony, and the cultural, legal, racial, libidinal, and capitalist economies of these are interwoven at sea.

Contemporary imaginaries of the ocean can be traced back to Hugo Grotius, a Dutch East India Company lawyer, early modern humanist, and ideologue of the Dutch state. Grotius's writings did more than influence four centuries of thinking about international law and the ocean. In his treatises, he attached legal justifications for Dutch imperialism to tales of maritime heroism and prowess and called the Dutch "those true sons of the sea" (2006, 481; Rieser 2020; Stelder 2022). He used this ontological description to support his argument that the Dutch, more than any other European nation, were destined for the ocean (read: imperial expansion). He attached a "providential function" to commerce that sought to rationalize the colonial project and the Calvinist mission by claiming that engaging in free trade would show Indigenous peoples the light of Christ (Porras 2006).

Grotius's *Mare liberum*, or *The Free Sea* (2004), constitutes the most well-known early modern European text deliberating the status of the seas.<sup>5</sup> For Grotius, Dutch imperialism was inevitable. The Dutch ontological relation to the sea became the ideological canvas upon which he hinged justifications of imperial expansion and accumulation (Stelder 2023). He devised tales of maritime heroism and prowess that continue to permeate the Dutch cultural archive to create an image of the Dutch as an innately maritime nation while obscuring a belligerent history of slavery, colonization, and "imperial ecocide" (Satgar 55). How does the ocean become an anchor point for the production of Dutch "white innocence"? In asking this question, I am inspired by the work of Gloria Wekker (2016). I am especially interested in how oceanic imaginaries of Dutch colonial supremacy as white innocence continue to inform Dutch self-perception. Furthermore, I argue for a methodological and analytical shift toward Black feminist, Caribbean, and anticolonial intellectual traditions to attend to what emerges in "the wake" (Sharpe 2016) of Dutch seafaring.

According to Wekker, white innocence forms a central paradox in white Dutch self-perception (2016, 5). This is a self-perception of the Netherlands and the Dutch as a small nation, liberal and humanitarian, free from racism or sexism (17-19). Viewed from the sea, this white Dutch innocence is also shaped by narratives of maritime prowess and grandeur, in which the Dutch relationship to the ocean disguises the colonial violence Dutch shipping constituted and enabled. The ocean becomes

a prosthesis of Dutchness that enables imaginaries of a small nation expanding itself over the surface of the globe via the sea—an image crafted by Grotius to support Dutch empire and state formation and sedimented over time in the Dutch cultural archive. As Ajay Gandhi points out, Dutch “maritime prowess and capitalist speculation... are heroic abstractions. What this world rested upon was intimate terror” (Gandhi, 2021). It is no coincidence that Wekker described the process of writing *White Innocence* as “an oceanic journey [she] had postponed quite some time” (2014, 159).<sup>6</sup>

This chapter evolved out of *The Golden Coach* exhibition (2021) and the symposium *Futures of the Dutch Colonial Past* at the Amsterdam Museum. In the first part, I will present an oceanic reading of the Golden Coach exhibition to show how maritime imagination formed the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the panel *Hulde der Koloniën (Tribute from the Colonies)*. In the second part, I turn to the book *Wij Slaven van Suriname* (1934) by Surinamese anticolonial, anti-fascist, and anti-capitalist revolutionary Anton de Kom. In the book, De Kom mobilizes the image of a slave ship to stage a revolutionary complaint against Dutch self-perception. He offers us a poetic oceanic lens to critically examine Dutch maritime imagination that provides a different entry point to rethink the relationship between the Dutch and the ocean, and destabilizes a Grotian self-perception. Returning to the exhibit *The Golden Coach*, I place two contemporary works in dialogue with what could be called De Kom’s “anticolonial poetics” (Kelley 2000). Thinking with the work of Katherine McKittrick, I understand such a poetics as a “black cultural practice invested in history-making that names the data of violence in order to creatively interrupt it and intentionally point to, and undo, the empirical and analytical violence that cannot sustain its own brutalities in the present” (McKittrick 2021, 147).<sup>7</sup> McKittrick’s focus on “black life and livingness” demands a reading practice that does not sustain the logic of violence and death (148).

## The Golden Coach

The ocean, ships, and shipping have always formed a key part in Dutch iconography dating back to the late 16th century and the advent of maritime art. The role of such a pictorial regime for inter-European warfare has received quite some attention (Siegerts 2014; Keyes 1990; Gaskchke 2008; Russell 1983). However, the work of Jennifer Tosch, Nancy Jouwe, Dienke Hondius, and Dieneke Stam (2019) has taught me to look at the background of this pictorial culture. What is the underside of Dutch self-narrations? What is backgrounded? And how can such a pictorial culture be queried through Caribbean, Black, and anticolonial analytics?

In 2021, the Amsterdam Museum curated a large-scale exhibition around the Golden Coach, a controversial carriage used by the ruling Dutch monarch during Prinsjesdag.<sup>8</sup> It is one of the few days in the year the Dutch monarchy is able to reassert its presence publicly. The coach has become subject to anticolonial criticism because it displays and glorifies the panel *Hulde der Koloniën (Tribute from the Colonies)*. On the panel, we see a white female figure sitting on a throne in the center, surrounded by kneeling colonized and enslaved people who offer her gifts. Commissioned and gifted in the late 19th century, the panel displays what Saidiya Hartman calls a colonial “scene of subjection” (Hartman 1997). Such scenes of subjection form “the imaginative surface upon which the master and the nation came to understand themselves (7).<sup>9</sup> In our scene, brutality is hidden under a ruse of willing subjection to the conqueror and the calmness of the ocean. In *Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (2019), Tiffany Lethabo King shows how popular

representations of the plantation often relied on a sense of orderliness, where the enslaved gratefully labor on the plantation, to stifle white anxieties around rebellion and revolt (74-119). The panel on the Golden Coach symbolizes such a representational strategy. By depicting the violent process of colonization as a willing submission to the colonizer, it creates the canvas upon which the white nation can imagine itself and pictorially appeases white viewers' anxiety around anticolonial rebellion. Underneath depictions of order and grandeur lie deep-seated white fears of losing the position of dominance through which whiteness has come to define itself. **150**

On the Golden Coach panel, we see a white woman in the center—the mother country—holding two shields. The right one has a sword on it and the left one a ship with the Dutch flag caught in a storm. Although the foreground of the colonial scene demands attention, my eyes wander to the background of the panel. My gaze rests on the calm turquoise sea opening up far and wide behind the scene—colonial ships bobbing gently in the background. The calm blue asks that I look beyond the horizon. In the foreground, the gifts offered to the central white figure are wrapped in white cloth, like freshly unloaded cargo from a ship. These scenes of subjection do not take place in a royal ballroom, a fort, a castle, or plantation, but amid the hustle and bustle of a port. And, looking at the green mountains to the left and right of the panel, I know I am not in the Netherlands but in occupied territories and waters. The panel tells me that the Netherlands and “her colonies” are formed by the port, the ship, and the ocean. The calm blue sea stands in stark contrast to the wild, gushing waves and the “frosty wind-swept skies”, as Grotius put it, displayed on the shield the white woman is holding. The rough waves envelop the ship, yet it has persevered, ending up in the deceptively calm tropical waters of the occupied territories.

How can I engage these entangled oceanic histories and representational strategies differently? It is in the work of Anton de Kom that I find a different way of approaching Dutch maritime imagination as displayed on the panel and in the work of Grotius. De Kom's work demands that those of us who want to work with the archive and afterlives of Dutch colonialism and slavery critically learn to unsee and unlearn some of the most foundational myths of white Dutch exceptionalism, beginning with the glory days of Dutch shipping.

## The Crow's Nest and the Hold

In 1934, Afro-Surinamese writer and activist Anton de Kom published *Wij Slaven van Suriname*.<sup>10</sup> In the book, De Kom writes a history of the present of Suriname from the vantage point of the enslaved, the colonized, and the more-than-human, while at the same time calling to account a white Dutch readership. *Wij Slaven van Suriname* is a rewriting of history as much as it is a complaint, a literary text, an autobiography, a manifesto of sorts. In mobilizing a wide variety of genres, De Kom develops what Robin D.G. Kelley (2000), in the context of Aimé Césaire's work, has called its own “anticolonial poetics”. It develops an idiom of critique, to think with Dent, in which the order of colonization and the genres (such as historiography and anthropology) through which it epistemologically and ontologically maps itself onto the world are challenged.

There is one passage in this work I keep returning to, and this is the moment when De Kom deploys the metaphor of the slave ship to directly address his white Dutch readership and the imaginaries around which we have formed our attachments to Dutch historiography and Dutch self-perception.

This scene anticipates the Black and Caribbean intellectual traditions emerging from the Anglophone and Francophone Caribbean (Césaire 1950; Glissant 1997, and Walcott 1986), and contemporary Black scholarship (such as: Sharpe 2016; Brand 2001; Hartman 1997; McKittrick 2021; Gilroy 1995; Scott 2000; Philip 2008; Moten 2003). Thinking with McKittrick's challenge, I read De Kom's "creative return" to the slave ship not simply as an accounting of "the causes and effects of racial violence", but as a "text that puts forth a different set of preoccupations that are interested how this past has shaped what we have come to know as freedom, in the present" (2021, 148). **151**

It is worth quoting the passage in full here:

On the boundless deep blue of the ocean sails a frigate, sublime in the taut pomp of its stays and shrouds, [in the *whirling whiteness of its proud wind-swollen sails*]. No pounding machines propel it, no clouds of black smoke besmirch the blue dome of the heavens. Seen from the crow's nest, the ship below us resembles a white fish; sea-froth splashes the bowsprit; two sailors at the helm sing an old, old sea shanty.

No spectacle matches that of a square-rigged three-master in full sail; it is finer than [Heinrich] Hauser's "last sailing ship", finer than the frigate *Johanna Maria*, it is the dream of those who, amid the noise of the big city, amid typewriters and calculating machines, dream of the golden of bygone ages.

We do not begrudge you your *imagined seat in the crow's nest* of [those old ships]. We do not begrudge you the sea wind through your hair and the song of sailors [standing on the beams below you below reefing the topgallant sail singing.]

But we do wish to warn you. [From your high place of standing], do not venture down the futtock shroud, or even take the less dangerous route through the lubber's hole. Do not set foot on the rope ladders that lead to the poop deck, *however white and freshly scrubbed they may appear from here on high*.

Up here you can *smell* the invigorating odor of tar and the salt sea wind.

Down there it already *reeks* a mile leeward of the sweat and excrement of a thousand slaves packed into the hold.

Up here you can *hear* the cry of the albatross, the song of the sailors, and the crash of the waves.

Down there you *hear* the *cries of the slaves*, the *wails* of a woman in labor, and the *crack* of the whip coming down on backs of blacks.

You will not take any pleasure in what lies below deck, the squalid breeding grounds of filth and vermin where the men and women - separated [and shackled], then packed together to save space - [are *wailing* in despair]. [*Even you must feel something of the despair and the grief of blacks*, dragged away from their homes, far removed from their kin, seasick and malnourished, *full of terror* at their unknown destination].

[And, above all, *it is not entirely without danger for you to venture down. It happens that, in a frenzy, a slave might attack the guards*, hoping to be beaten down.] It has even happened that *all the slaves aboard a ship rose up in revolt...*



And whatever the [Dutchman] lacked in humanity, [we have to let him keep the honor of being a good merchant.] (60-62, *emphasis places by the authors*).<sup>11</sup> **152**

In this passage, De Kom deploys the metaphor of the slave ship to excavate the simultaneous emergence of stories of maritime prowess and nostalgia and the violent histories of the slave ship. For De Kom, the slave ship forms a prominent imaginary place in the minds of white Dutch people—with its white sails and white decks. For De Kom, it is an “imagined seat” that feels and smells like grandeur, adventurousness, and freedom—the fresh air and salty sea. At the same time, white Dutch self-perception is dependent on an imaginary place founded upon the “the crack of the whip coming down on the backs of blacks”. The slave ship becomes a violent technology of Dutch self-perception *and* a space of possibility from within which Black rebellion and insistences on freedom emerged. De Kom’s description of the material separation of the senses in the very structure of the slave ship shows how the ship contains, regulates, and hides black humanity “because it ‘just is’ and because those inside, bound to the walls, are neither seeable nor liberated subjects” (McKittrick 2006, xii). The ship’s function was to disguise human terror (xii). For De Kom, the deck acts as an imaginative surface that becomes penetrated by the screams and smells of the hold. Drawing on the senses of the hold, De Kom undermines the seemingly transparent, forward-looking perspective of accounting.

Juxtaposing the senses and sensibilities of the crow’s nest with the violence and resistance in the hold challenges the imaginary place of whites in the crow’s nest, as it rests on an active denial of the material realities of the hold. De Kom warns that the hold below the white, polished decks is not only the site of subjection; it is also the underbelly of white anxiety and Black rebellion. A site where abducted Africans revolt. De Kom’s warning “do not venture down” shatters imaginaries of the crow’s nest while revealing the erasures it performs.

Staging a revolutionary complaint against the Dutch colonizer, De Kom presents the slave ship as metaphor and architecture for white unseeing *and* Black rebellion. At the same time, De Kom’s irony sheds light on the Grotian figure of the “good merchant” and how such white “autopoiesis” (Wynter 23-33) is irreconcilable with humanity.

De Kom’s complaint, “Even *you* should feel something”, addressing the Dutchman who lacks humanity, is echoed decades later in the poetry and essays of, for instance, Aimé Césaire (1950) and Édouard Glissant (1997). It is precisely in those places such as the hold of slave ships, argues Inez Blanca van der Scheer, “from which the archive of truth is not written but has been experienced” (15). And it is this experientiality of the slave ship undergirding and enabling Dutch maritime imagination that De Kom attempts to capture in his description of the ship as a symbol of Dutch self-perception. He asks white readers to open their senses to what they continue to refuse to imagine. De Kom also signals to a different understanding of temporality in which the racial terror of the slave ship is not “over”, as it continuous to operate subconsciously in the production of Dutchness and colonizer-colonized relations.

In the exhibition *The Golden Coach*, the artists AiRich and Sithabile Mlotshwa develop anticolonial aesthetics akin to De Kom’s to critically examine the conditions of possibility for the Golden Coach’s emergence. I take De Kom’s invitation as a starting point to analyze these artistic practices.

Afro-Caribbean visual artist AiRich depicts the colonial panel as a ship, or rather the hold of the ship, in her piece *BLOODY GOLD. TRIBUTE FROM THE COLONIES/WHAT ABOUT REPAIRING THE DAMAGE?*. In her collage, AiRich has made a cutout of the shape of the panel and turned it into a slave ship. Instead of the “toned down” version of history, AiRich has substituted the images on the panel with images of the brutalization of Black bodies. The white woman in the center is surrounded by guns, gold, blood, and the Bible—the tools of colonial and racial terror occluded in the original panel. Producing the collage, AiRich describes that she was struck that “through these panels, the Netherlands admits that they enriched themselves in the colonies. But they portrayed the people as if they came bearing gifts. It is weird how coercion and inhumanity have been left out”. (AiRich 2021). In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Christina Sharpe reminds us that the hold is not just a space for the transport of kidnapped humans and cargo, but also a metaphorical space that carries in its “wake” what she calls “slavery’s as of yet unresolved unfolding” (14). AiRich engages in what Sharpe calls “wake-work”—an analytic and methodology that draws attention to what continues to unfold in the wake of the slave ship. In her own panel, AiRich forces the museum visitor to go down into the hold, while also drawing attention to how the racial terror of the hold continues to persist into the present through the ongoing dispossession and erasure of Black lives.

Another work that builds on Anton de Kom’s anticolonial poetics is the one by Sithabile Mlotshwa. Her contribution, *A Truly “Dutch” Creation. The Citizen as Investor and Stakeholder*, explores the relationship between the golden carriage and the good merchant. Mlotshwa has carefully collaged cutouts of the most well-known drawing of the hold of a slave ship, the *Brooks*, and overlaid these images of the hold with a collage of nutmeg, mace, and other spices, as well as depictions of the Dutch monarchy, drawing attention to the oceanic entanglements of empire, past and present. Mlotshwa is interested in how colonial innocence is produced in conjunction with Dutch self-perception as good merchants. It is Mlotshwa’s work that draws attention to the “intimacies of four continents” (Lowe 2004) and the inability to separate different areas and routes conquered by the Dutch. Her work invites me to connect across oceans, while calling a white Dutch audience to account for the erasures we continue to perform. Mlotshwa mobilizes the figures of the Dutch king and queen in her work to comment on how the nation continues to script itself into the present—how the view from the crow’s nest forms a technology of white innocence. A white Dutch audience, Mlotshwa’s work seems to say, remains invested in the extraction of bodies, lands, and so-called “resources”. Mlotshwa’s work refuses the linear temporality of conventional historiography by showing how the past works upon the present. By showing how contemporary global racial capitalism must be historicized.

In the wake of De Kom’s anticolonial complaint, artists AiRich and Mlotshwa expose what goes unseen in the celebration and grandeur of Dutch shipping and shatter imaginaries of the crow’s nest and the open, free sea from the vantage point of the hold and colonial shipping. They each in their own way draw attention to how maritime belligerence—not willful submission—makes the Dutch nation. They refuse the separation between past and present, between colony and metropole. The medium of collage offers a methodology to peel away the layers of Dutch maritime innocence and reveal the (sub)marine and submerged entanglements of empire.

The seeming “mundaneness” of the colonial port scene with its calm tropical horizon and the “willing” submission of colonized and enslaved peoples reveals the projection and justification of white anxiety around the ever-looming prospect of Black and Indigenous rebellion and mutiny on the ship—an insistence on freedom.<sup>12</sup> The silence before the storm; a theme that returns in De Kom. Following De Kom, an oceanic framework requires the cutting of the masts, the shattering of the crow’s nest, a white descending into *and* an enslaved person’s rupture from the hold.

Starting from the ocean allows me to cross temporal and geographical divides characteristic for the study of colonial and imperial history. Such an oceanic framework shows both the persistence of the “coloniality of the free sea” (Esmeir 2017) while drawing attention to the ever-present cracks in the hull. Turning to the ocean then becomes particularly meaningful for the Dutch context, as it allows for analytic connections and entanglements between different eras and areas to emerge—a cultural oceanography of imperialism *and* its aftermaths that centers Black, Caribbean, and anticolonial critical traditions.

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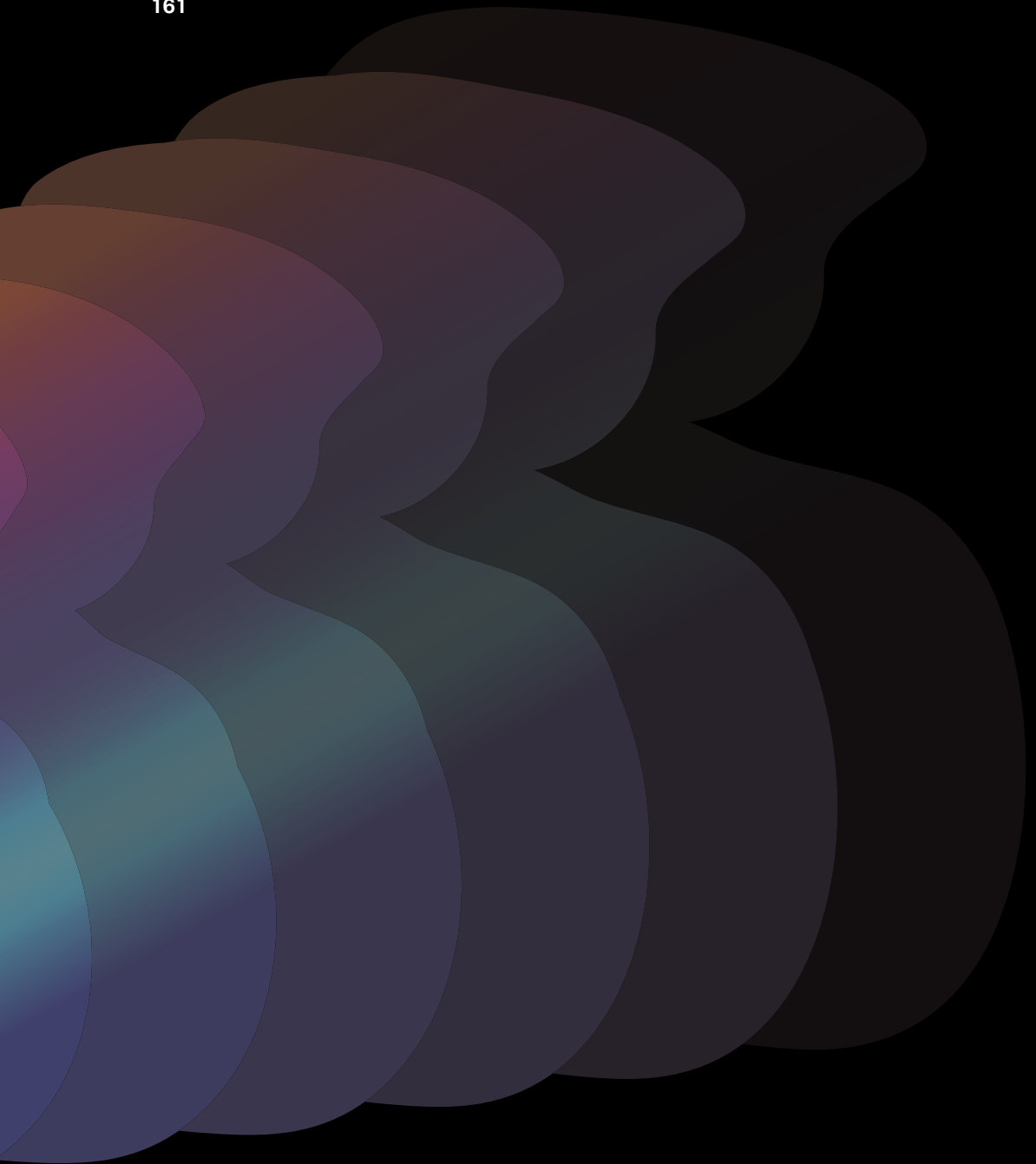
## Notes

1. The chapter forms part of my larger project *Maritime Imagination: A Cultural Oceanography of Dutch Imperialism and its Aftermath*.
2. Thinking about the intimacies *between* continents I am indebted to Lisa Lowe's (2014) "intimacies of four continents", which focuses on the transoceanic entanglements of U.S. empire.
3. During my time as a visiting graduate student at the University of California Santa Cruz in 2016/17, I attended Gina Dent's seminar *The Idea of Africa* at the University of California Santa Cruz in 2016/17 and worked with her closely in an independent study.
4. The turn to the ocean takes on different forms across different fields and disciplines. Others who have written about the shipping its ongoing role in shaping global racial capitalism are for instance, Khalili 2021; Linebaugh and Rediker 2000; Campling and Colás 2021; Ranganathan 2019. For the purpose of this chapter, I draw on Black, Caribbean and postcolonial engagements with the oceanic.
5. *re Liberum* was commissioned by the Directors of the Chamber of Zeeland to respond to a dispute between the Dutch and the Portuguese over the capture of the Portuguese carrack *Sta. Catarina* by Dutch captain Jakob van Heemskerck off the coast of present-day Singapore (Ittersum 2003; 2006; 2010; Borschberg 1999; Mawani 2018). Over the past two decades, legal historians and political theorists have shown how *Mare Liberum* was as much a dispute over the status of the seas as it was a dispute over Dutch expansion in Southeast Asia (Ittersum 2003; 2006; 2010; Borschberg 1999; Mawani 2018; Wilson 2008). I have shown elsewhere how the Grotian imaginary produced a differential notion of the sovereign subject that subjected Indigenous peoples, Indigenous lands, and the environment to Dutch capital accumulation (Stelder 2022; forthcoming). Within the term Indigenous, I include those people abducted from their ancestral lands to work in slave plantations elsewhere.
6. In *Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (2006) and in the "Coda" to *White Innocence* Wekker also turns to the sea. In the former, to show how the term *mati* derives its genealogy from Africans forced to cross the Middle Passage (2006). In the latter, to show how the affective position of the captain is intertwined with Dutch self-perception.
7. Here, McKittrick discusses the groundbreaking text *Zong! As told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng* by M. NourbeSe Philip (2008). Although I do not have space to read De Kom and Philip together here, I think it is pertinent to understand De Kom's poetics as a different way of history-making, which names and undoes the violence of history and historiography.
8. On that day, the monarch addresses the nation in a formal gathering of ministers and government employees in the *ridderzaal* in The Hague.
9. I have written elsewhere about how the Dutch Sinterklaas tradition is another example of a scene of subjection (Stelder 2021). See also the work of Smith 2014; Martina 2013)
10. The first English translation was published in 2022 by Polity Press.



11. This quote is taken from the official translation of *Wij Slaven* by David McKay (2022). I have placed my own translations in brackets whenever I found myself in very minor disagreement with McKay's official translation.
12. For more on the mundaneness of colonial-racial violence within the colonial archive see Fuentes 2016.





# Activism Inside/Outside Institutions

**T**his chapter presents a comprehensive exploration of the Dutch colonial past, emphasizing the enduring effects of colonialism and the urgent need for transformative cultural practices. The essays highlight key themes such as the normalization of violence and exploitation during colonialism, the persistence of colonial legacies, and the challenges faced by cultural institutions in addressing their colonial past. Activism and resistance emerge as crucial forces in interrogating colonial ideologies and promoting decolonial futures. The essays also emphasize the need for inclusive representations of history, the importance of centering marginalized voices, and the transformative efforts being made in various fields to confront institutional racism and reshape collective memory. The provocative intervention discusses property as a racial weapon of colonial capitalism. An interview with renowned scholar and thinker Gloria Wekker closes out the chapter. Overall, these texts contribute to ongoing discussions on decoloniality, urging critical engagement, activism, and the envisioning of alternative futures for a more just and inclusive society, inside and outside institutions. By centering marginalized voices and challenging historical erasure, institutions can play a vital role in shaping inclusive narratives and fostering societal transformation.

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Imperative  
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# Let Us Not Erase Black Activism When Remembering the Dutch Colonial Past

BY JESSICA DE ABREU, ISABELLE BRITTO AND  
MITCHELL ESAJAS

**ABSTRACT:** In recent years, there has been increasing attention among Dutch museums and heritage institutions to address the (Dutch) history of slavery and colonialism, and its legacy. In this essay, we argue that the developments in the cultural and heritage sector cannot be understood without considering the 'new wave of anti-racism' which was catalyzed by the movement against the national Saint Nicolas and its racist caricature black pete which led to larger political and societal discussions around antiblack- and institutional racism, and collective memory in the Netherlands. Grassroots activism played a crucial role in the recent changes among museums and wider debates on anti-racism.

In recent years there has been growing attention among Dutch museums and heritage institutions to address the (Dutch) history of slavery and colonialism and its legacy. While these topics were largely silenced and underexposed in the Dutch cultural sector, the last decade has marked a change, with a cacophony of exhibitions and projects related to colonial history. In this essay we argue that the developments in the cultural and heritage sector cannot be understood without taking into account the recent wave of anti-racism, which was catalyzed by the movement against Zwarte Piet (Black Pete). The movement against the national tradition of Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas) and its racist caricature Zwarte Piet led to larger political and societal discussions around anti-black and institutional racism and collective memory in the Netherlands. However, it seems that grassroots activism is often forgotten, although it played an important role in the recent changes among museums and wider debates on anti-racism.

In the first section, we will discuss a chronological timeline of how grassroots activism demanded recognition of the Dutch History of Slavery and developments around inclusion and Black perspectives within the cultural sector. In the second, we will elaborate how that movement sparked larger conversations about changing institutions and staff. Lastly, we will share how activism and the work of The Black Archives fits in the larger tradition and narrative of Black communities commemorating, collecting, and exhibiting Black history.

In November 2021, the Amsterdam Museum organized a symposium titled "The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past" together with several partners ("Symposium"). During the symposium, academics and professionals, mostly from the Dutch museum sector, came together to think and talk about the ways in which the Dutch colonial past is dealt with in contemporary cultural and academic practices. Members of The Black Archives, an Amsterdam-based historical archive focused on Black history and literature, participated in the symposium as well. Although we found it a fruitful gathering, we also found that a rather self-congratulatory tone, centered on and celebrating the achievements of Dutch museums,

prevailed throughout the gathering. This overshadowed the crucial intellectual work, the emotional labor and risky activism done by collectives, activists, students, and thinkers which catalyzed the shift in the narrative around the colonial past in Dutch institutions. These people, who are often excluded from museums and institutions of higher learning, were underrepresented in the space. **168**

The title of the symposium made us think of a collection of essays published in 2006 by the Surinamese-born sociologist Waldo Heilbron titled "The Future of the Past: Reflections on the Netherlands' History of Slavery and Heritage". In the booklet, he critically reflected on the way in which descendants of enslaved people sparked a national debate on the history of Dutch slavery and its legacy and how Dutch cultural institutions dealt with it in the early 20th century. In addition, he critically reflected on the way representations of national history and heritage are constructed in the context of colonial power dynamics, and how those representations of history and heritage nurture the identities of individuals, groups, and nations. Additionally, he argued, what is seen as "national history" is shaped by a "canon" which consists of a set of highlights, important moments, and people that are decided to be of importance by an elite group of people. Violent aspects of national history such as the Dutch History of Slavery were marginalized and silenced within the dominant narrative (Weiner 2). Educational institutions such as schools and universities and cultural institutions such as museums play a crucial role in transmitting collective representations of "national history and heritage". Schools and museums historically also played an important role in the development of the modern nation-state in the 19th century. European museums were developed in a period of rising nationalism (Anderson 282-288). Their role was to construct a national collective identity, an "Us". This was based on a collection of "national heritage" which represented the pride of the nation. In the same period, ethnographic museums were developed based on large numbers of "exotic artifacts" which had been taken, often stolen, from colonized peoples. Not only land and natural resources were extracted from colonized territories but also cultural products ranging from simple functional objects to large valuables (van Beurden 11). While modern and contemporary art museums showed the artistic achievements of the nation, ethnographic museums produced and reproduced racist and colonial representations of the "primitive other" (Vazquez 84).

The collected loot of ethnographic museums also included thousands of human remains from people in colonized territories. These human remains were used for pseudoscientific practices which proved the presupposed superiority of the "white race" and legitimized further colonial and imperial practices (Zoetbrood, Seck and Fabels). Exhibitions about the colonies allowed the mother country to familiarize the general public with the significance and position of its colonies. The Colonial Museum in Haarlem, for example, was founded in 1864 by the Society for the Promotion of Industry, with the aim to benefit Dutch industry and counter British competition by promoting and facilitating the development of colonies, exhibiting their products, and stimulating people to study them (Demollin, 37). The Colonial Museum was rebranded several times, and eventually named the Tropenmuseum. It still has a depot with hundreds of skulls from different former colonies; at least 1,225 of these are from Papua New Guinea alone (Westerman). In October 2022 a collective of Indigenous Surinamese people wrote an open letter to the museum and the Minister of Culture to demand the repatriation of the remains of a baby who was preserved in a pot. Historically, museums were both a reflection and a source of colonial power relations (Stuart Hall, 169; Vazquez 62). They contributed to the erasure, displacement, and devaluing of "Other" worlds. Silence about the violent history of slavery and its legacy and the exclusion of descendants of enslaved and oppressed communities were key aspects of this.

In 2007, a year after the publication of Heilbron's essay collection, he wrote another book together with Valika Smeulders, Alex van Stipriaan, and Aspha Bijnaar titled *Looking for the Silence: Traces of the History of Slavery in the Netherlands*. Building on Heilbron's work, they argued that action groups which arose from communities of descendants of enslaved people put the topic of the colonial past—especially the history of the transatlantic trade in enslaved Africans—on the political agenda. There is a long history of activities of remembrance about this history of slavery, especially within Afro-Surinamese and Afro-Caribbean communities. In The Black Archives' collection, exhibition pamphlets for Ketikoti commemoration celebrations (i.e., celebrations to commemorate Emancipation Day in Surinam) can be found dating back to the 1940s. In 1999, several grassroots organizations and initiatives of Afro-Surinamese, Dutch Caribbean, Aruban, Ghanaian and Indigenous Surinamese groups united in the National Platform for the History of Slavery (LPS) (Van Stipriaan 156). After years of organizing, lobbying, and campaigning, the Dutch minister R. van Boxtel expressed "deep remorse" about the Dutch History of Slavery during a UN conference in Durban, South Africa, on behalf of the Dutch state. One year later, in 2002, the National Slavery Monument was erected in the Oosterpark in Amsterdam. A year after that, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (NiNsee), which had the responsibility to conduct research on the History of Slavery, opened its own permanent exhibition about Dutch slavery and organized public events and commemorations, with the national commemoration of the abolition of slavery on July 1 as the largest and most visible annual public event. The establishment of NiNsee and the National Slavery Monument were rightfully seen as important steps toward acknowledgement of the historical injustices and crimes which the Dutch state and Dutch colonizers had committed. The silence surrounding the Dutch History of Slavery had been broken.

With the establishment of NiNsee, there was hope that some continuity was ensured in making the history of slavery part of the collective memory. There were still concerns, however, about the continuity of silence in most Dutch museums. The history of slavery had never been an important point of research in most museums, and researchers found it hard to find traces of slavery. As most of the collections were not digitized yet, one had to rely on the knowledge of curators who had studied the collections. The lack of Black curators contributed to the silence in regards to slavery in Dutch museums (Van Stipriaan 57-63). The reluctance of Heilbron and his fellow researchers was not unfounded. NiNsee almost did not live to see its tenth birthday, as the government cabinet Rutte I, consisting of the conservative liberal party VVD and the Christian Democratic party CDA, supported by the populist extreme right party PVV (2010-2012) decided to slash the budget of NiNsee and other cultural institutions such as the Tropenmuseum. As Wekker wrote, "The infrastructure to produce and disseminate knowledge about the Dutch slavery past and present was almost annihilated" (14).

## Anti-racism Sparks Change in the Cultural Sector

While Heilbron, Smeulders, Bijnaar, and Van Stipriaan noted that the silence around the Dutch History of Slavery was broken in 2009, between 2011 and 2022 a new cacophony of exhibitions and activities dealing with the history of slavery and the colonial past and its legacies underlined this.<sup>1</sup> Activists, cultural practitioners, and collectives from outside the institutions played a key role in this shift. In 2011 the "Zwarte Piet Is Racism" campaign, which was started by Black activists and artists, sparked a large and heated national debate (Heilbron). Zwarte Piet is the imaginary

servant of Saint Nicholas and is often played by white people in blackface and depicted as a caricature of Black people. The figure was long considered a normal part of an “innocent children’s holiday” by the majority of Dutch people, although for decades there have been many critiques, mainly coming from Black communities in the Netherlands. **170**

In 2013, a UN working group criticized the tradition. Its chair, Verene Shepherd, called the tradition a “throwback to slavery” which should be stopped in its present form. Her comments were met with fierce disdain, radicalization, and even death threats. A year later, various activists and collectives came together to form the action group Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP). They used several methods of nonviolent protest during the annual official Saint Nicolas parade to address both the tradition itself and its underlying problem of institutional and anti-black racism, framing it as a legacy of colonialism and the history of slavery. From the beginning, they were met with different forms of repression, including mass arrests, police violence, and violence from far-right supporters of Zwarte Piet. For several years, the (activism against) Zwarte Piet issue made national and international headlines.<sup>2</sup> Official organs such as the UN’s International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the Children’s Ombudsman, and the National Institute of Human Rights made statements about the tradition, in most cases linking it and present-day racism to the lack of education about the Dutch History of Slavery and the colonial past. The CERD called upon educational institutions and museums to pay more attention to this part of history (“Mission Statement”). In 2020 more than 50,000 people joined protests after George Floyd, a Black man, was murdered by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. The massive protests put institutional and anti-black racism on the political agenda. Whereas only a few cultural institutions had made public statements about Zwarte Piet, the #BlackLivesMatter movement was less controversial and safe enough for them to speak out regarding racism and diversity (Ouédraogo, “Simone Zeefuik”).

## #DecolonizingTheMuseum

A social movement consists of multiple organizations, networks, and individuals who dedicate themselves to the fight against racism. Philomena Essed compared the earlier wave of anti-racism in the 1970s and ‘80s with the current wave, calling today’s “more broadly organized” and “networked” (136). Members of the anti-Zwarte Piet movement were also involved in other initiatives, often sharing their experience in organizing as well as their knowledge, ideas, and methods, as social media allowed them to connect more easily than previous generations. Instead of seeing activists as isolated individuals or part of groups outside of the cultural sector, we see them as part of a broader, dynamic network of collectives—individuals who operate in different collectives, institutions, and sectors while sharing similar anti-racist goals. Members of #DecolonizingTheMuseum, for example, were also involved in the occupation of the Maagdenhuis, calling for the decolonization of the University of Amsterdam. Members of New Urban Collective (NUC), the student collective which founded The Black Archives, were involved in this occupation as well, while at the same time remaining involved with KOZP. Social media also allowed them to name and shame institutions that were sensitive about maintaining their reputation. The collective #DecolonizeTheMuseum arose after the Tropenmuseum invited experts and activists for a brainstorming session about how to change its practices and reach different audiences. Simone Zeefuik, Tirza Balk, and Hodan Warsame, a group of Black women and women of color, decided to open a Twitter account using the hashtag #DecolonizeTheMuseum. They started tweeting their critiques about the texts and objects which

they found not only in the Tropenmuseum but also in other museums (Bohlmeijer). They also **171** wrote open letters to the boards of different museums, such as the Amsterdam Museum and the Rijksmuseum. Some institutions were reluctant at first, but Wayne Modest—then head of the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC)—found a way to engage with these thinkers and activists and invited them to together consider the renewal of the exhibitions within the museum. This led to several events and publications and influenced a different way of exhibiting within the museum, which paid more attention to the violence of colonialism and slavery and histories of resistance (Ariese, “Amplifying Voices” 125).

## The Golden Age

#DecolonizeTheMuseum also critiqued the Amsterdam Museum and its use of the term “Golden Age”. This term was widely used to depict the period around the seventeenth century, a time of cultural and economic prosperity for the Dutch Republic. The term is controversial, however, as it was a period of violent colonial expansion that was framed in a nationalist way (Van der Molen). Despite the fact that #DecolonizeTheMuseum and others critiqued the Amsterdam Museum about its exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*, it took a while before the critique led to actual change. Again, it was activist-scholars from outside who nudged the institution toward taking action. In 2019, one of the authors of this article, Mitchell Esajas, arrived at The Black Archives and was shocked to see a gigantic billboard advertising the Golden Age exhibition right in front of the entrance of the building. This did not sit well with him, as it directly opposed the critical and decolonial narratives for which The Black Archives stands. Esajas decided to perform an intervention on the billboard. Some of the faces of the men on the billboard were whitened out; over them he wrote “BLOODY” with red spray paint and the exhibition was retitled “Portrait Gallery of the STOLEN age”. It did not spark much media attention—the advertisement was swiftly replaced—but it did increase the urgency for the museum to deal internally with this matter (Ariese, *Decolonizing the Amsterdam Museum* 128). The curatorial staff and management of the Amsterdam Museum decided to revise the whole exhibition and abolish the usage of the term “Golden Age”. In a self-reflexive essay, one of the curators of the exhibition expressed feelings of “unease” about the “misplaced feelings of pride” around the usage of the term and thanked the critics (Van der Molen).

Since the movement against Zwarte Piet sparked an intense national public debate about the tradition, it opened up a broader debate about the lack of collective memory surrounding the history of slavery. This exposed the role cultural institutions played in what ethnologist Helsloot calls “cultural aphasia”, the “inability to recognize things in the world and assign proper names to them”, in relation to the colonial past in Western societies (Helsloot 3). There are many more examples of networks, collectives, and individuals who were part of the broader social movement against racism, who called out cultural institutions on their role in whitewashing history and heritage. The Rijksmuseum, for example, prided itself on developing its first exhibition in its more than 130 years of existence about Dutch slavery. Before the museum made this decision, it was Jennifer Tosch, a woman of African American and Surinamese descent, who set up the Black Heritage Tour Amsterdam and brought groups of people to look at the Rijksmuseum collection from a decolonial perspective. Initially, the museum was very reluctant to engage with Jennifer, as the tour challenged the dominant “Golden Age narrative”, but eventually the institution changed its views as well. There are many other examples of the influence of activists on cultural institutions.



**Figure 1**

Golden Age Poster – modified by activists

(Photograph by Annemarie de Wildt)



In the previous section of this essay we argued that social movements against racism led to a shift in the cultural sector, which was reflected in a multitude of exhibitions and public programs related to slavery, colonial history, and its legacies. But to what extent did this also lead to a more diverse, inclusive, and Black presence among staff within cultural institutions?

The institutional response toward the call for more attention concerning the history of colonialism, slavery, and its legacy was translated in the development of a renewed governance: the Code for Cultural Diversity and Inclusion in 2019, following the initial Code for Cultural Diversity in 2011. This code, created by and for the cultural sector in the Netherlands as a whole, aims to work toward an accessible, more diverse, and more inclusive field (*Code Culturele Diversiteit*). Central to the renewed code are four pillars, also known in Dutch as the “four P’s”. These refer to programming, audience, personnel, and partners, meaning: what are cultural institutions showing, to whom are they showing it, who is working at these institutions, and which organizations are they working with? Many cultural organizations, such as the Museum Association, the overarching association for Dutch museums, adhere to the code, which itself is leading in awarding funding opportunities. As more and more museums are creating exhibitions related to Black histories and cultures, it is important to look at two the other pillars, namely who is making these exhibitions and for which audience.

In the process of decolonizing the museum sector, it is key to ask who is in charge of making the decisions. To this day, workforces at art institutions throughout the country remain predominantly white, especially in the curatorial and management offices. While the top of the museum remains white, most of the Black people and people of color employed at these museums work at the bottom of the hierarchy as security guards or janitorial staff. A study done by Lucette ter Borg for the *NRC* newspaper in 2020 on diversity in 21 major museums in the Netherlands shows that inclusivity has been far from being achieved; of the 231 employees in “responsible art positions” (i.e., positions where one can decide exactly what will be exhibited to Dutch audiences), only six employees had a “non-Western migratory background” (ter Borg). This accounts for only 2.6% of the total. This means that, even though we are currently looking at a perhaps temporary surge of exhibitions about issues regarding slavery and the colonial past, no systemic changes in the Dutch museum sector are being made. Even a museum like the Tropenmuseum, which is actively seeking to decolonize and redefine its colonial collection, remains mostly white in the management and curatorial offices.

So, how can we foster more structural change within the sector? For now, hiring processes are very stringent and distinctly part of historical processes of exclusion. If a museum really wants to stimulate change, it is up to the museum to change hiring requirements to include other experiences that would be valuable for the position. But for this to be possible, there has to be a willingness to combat systematic inequality—and if this will exist is yet to be seen. Thus, if the current wave of interest in Black cultures and those of other people of color falls away, there is a great risk of reverting to the situation before activists advocated for decolonizing museums. Due to a very painful history of widespread Dutch cooperation with the Holocaust, based on extensive registration of ethnic groups before World War II, to this day there is a taboo on registering ethnicity in the workforce—a fact that makes thorough research into institutional racism in the museum sector all the more difficult (Hondius 10). However, even without thorough quantitative research, more and more voices have been speaking up about the lack of diversity in Dutch museums.

# Provocative intervention

BY CHIHIRO GEUZE BROEK

ACADEMIC THOUGHT EXERCISES ABOUT LEARNING FROM  
“COLONIAL PAST” ARE OF NO USE TO US IF IT SOLIDIFIES  
THE ONGOING GENOCIDAL LEGISLATION AND PRACTICE  
OF COLONIAL PRESENT

“Privatized property is the most sophisticated racial weapon of colonial capitalism” (Marya and Patel 2021). The colony exists by the grace of human/white supremacy that appropriates other life, including land and water, as property. As long as we operate from private property, Indigenous peoples and all other living beings that are labeled less-than-human are endangered. A world without private property cannot believe in “growth”; the colonial lie that measures only the growth of property and not the shrinkage of the commons. The core of decolonization is therefore the elimination of private property and the restoration of reciprocal relations. The problem with ‘decolonial’ endeavors within the institute is that the crucial is deemed ‘outside the scope.’ Even abolishing Marketing as a department, modality, or practice is ‘going too far.’ The fact that branding stems from branding ‘property’ —

including enslaved people and livestock — is apparently not enough for institutions today to withdraw from market-based operating. Instead of de-marketing, the focus is on inclusive branding. The promise of INCLUSION by institutions poses a terrible threat to the survival of Indigenous peoples. There is the assumption of a power dynamics between an “includer” and an “included”, just as there is a relationship between a “fucker” and a “fucked”. When an Indigenous nation is granted civil rights, it is on the condition that the (settler) nation-state dominates and the Indigenous governance is dissolved. Genocide and epistemicide take place here. The promise to move from *object* to *subject* is not liberation but an encapsulation in the colonial order in which sovereignty no longer exists. Google Maps and the atlas obliterated 5,000 Indigenous peoples. This reflects the colonial habit of framing “Indigenous” and “modern” as opposites; eliminating our right to exist. Indigenous peoples in the Netherlands are erased in every way and discussed in terms of remote: in past tense or far away geographically.

We are excluded from all statistics. Where is the attention for Indigenous liberation from the nation-state monstrosities formed in Indonesia and Suriname, which now oversee the looting and displacement of Indigenous peoples? And what about Indigenous peoples who have not experienced flag colonization by the Netherlands, but economic colonization? Reparations are not redemption, just restitution, after which rehabilitation and satisfaction and relationship recovery must still take place and guaranteed non-repetition.

It takes activism from inside and outside institutions to

guide systemic change. But those who fight within the system are burning out or becoming assimilated. And sometimes both. It is important to bear in mind that an institution and the state share the same etymological core and stem from the 14th and 15th centuries.

*Institute: "to establish in function, to appoint", from the Latin institutus, past participle of instituere. stand- "stand, make, or be steadfast" (etymonline.com).*

Realize that settlement is a privilege for those with status who are permitted private property. Realize that until now there is not one single Friendship Center for Indigenous diaspora in the Netherlands. Structurally denying self-led institutions to revitalize endangered dance, language, culture and cosmovision. Our bones still belong to others in museum collections. Activists within the institution have to accept colonial cosmovision and ways of being as vehicles for change; a constant source of gaslighting that denies that other ways of being are possible and necessary for decolonization and ecological and social recovery. Guerilla resistance has played a crucial role in anticolonial struggles.

Guerilla strategy is based on 'hit and run.' When waging an asymmetric struggle where the colonial power has more military, technology, and capital, being able to surprise the colonial power and choosing the moment of engagement, including an escape route, is crucial. To date, the outsider activist is better situated to organize hit-and-run interventions and disrupting today's colonial thinking and doing.

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How can museums internally change to follow the sudden external expressions of exhibitions related to colonial history and the history of slavery, fueled by grassroots activism? So far the solution adopted by museums is hiring more Black people and people of color in positions in programming departments or as diversity officers. Many of these positions are relatively new and often have high turnover rates, because new employees of color often encounter difficult work environments and soon find out they are not in a position to make any real changes (Ouédraogo, "Amal Alhaag"). Another method institutions have used is hiring guest curators of color. In the past few years, many of these guest curators have been approached to share knowledge, expertise, and personal networks while working on exhibitions related to their own histories and cultures. Aside from knowledge, these guest curators often also bring legitimacy to these predominantly white institutions. Black museum professionals are often offered temporary positions as guest curators or in junior positions below their employment level. This makes it impossible for Black creators to work at senior curatorial positions for long enough to make structural changes within the organization. **178**

And here we arrive at another pillar of the Code for Diversity and Inclusion, namely, the audience. Who are the intended audiences for all of these Black exhibitions? When Taco Dibbits says the Rijksmuseum stands for all people, to whom is he referring? It does not seem like Afro-Dutch people are the intended audience. Exhibitions on Black histories and culture in museums in the Netherlands are more an introduction for white audiences who had little to no previous knowledge of the colonial history of the Netherlands and its legacy, which still lives on today. This also influences the quality and the content of the exhibition: fearing alienating white audiences, many museums often choose to avoid "uncomfortable" and painful histories and how they relate to our current Dutch identity. This explains why it took so long for these major museums to tackle the colonial past of the Netherlands. As decolonial activists and theorists argue, and as has been shown in this essay, diversity and inclusion policies merely scratch the surface of true institutional change. Instead, a more radical approach is necessary for actual change, and for this we must ask critical questions in moving toward a decolonial approach which goes beyond the discourse of diversity and inclusion.

Asking decolonial questions therefore also covers wider issues like: who is allowed to make such a work of art? When we talk about renaming streets, who is allowed to rename them? The same with curating a museum, who is allowed to determine that? The decolonization of cultural institutions requires a stratification that goes beyond replacing some obsolete terminology. How far are the board of directors willing to go in order to bring about change? (Demollin, 84)

## The Black Archives: An Alternative Way

In contrast to traditional Dutch cultural institutions, The Black Archives (TBA) is part of a longer tradition of preserving, collecting, and remembering Black history before it became a trend. In this context, The Black Archives, as a non-traditional archive, documents Black history but also pays attention to communities, power, and anticolonial/intersectional politics in its practices as academic work, activism, and art. Among the thousands of books and audiovisual materials, our archives center on Black communities and their realities in order to explore how everyday experiences of historically oppressed communities are interwoven with a violent colonial past. In particular, the legacy of colonialism and history, which still haunts Black people and communities of color across the globe through structural, systemic, and institutional racism (*ZWART MANIFEST*). Our collections

reveal the silenced histories of Black communities and movements in the Netherlands (and beyond) to demonstrate how Black people are resilient but are also more than just “passive beings” who “accepted” colonial rule and domination. In other words, The Black Archives focuses on how there has always been resistance during colonialism and present-day struggles, and how heritage is not just about the past but also the present. **179**

In the Western world, archives and workspaces are seen as neutral spaces (Powell, 30). However, we acknowledge that archives and institutions are built on structures of power and reflect colonial orders of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. The Black Archives challenges the traditional view of the archive by putting marginalized communities and their political practices and emerging struggles at the center of our ideas and work. We hereby offer an alternative way to build archives and organizational cultures in order to decentralize power and provide space for suppressed voices in history and present-day society. As a result, as a Black- and community-led archive, it is our duty to provide a safe space for our visitors and colleagues to explore their identities, experiences, and histories from a decolonial perspective. We refuse to accept the position and methods of those who have been the norm, and that is why we aim to *delink* from the modern/colonial order which is the foundation of cultural institutions and develop a practice in which there is space to imagine and create beyond the white gaze (Vazquez 62).

Because our co-workers and visitors are also a reflection of our collection, Black identities, histories, and realities are at the center of our daily conversations instead of an aspect of a temporary diversity and inclusion policy. Therefore, Black history is not solely a theoretical framework but deals with the daily lives of Black people. As a result, racism, triggers, trauma, and healing are inextricably linked to our work and practices. Our aim is to look at Black history from a holistic point of view where the past is connected to the present, to examine how we bring our cultural baggage to the office space, and to address how (past) discrimination in predominantly white societies and spaces have affect on our bodies and minds. It is a working and learning space where there is open discussion about how racism affects lives and demands healing and care. As Gagné (1998) mentions, “Colonialism is the seed of trauma”, as there is a link between this historical past and mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and more. Researchers have been investigating the “psychological effects of colonization (e.g., colonial mentality, internalized oppression) on colonized populations, such as a negative view of cultural identity, self-rejection, low self-esteem, and depression” (Okazaki et al. 2008; de Almeida Segundo & Moura 2019). By taking this into account, TBA has deliberately focused on how to develop a safer environment for a historically traumatized community as people of African descent and how to provide a space for healing.

## Facing Blackness

One example of this is the exhibition *Facing Blackness: Visual Representations of Black People and Their History of Resistance*, launched by TBA and marking the ten-year anniversary of the “Zwarte Piet Is Racisme” campaign (Expo: Facing Blackness). As the national debate around the tradition showed the lack of historical awareness of colonial history, TBA aimed to show, on the one hand, how present day forms of anti-black and institutional racism, imagery, and traditions are part of a longer history of racial thinking. On the other hand, the aim was to show that there has been a much longer history of resistance against the blackface figure. As an institution focused on centering Black people,



we were faced with the question of how to curate the exhibition and display this violent history **180** without retraumatizing people. We were aware that showing certain objects without context might reproduce white supremacy, trauma, and violence. While building the exhibition, we made a conscious decision to reduce the exposure of colonial imagery at first sight. Behind this vision lies the realization that racist imagery can affect the mental state of Black people, who can be triggered by these images and derogatory words. Based on Black feminist theories, we used methods such as black annotation and black redaction to make Black visitors feel welcome and comfortable while still showing these objects (Sharpe 123). The former meant adding comments or explanations to an object, image, or text. This meant that we moved away from the notion of a cultural institution being a “neutral place”. Black redaction involves revising or editing images and texts. In certain videos, for example, it was decided to censor the N-word, while images of the “Enlightened philosopher” were edited in a way as to question their position of power and authority.

The significant care for the well-being and health of Black communities played a larger role after TBA co-founder, writer, and activist Jessica de Abreu (2020) wrote about the notion of a “postcolonial depression” which considers the personal psychological conditions of sadness and hopelessness after one understands how generations of colonial pains and legacies took place.<sup>3</sup> She also delved into acknowledging how TBA’s and many Black people’s years of activism involved retraumatization and emotional/physical pain, and meant voluntary participation in stressful and violent events for a collective cause (De Abreu). In this sense, the activism of TBA and other Black activists is largely known due to the recent anti-racism movement, which is seen as an empowering and brave act, often glorified, but broadly ignores how grassroots activism took a toll on people’s socioeconomic position and mental health.

In conclusion, we have shown that a long history of silence and erasure of the history of colonialism and slavery was broken mainly due to the previous activism of people outside of institutions. As institutions within the cultural sector seek ways to come to grips with the past, it is imperative to move beyond the narrative of diversity and inclusion and collectively work toward a sector that actively contributes to social justice and the reparation of the inequalities resulting from a long history of colonial violence.

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**Figure 2**

The exhibition *Facing Blackness*,  
(Photograph by the Black Archives)

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## Notes

1. A list of exhibitions and “decolonial interventions” can be found in Ariese’s “Amplifying Voices: Engaging and Disengaging with Colonial Pasts in Amsterdam”.
2. Donker (2020) made an overview of the number of newspaper articles about KOZP in the period 2014 to 2020 and counted 485.
3. “A Postcolonial Depression” <https://www.openarchief.com/blog/a-postcolonial-depression>, 15 Oct. 2022





Finally  
at a  
future





Becoming  
Nothing Again:  
Urgent Activism,  
Disengaged  
Theory and the  
Possibilities of  
Reversal

BY TIRZA BALK

ABSTRACT: Many institutions in the Netherlands and other colonizer countries are increasingly eager to adopt decoloniality as a method and objective. This paper presents three issues to consider when theorizing the future of the colonial past. First, the tendency to disconnect decolonial work in academia and galleries from the violence of a contemporary global distribution system should be countered in order to adequately respond to conservative backlash and neutralization. Second, a critique of current racist and classist academic/curatorial procedures is required to prevent harmful appropriation and erasure. Finally, connecting to deep time is introduced as a potential strategy to evoke visions beyond colonialism. This contribution is informed by the author's work within Decolonize the Museum and the University of Colour in the 2010s.

**W**

hen the Dutch, alongside other European states, companies, and individuals, engaged in the enterprise of colonialism, they projected a future in which persistent forms of violence and exploitation are normalized and foundational to the way we relate to each other. This is the reality of our present. While the formal end to many colonies and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the second half of the last century signaled the transition into what is referred to as a “post-socialist, post-colonial” condition (*Politics and Poetics of a Strike*, 2022), activists and thinkers from around the globe have articulated how coloniality—and therefore decoloniality—is by no means a finished project (See Waziyatawin and others). This brings forth the question of how to “deal” with the colonial past on the level of the institution in (ex-)colonizer countries such as the Netherlands while presented with a world economy still very much invested in this project.

*“These texts were engraved by the materiality and the urgency of events that have transformed us. We have a wish: that the active connection between these pages and many others manage to escape the fate of the academic text, the political pamphlet, and all aestheticizing pretension, in order to form part of this moment of foundation of a new social protagonism capable of bringing to life the experience of revolution”*

(COLECTIVO SITUACIONES, 2002).

I am writing this because in 2014, as I was enrolled in a bachelor's program in cultural analysis, Hodan Warsame, Simone Zeefuik and I initiated an intervention that later came to be known as Decolonize the Museum. Initially focused on creating new narratives within the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam

with the support of dr. Wayne Modest and dr. Laura van Broekhoven, this movement led us on a journey across Europe to confront colonial imagery and ideas perpetuated in contemporary curatorial practices. The following year, my fellow students and/or activists and I co-founded the University of Colour, an action group aimed at adding decoloniality to the agenda of a transnational anti-neoliberal student and teacher movement that occupied the University of Amsterdam for months. The following text is rooted in my experiences living and working within the parameters of what we lovingly refer to as the global resistance.<sup>1</sup> I have chosen not to write a practice-based text—for there are already multiple publications describing these particular interventions—but rather engage in the broadest sense with some of the ideas and dilemmas informing our activism in the first place. **190**

Three short sections of this text loosely correspond to the three chronological stages as it travels from the violence originating in the past to the limits of our present, arriving finally at a future in which the imagination runs free. They are named after rocks and creatures that each represent a particular stage. The snake is the Black Snake, the Native prophecy as manifested by the Dakota Access Pipeline and other so-called development projects around the world (Goldtooth, 2016). It signifies the continuation of the tangible violence against which decolonial activism, including that of the University of Colour and Decolonize the Museum, emerged.<sup>2</sup> Butterflies appear as illustrations on the cover of a still traveling copy of *All About Love*. We conclude with a moon of another planet to invoke a future that is rooted in deep time. My hope is that, by meditating on these themes, it will become easier to develop practices through which any person can use their unique skill and positionality to bring about a world free from colonial patterns and ideas.

## The Snake

*"Theirs was the kind of life that did not guarantee living. They had to act fast"*

(YAA GYASI, HOME GOING).

Understanding the urgency of decolonial work helps to do away with many of the misconceptions that are held against it so often, on televised talk shows and in newspaper articles; sometimes willfully, sometimes unknowingly. Opponents of the restoration of joy and dignity and the redistribution of resources for all will propagate that it is just a matter of "political correctness", of semantics, even of censorship. Ultimately, this work is dismissed as trivial, moralizing, stuck in the past.

But Haiti is still being punished for demonstrating the possibility of freedom (Pierre, 2021). Bonaire is being recolonized through the settlement of Dutch businesses and legal constructions that allow for the existence of second-class citizens (Kroon, 2022). The horrifying conditions described by Marx and Engels in the earlier days of industrialism have not vanished; they exist on a much larger scale outside of Europe, serving European companies and European demand. When laws arise in the EU or the US that declare certain chemicals too toxic to be used, the cycle of supply is simply (re)designed so that it is communities in Brazil or the Philippines that deal with the consequences of the dysfunctional production on the health of people, all creatures, and the land (Bombardi, 2021).

None of this would have been possible without colonialism and the mental restrictions—in addition to the obvious physical restrictions in the form of borders and other checkpoints of wealth and power—

that it imposes on entire generations. By racializing the majority of the global population, **191** colonialism enabled the dehumanization and conglomeration of so many different people and to such an extent that the suffering of communities of color has simply come to be expected — seen as unfortunate but inevitable; rarely a cause for immediate intervention or alarm (Erakat, 2022). Similarly, coloniality's devaluation of the natural world and non-human animals leads many to accept a situation where hurting and dysregulating a majority of species systematically and without pause is part of getting our desires met for products that often can be substituted and do not carry the type of cultural value that hunting and fishing do to particular Indigenous nations resisting the ongoing occupation of their land (Red Rising Collective, 2022).

It is speciesism that allows for humans to love our pets but torture other species at an unimaginable scale and rate. White supremacy and capitalism make it possible for underage Burkinabe miners to be trapped in a Canadian-operated zinc mine for almost a month, only to be met with minimal media coverage from outside the continent (Africanews 2022). The European gender binary as implemented both internally and in the occupied territories sends record numbers of racialized trans people to a premature death. And yet, when we make an attempt at addressing those mechanisms, all tied up with colonialism, it is reduced to a “*woke perspective on history*” (Het Parool 2022). It is not the first time that a concept is taken from African-American Vernacular English into a public discourse that does not grasp its meaning and presents it as both laughable and dangerous.

When we think of all the lives being limited by the way our distribution system is set up globally, with the Netherlands being among the select group of countries towards which the generated flows freely, it should come as no surprise that whatever institutions in those very countries teach about other people—and their capacity to think, feel and imagine—will have grave consequences in the real world. It is imperative that the perception of decolonial work as a hysterical and purist tendency to politicize is countered and contextualized. This means that museums, universities, and other institutes of art and education must provide a much clearer response to the backlash we are currently experiencing; one that goes back to the root of the struggle, the moment of colonial violence. This is a first step in decreasing the chance of this violence continuing endlessly into the future.

## The Butterflies

*“Justice is what love looks like in public.”*

(CORNEL WEST).

On the day that the abstract for this publication was due, bell hooks passed away. I had just rewritten a sentence so as not to use the word love, afraid that it would not be considered academic. Returning to *All About Love* in the days following her passing, I decided to dedicate a section to acknowledging love as a revolutionary concept and the guidance it can provide in setting practices that effectively address the colonial inheritance.

Crucial in her book is that love is defined as “the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own or another’s spiritual growth”, a combination of not only affection but also care, recognition, respect, trust, and commitment. As such, love is irreconcilable with harm, and it

becomes impossible to act in the name of love if there is an abusive disregard for another's dignity and well-being. A generation of activists is determined to honor the author's legacy by reconceptualizing love in this way. Colonialism, then, is the opposite of love; it is the globalization of a behavior based on extraction, humiliation, and control. If it is possible to institutionalize the first through stories and curricula, would it not also be possible to normalize the latter and uphold an ethics of love within our activism that involves education, art, and research? **192**

Much of the way that academia, the arts, and other cultural structures are set up makes it difficult for a decolonial practice based in love to flourish and claim accomplishments. The frequent erasure and appropriation of the intellectual and artistic work of others, especially resulting from anti-Blackness and classism, shows a lack of recognition and respect in even the most progressive of programs (Zawto, 2022). A particularly sticky situation arises when the institute moves past its "Golden Age"-script and embraces a script drenched in decolonial or hooksian language, but does very little for the health and safety of the people involved in enabling this transformation. Sometimes theory can "hide or abandon" the original issue that warranted the field: the survivability of its subjects (Hayward, 2022).

The copy of *All About Love* that circulated in the small Dutch anti-racist reading and consciousness-raising circles around 2013 was the edition with the pitch-black cover and the two butterflies. It still encourages readers to combine compassion with thoroughness in critique, to acknowledge our complicity in oppressive structures as well as the individual humanity that belongs to each and every one. It means continually re-evaluating where progressive strategies fall short. Not to discourage change, but to encourage as many people as possible to tap into their own practice of love.

## Saturn's Moon

*"There in muscle in high inner flight always in the plunge we fear  
for the falling, buckle to wonder: What man is expendable?"*

(LAYLI LONG SOLDIER, WHEREAS).

However eager institutions may seem to move away from the past and into an uncorrupt future, no one wants to move on from the confines of history more than the colonial subject itself. So when we have re-established a direct connection to the origins of violence, and examined our actions through the lens of love, it is time to unleash the future. But how do we speak of something that has not yet happened? Is it desirable to do so openly, knowing the dreams and visions of activists have so often been neutralized?

There is something so powerful about observing glaciers, or volcanoes, or anything that can serve as a reminder of how our planet came to be and what it can become. Whether or not it is through direct experience, we must cultivate regular access to how it feels to perceive those parts of us that exist in deep time, even if humanity has managed to affect many of those cycles by the way a small segment of us live (a process euphemistically referred to as "climate change"). Because, when we do so, we unlock an experience—if not a memory—that humans have had for ages, long before colonialism or any of the interlocking systems of oppression that are witnessed today. Perhaps to make way

for the future is to advance our memory and leave small traces of freedom for ourselves to catch onto during the day. What if we believed that we were capable of anything? What is so powerful about a human being believing that they are capable of anything that entire structures had to be set up to proclaim the inferiority and incompetence of specific parts of the global population? What is needed to find out? **193**

Going forward, I am interested in research that will wonder how many human minds it takes for a certain racialization or gendering to be successful, that is to say: for it to be sufficiently solidified and circulated to be enforced through violence that is either directly state-sanctioned or socially unpunishable. To know this is to locate the edges of the colonial. I am interested in reversibility. Not of the colonial past, for the damage done is irreversible—a collection of facts that have altered lives already gone by. Not of a reversal of punishment or subjugation, either, since the justice sought after by all of the decolonial movement I know is a restorative one. But in the context of artistic/academic/curatorial practices, we might want to engage with the possibility that if something has been created from nothing, it could become nothing again.

What the Netherlands will look like when that happens—if it can happen—I do not know. We might even imagine different geographies altogether, as time inevitably changes even the most rigid of empires. And, at times, change comes sooner than we think.

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## Notes

1. This term is used in anti-colonial and anarchist media to connote a set of affiliated organizations and practices undertaken by activists in a transnational context which share specific (anti-capitalist and anti-oppression) goals. See *The Stimulator*, 2016.
2. For reasons not unrelated, *The Stimulator* consistently refers to the empire of the United States of America as the "United Snakes".

# Gloria Wekker

**Interviewed by  
Imara Limon**



**I**n this interview, Imara Limon, a Dutch art historian and museum curator, engages in conversation with Gloria Wekker, renowned Dutch anthropologist, writer, and activist, celebrated for her groundbreaking work in the fields of intersectionality, gender studies, and decolonization.

IMARA LIMON: To begin, what are the main challenges you have encountered in Dutch institutions that aim to diversify or decolonize as a way of reckoning with the colonial past?

GLORIA WEKKER: First, I'd like to say that my terms of reference are institutions like the university, less so museums. Of course, I've visited museums like Amsterdam Museum and the Rijksmuseum, but somehow I look at that with less involvement, unless there is something that strikes me. So, in terms of my position in this debate, I am more involved with universities, but I'm also deeply involved with the development of the political party BJJ1, which is another kind of institution.

But to answer your question, I don't think it is a very happy picture, because in the first two types of institutions, academia and

museums, the state of affairs is that these are mostly white institutions who bring in people of color, who are allowed some space. We as people of color have to find a way to find our bearings in these institutions.

IMARA LIMON: So, are you saying that one of the big challenges concerns the fundamentals of these institutions that are rooted in the colonial system? That, if you want to change things from within these institutions, you don't know where to start? If so, that's a big one.

GLORIA WEKKER: Yes. You said you also wanted me to refer to my experiences at the University of Amsterdam as the Chair of the Diversity Committee, in 2015–2016. So, the University of Amsterdam is a white institution. Suddenly, there was this great dissatisfaction at the university among students and faculty about lack of democracy, lack of diversity, lack of transparency on behalf of the higher circles in the university making decisions which devolve downward toward the people teaching and the students who are confronted with the decisions made at the top. A group of students of color, among which were Jessica de Abreu and Mitchell Esajas, published a report with recommendations.

Fundamentally, one of the things that I think are true across the board at whatever institution one works at, are the four major grammars of difference. I am talking about gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality, and class: those are the four main grammars of difference. There are more, but I find these to be the most important for the moment.

Everybody can speak on gender. One has to be a real Neanderthal not to agree with the aim that there should be more women in the higher positions in university. Interestingly, some work domains have gotten more women, even women of color. Hospitals and the court system, for example.

IMARA LIMON: The idea of women (of colour) occupying higher positions in institutions should not be controversial.

GLORIA WEKKER: Rather, the opposite would be controversial. Then you would be the Neanderthal, you know? So, it has been accepted in a lot of domains that women need to be equally represented. Interestingly, that is not the case in academia. We still have a long way to go. I think at this point we have about 25% women professors. We don't even have to talk about professors of color, because that is less than 1%.

We interviewed a wide variety of people at different levels in the university. What was striking at first is that people can talk about gender without being ashamed or being uncomfortable. To a lesser extent, there is also some discourse around sexuality, but not much at all. There is no discourse about race/ethnicity, and there's hardly any discourse around class, either. So, people can talk about gender, but not about the other grammars of difference. When it comes to race/ethnicity, people are really uncomfortable. They are afraid of using the wrong words, so they'd rather avoid talking about it. This is consistent with what I experienced myself while a professor in Utrecht in Gender Studies. Very few students and colleagues were able to squarely look race and ethnicity in the face to embrace it, to try to deepen their knowledge about it. It's still more or less a taboo. It is a field in which a deficit discourse is dominant. That is to say, when there aren't more people

of color around, either students or faculty, the most common thing to say is: "Well, they are not ready yet. They'll come when they are ready". There is no self-reflexivity within the institution. They don't think: "Are there maybe characteristics of the culture that we have here that excludes students or faculty of color?" There are many pointers to the fact that the culture in the university is excluding people who aren't white, male, hetero, or middle-class. It is much harder for other people to enter and thrive.

IMARA LIMON: What has changed since the report was published?

GLORIA WEKKER: Well, this report came out in 2016 and had about 60 recommendations, or things the university could do. Practically, none of these recommendations have been followed up. The only recommendation that has been followed up in a limited way was that we said, "There needs to be a team of diversity officers, chief diversity officers, and diversity officers in all the nine different faculties", and we also said, with insistence, "This needs to be a person who in one or more respects has experienced exclusion in his or her own life". And what does the University of Amsterdam do? It appoints only white people. There are ten people in this unit of diversity officers and chief diversity officers who are all white. When you choose to appoint people who are already in the organization to apply for these jobs, you know that they are going to be white. If you really want to make a difference, you have to bring in people of color. Not one at a time, you have to bring them in in greater numbers so that some change can be accomplished.

I cannot tell you exactly where we stand, or what changes have been accomplished, but I'm not at all optimistic about the way this is going. Or the rate at which this is going.

When I speak to people who are connected to the university, there are a couple teachers of color, mostly African American. But it's like a revolving door. Their position is so untenable. Women of color, Black women, they suffer from racism, sexism, not being seen for their accomplishments and the value they bring to the university. They leave as fast as possible. So, I am not optimistic about the way things are going there.

IMARA LIMON: As it seems to be difficult for institutions to change, what role do young people play regarding the future of such institutions?

GLORIA WEKKER: When we look at the way that the population is built up, young people of color will be abundant on the labor market, entering universities. We already see that, for instance, very clearly with young Turkish and Moroccan women. They are entering universities in great numbers. I am hopeful that

get my knowledge about diversity, inclusion, race, and ethnicity in the Netherlands. I had to go to the States to study and to do my PhD there. If you study in the Netherlands, who's going to tell you about this fundamental grammar of race; how race works through everything? We cannot conceive of or understand our society without taking race into account, as well as gender, class, and sexuality. And there are far too few places where you can learn about that, so that is a pitfall.

IMARA LIMON: It is a huge pitfall.

GLORIA WEKKER: I am really grateful that my work has gotten a lot of attention and that it is read in many classes in many different disciplines, at universities in the Netherlands. However, I always recommend students to go to the US to study, if they can afford it. I would be surprised if I would have been able to write what I wrote if I hadn't gone to the States,

# Great dissatisfaction

the supply of young professionals in the labor market will make it inevitable that they will enter the institutions.

IMARA LIMON: Do you see pitfalls for young people who want to make sustainable changes in the Netherlands?

GLORIA WEKKER: There are a couple of pitfalls. When I look at my own example, I didn't

because the study of race in the Netherlands is so limited. We do study ethnicity in the sense of the Other. We study Turkish, Moroccan, and Surinamese people, and maybe Poles, Romanians, and Eastern Europeans. We do not study whiteness. There's a lot of work to be done there. This is a rather long-term vision of what needs to happen, but it needs to change and it needs to change badly. The thing is, what is often said about my work is that I'm

too influenced by the US, by this grammar of race. The Dutch often say: "We are color-blind. We don't see race. We don't do race".

been hampered in my career because that notion that race is a thing in the Netherlands was totally lacking. **200**

# A well meaning group

It's seemingly very difficult for people, for white people, to discuss race. It feels like something is taken away from them, and it's a painful thing to engage with. There's still this conviction that it really cannot be that bad with race and the way that race operates. "We really aren't that bad. We aren't like South Africa, and it isn't like it is in the States. We are such a well-meaning group of people". We like to tell ourselves stories about how good and eminent and well-meaning we are, and that prohibits us from really coming to terms with the deeper ways in which race orchestrates us and who we are.

IMARA LIMON: How has the idea that race isn't a thing in the Netherlands influenced your work as a researcher?

GLORIA WEKKER: As a professor of color, I have been seriously duped by the fact that race for the longest time wasn't a thing. It wasn't a thing to study. "What are you studying? There's nothing there", is always the response. Also, the institution that gives you research money, money to buy yourself out of teaching students so you can do research, I never got one single penny from them, whereas, in the States, I always got money for research having to do with race. So, I have

IMARA LIMON: Despite the obstacles, you have been able to make a place for yourself in the university as a professor of color. There are also young people of color in institutions like universities and museums, but they often don't have decision-making power. How can we change that?

GLORIA WEKKER: I'm always saying; don't bring in one person of color who will drown. When you are going to hire, create several positions at the same time so that there can be counter-discourse. When it is on the shoulders of one person, they're going to go crazy. Their energy will be sucked dry by their white colleagues. I only survived because I had a large network of African American and Black British women. Later, that got wider, it spread over Europe. You cannot survive without the network of people who have gone through these practices already. And you need to take care of yourself, too. You still need to work for a long time. You don't want to get burned out.

IMARA LIMON: We have talked much about institutions today. If it's, in general, very difficult for these institutions to change, then what is the future of the Dutch colonial past? Where can there be changes? Will the institutions themselves be part of it?



GLORIA WEKKER: They have to be. There is no choice there. We need change and activism both inside and outside of the institutions, on both sides; we need it. They cannot get a pass.

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There  
were  
tears





New  
Narratives:  
Activism In and  
Outside the  
Amsterdam  
Museum

BY IMARA LIMON

**ABSTRACT:** How can we make recent positive changes regarding diversity and inclusion in museums sustainable? I try to formulate an answer to this question by offering a close reading of my curatorial practice at the Amsterdam Museum. The program line New Narratives, which I initiated in 2017, was a catalyst for change in terms of presenting more inclusive narratives about the city, as well as becoming a more inclusive organization. I present case studies from New Narratives tours, the exhibition Black and Revolutionary (2017-2018) in collaboration with The Black Archives, and Dutch Masters Revisited (2019-2020) with Urban Myth, which sparked a public debate around the term 'Golden Age', to reflect on lessons learned in dealing with colonial histories and legacies.

**W**

e gathered in a small group in the Amsterdam Museum, surrounded by 17th-century paintings and objects that were part of the permanent collection presentation. After I introduced her, guest tour guide H el ene Christelle Munganyende, author and political scientist, recited a self-written poem about rooting herself, as a Black Dutch person who fled Rwanda, in the history of the Netherlands. Afterwards, Munganyende explained that in places where she feels uncomfortable and erased, she kicks off her presentations with a poem. And that this room, this *museum*, was such a place. In another guest tour, author and cultural organizer Simone Zeefuik<sup>1</sup> pointed out how the few sections mentioning slavery in the introductory exhibition *Amsterdam DNA* (September 9, 2011 – February 27, 2022) gave a distorted view of this colonial history. An example was an icon on a wall: a figure with a hat, holding a chain fastened around the neck of an enslaved person with a submissive posture. The caption stated "1 slave = 5000 pounds of sugar". Zeefuik explained how this reproduces the term "slave" without problematizing it, and the same goes for the idea of human beings as commodities. She also stated that resistance and the voices of enslaved people should not be omitted in the context of the abolition of slavery.

Both tours were powerful and emotional events that have stayed with me. As a young professional, and one of the few Black queer cisgender female curators in the Netherlands at that time, with parents who migrated from Suriname (formerly colonized by the Dutch), the tour guides' perspectives resonated with me. I recognized Munganyende's feelings of discomfort: I experienced feelings of exclusion and erasure myself on a daily basis in the museum. But in order to survive in white environments, such as the town where I grew up and my studies at the University of Amsterdam, I had become accustomed to hiding how (institutional) racism affects me. What struck me was that Munganyende chose to publicly show her feelings, as she began the event with a performative act

to reclaim her space, in order to feel more at ease. It inspired me to challenge the fact that museums rarely center the needs and voices of marginalized people. 206

The tours mark important steps in how activism and decolonization finally started to impact the Amsterdam Museum on a structural level. Zeefuik's tour was part of *Black Amsterdam* (October 7 – November 20, 2016), an exhibition about Black presence in the city, for which I was invited as a guest curator and programmer<sup>2</sup>. Black people have been here since the 16th century, but Blackness in the Netherlands is an underresearched topic (Wekker 90). We organized a series of tours through this particular exhibition, as well as through the permanent collection presentations, given by people not involved with the museum, whom we asked to share their critical perspectives. As the museum of a city with a comprehensive history of slavery and colonial profiteering, the stories that are embedded in the collection still generally represent a white perspective and dominant narratives of wealth, power, tolerance, and other values that continue to be attributed to Amsterdam, and to the Netherlands at large. The sharp contrast between the relatively inclusive but also small and temporary exhibition *Black Amsterdam* (where still several communities were underrepresented, such as Moluccan and [black] Indigenous voices) and the permanent presentations with a predominantly white perspective was striking, and did not go unnoticed. It emphasized the whiteness of the institute, and to me, indicated that this work should be continued. In 2017, I initiated the *New Narratives* program, with an ongoing public program of (guest) tours, panel talks, and events to reframe collection items, in order to further challenge institutional structures and policies from inside the museum. Munganyende's tour was part of this program.

There are hopeful changes in the Dutch cultural field in dealing with colonial legacies. The upsurge of global anti-racist activism instigated by the Black Lives Matter movement impacted the Dutch field. In the Netherlands, over the past ten years or so, opposition to the racist caricature Zwarte Piet, as well as the anti-racism struggles of various Asian communities, intersecting with queer, trans, and women's struggles and more, have sparked and accelerated change as well. As a result of this grassroots activism, European museums are doing more provenance research and finally considering claims to return looted colonial artifacts (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap); initiatives such as the publication *Words Matter* (Modest and Lelijveld) and the Amsterdam Museum's statement to no longer use the term "Golden Age" as a synonym for the 17th century (elaborated on in a subsequent section of this essay) have contributed to the public debate about language, inclusion, and colonial legacies. Further, the initiative *Musea Bekennen Kleur* (Museums See Color) is a national collaboration between museums on the directorship level to realize diversity and inclusion in their institutions. All these developments are hopeful, but in a time of growing right-wing political parties and racist ideologies, an urgent question is: (How) can we make these changes sustainable?

I will try to formulate an answer to this probing question by offering a close reading of my own curatorial practice. *New Narratives* was intended as a catalyst for change within the museum. I wanted to bridge the gap between relevant makers and thinkers, on the one hand, and the museum field on the other, with the Amsterdam Museum as a concrete first step in order to present more inclusive narratives about the city, as well as becoming a more inclusive organization. In my network, I encountered many powerful and relevant responses to societal developments regarding inclusion and diversity, decolonization, and restorative justice. From spoken-word artists to young scholars

and activists in the Netherlands and beyond, pushing the boundaries of institutions such as **207** museums that were mostly reaching a more conservative and older audience and claiming they "could not find 'them.'" Returning to the first *New Narratives* tours unveils what institutional change can look like on a daily basis: bringing in the different voices I was already familiar with and inviting them to address institutional power structures and institutional racism. I aim to show how we created a methodology for structurally including different perspectives in the museum. A few key issues from different projects and their impact on our institutional practices and policies today shed light on several challenges and turning points I encountered. How can we hold space for marginalized voices within collaborations? How can we add to and (re)interpret the museum collection? What terminology and definitions do we employ? And finally, I consider to what extent our ways of working have transformed, what our most important learnings were, and what we aim to still achieve in the future. What are our institutional responsibilities regarding ongoing inequalities?

## Unsettling Conversations

A key element of *New Narratives* was bringing in people who were not affiliated with museums and whose perspectives were underrepresented in the Amsterdam Museum. Throughout 2017, we organized a series of guided tours. My aim was to focus on colonial histories and legacies, but always intersecting with overlapping struggles. This was important to me, as I noticed that the museum's programs and networks around for example queer, trans, and women's struggles tended to center on whiteness. Blackness, in terms of representation, was almost exclusively linked to issues concerning (the legacies of) colonialism, and specifically slavery. I strived to emphasize the concept of intersectionality, a term first used in the 1980s by American scholar and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw, pointing at how multiple identities interact to create specific forms of oppression (Crenshaw 139-167). For example, on International Women's Day, creative producer Stephanie Afrifa gave one of the first *New Narratives* tours, highlighting the role of women and female allegories in the city's history, comparing them to today's roles, expectations, and stereotypes of Black women in power.

As I was putting all these elements of a public program in place, I was also concerned with increasing diversity and inclusion behind the scenes of the museum. I knew that in order for the latter to happen, I had to learn more about the organization and make myself known. I managed to get a contract and joined the works council, of which I became the chair a year later. A greater commitment to the museum felt good and secure in several ways: financially, and with another year ahead of me to contribute to change, but also because I experienced the Amsterdam Museum as an open and warm organization, feeling connected to the people that I worked with. At the same time, I knew in advance that this project would demand a lot from staff members: decentering white perspectives can elicit feelings of discomfort, but a deeper awareness of how racism is still operative in our policies and ways of working is fundamental to change. It would demand a lot from the tour guides to share vulnerable stories, and I also knew that it would demand a lot from me. Functioning in a predominantly white institution means dealing with bias, tokenism, and overachieving in order to fit the (extra) expectations. It means navigating a space where all this will be denied, and with no adequate support in this area. To accommodate this, I brought together a network of young professionals from the cultural field with diverse cultural backgrounds. For support, and because I felt afraid that I would assimilate into the white institution without regularly exchanging experiences





**Figure 1**

*New Narratives* tour by guest tour guide Stephanie Afrifa, March 8, 2017, (Photograph by Claire Bontje)

and receiving feedback. It was not until I created a support network that I felt safe enough to continue this mission. **209**

Whereas a regular curatorial tour could consist of a few stops providing information about objects on display, *New Narratives* tours were less standardized and more vulnerable, as they each time focused on critical reflections from a personal perspective. A sort of reading between the lines, where tour guides express what remains invisible on the surface. As a project team, which has been a cross-departmental collaboration from the start,<sup>3</sup> we chose this approach because we believed it could lead to a better understanding of multiple perspectives that exist among the participants regarding colonialism and related topics. The audience consisted of the tour guide's network, curious museum visitors, and Amsterdam Museum staff. There would not always be mutual knowledge involving these topics. During the preparations, we asked tour guides to pick three stops and highlight what affects them and why, rather than merely sum up what they perceive as factual inaccuracies. What does this exhibition communicate to you? What triggers you? What would you change, and why? In this way, we aimed to facilitate sufficient room for the tour guides' points of view, and exchanging knowledge in a respectful manner, in order to gain a better understanding of each other's perspectives.

During the tours, the radical shift and tension that was in the air in society was also tangible in the museum spaces we walked through. Objects and wall texts were scrutinized and recontextualized. Tour guides who spoke about topics that were perceived as sensitive, such as Zeefuik's remarks on the representation of slavery, could count on skeptical responses and (often rhetorical) questions: "At least slavery, the 'flipside' of colonialism, was mentioned, right?" It now seems difficult to imagine that, only six years ago, merely mentioning the term slavery could literally startle an unprepared visitor to the point that they would immediately walk away—it happened. At that time, it seemed necessary to provide a platform where these confrontations could happen. We aimed to facilitate a safe(r) space by stating the house rules at the beginning and intervening when inappropriate statements were made. Still, I underestimated how unsettling these conversations could be. Tour guides talking about how they felt excluded, for example, by the frequent use in wall texts of *we*—implicitly only referring to white Dutch people and their ancestors—versus *they*—meaning the so-called *Other* who is subordinated (Spivak)—were accused of being too sensitive or creating problems that did not exist, because "this is just how it is" or "it makes sense that white people are the norm in the Netherlands". Sometimes these confrontations became verbally hostile. Regularly, there were tears of frustration, tears of joy in finding allyship in others, or tears of empathy. The unhealed Dutch colonial past showed its presence through big emotions: repressed fear, shame, and guilt about colonialism manifested as anger toward the tour guides who shared their truths.

## Changing Narratives?

We set up the *New Narratives* program as a step-by-step methodology to change the narratives that were represented. I expected short-term results, as we uncovered many opportunities for small improvements in wall texts, audio tours, and within the choice of objects on display, and based on the conversations we were having within the museum: we often spoke about the need for a multiplicity of voices. In practice, it proved to be quite a challenge to change the narratives. The first step of the methodology was to identify issues in our exhibitions, together with critical experts from outside the museum, via public programs. Museum staff was invited to join in order

to learn. Next to the tours, we started organizing *New Collection Narratives*, a series of expert sessions that zoom in on one collection item, such as the painting *Plantation Waterland* (ca. 1706–1708) by Dirk Valkenburg, on permanent display at the museum. We chose items that potentially could be seen in a different light by providing extra context and opening up the discussion. *Waterland* depicts—at first glance—an innocent-looking landscape in Suriname that was actually a sugar plantation at that time, owned by Jonas Witsen in Amsterdam, who commissioned this painting. Prior to the event, curator Tom van der Molen assembled archival records with information on enslaved people that were held on the plantation and the violence against them (Van der Molen). Discussing the painting with peers and professionals, students, colleagues, but also the retired curator who acquired the painting for the collection in 1973, helped bring to the surface different and changing perspectives on dealing with colonial histories. It also showed how museum practitioners can create and change narratives, and I consider the awareness of that power a crucial part of curatorial practice. The second step was that the *New Narratives* project team organized feedback sessions for museum staff to reflect on the lessons learned and discuss which adjustments would be suitable and most urgent to realize based on what we had learned, such as the problems Munganyende and Zeefuik had pointed out. The third step was, after approval from the committee or manager in question, to rewrite wall texts, replace objects, adjust working processes, or implement other changes. **210**

The first step had impact. Curators and other staff joined the events, and this brought the conversations into the museum offices. However, curators would tend to “take over” the platform from tour guides by correcting them about historical facts, or even adding unsolicited information from their curatorial expertise—with the best intentions, but still disruptive to the shift in power balance that *New Narratives* aimed to facilitate. The second step of gathering feedback already happened before the actual feedback sessions took place. Each tour was so thought-provoking that we could easily select and propose modifications for implementation. The third step was more challenging. Implementations were rarely ever approved, despite my extensive lobbying.

At first I thought the whole program failed miserably, as the process remained limited to talking. We had fruitful discussions, but as soon as adjustments in the presentations were on the table, it was met with resistance. A recurring argument was that the suggested changes were just the opinions of a handful of activists and that the museum should remain neutral. Even if the point was acknowledged, “I agree with the content” was often followed by: “...but our audience is not ready for this/ we should first double check with ‘real’ experts/ this is not urgent/ we don’t have the budget”. For tour guides and participants whom we invited to share their expertise with us, our invitation indicated that we would make changes based on their input. I later realized that most museum staff in charge of exhibitions were interested in *hearing* other perspectives but reluctant to take these perspectives seriously; it was crucial for them that the process remained free of any obligations, and to sustain their comfortable and secure position as gatekeepers. In fact, the team of curators and collection staff in charge of daily affairs around the permanent collections was the Vaste Opstellingscommissie (Permanent Collections Committee), abbreviated as the “VOC”,<sup>4</sup> more widely known as the initials of the Dutch East India Company. This established power is what the gatekeepers, perhaps subconsciously, associated themselves with. It made me feel frustrated that they laughed it off when I mentioned it during a meeting.

It took several years and key projects to achieve significant results that changed the narratives about Amsterdam. The first year of the *New Narratives* program, including preparations of the events and the aftermath, was an emotionally intense process for everyone who participated, as was expected. Somehow, I still left the emotional factor out of the aforementioned methodology. I took a large part of the emotional labor on myself, together with allies in the project team. Endlessly providing feedback on anything from campaign images to vacancy texts. I felt seen for my expertise, but also frustrated and exhausted, because there was no concrete plan for actively increasing awareness of ongoing exclusion nor to urgently hire more people of color in my department. It took two years to arrange an unconscious bias training, and another three and a half years until a follow-up, in 2023. I consider Simone Zeefuik's tour a turning point. Eventually, after almost two years, Zeefuik's critique led to an adjustment in the museum presentation of the icon of an enslaved person, after she reminded us several times, followed by discussions behind the scenes and pressure from activists through social media. Change takes time, but arguments that *people* are not ready and need time to adjust once again centers the experiences of *white people*. In the next part, I highlight a few other turning points from projects I was involved in. 211

## Turning Points

A collaboration between the then newly founded grassroots organization The Black Archives and the Amsterdam Museum in 2017 brought out a power dynamic that revealed several institutional blind spots. The Black Archives planned for their first exhibition and invited me as a curator. After all, I had just curated the aforementioned *Black Amsterdam*, where I ensured that (Black) voices and perspectives retained their core message through the curatorial process of interpreting, rewriting, translating, exhibiting, and designing. The exhibition we curated, *Black and Revolutionary: The Story of Hermine and Otto Huiswoud* (November 25, 2017 – July 8, 2018), concerned the Huiswouds, a couple from British Guiana and Suriname who fought against colonialism and capitalism in the early 20th century. It was installed in the heritage building on Zeeburgerdijk, from which they waged their struggle along with many intellectuals worldwide and where Vereniging Ons Suriname (the Surinamese Society) has now been based for 100 years. Museum colleagues were concerned that the quality of our upcoming project would not meet the institution's requirements. Persistent beliefs were that the topic would be too niche, that The Black Archives *needed* our professional "help" with texts, object preservation, archiving, marketing tools for visibility, and more. I believe that it was not so much an offer as a control mechanism. Established white institutions have power and resources and tend to consider themselves more competent than grassroots organizations or community initiatives, especially initiatives by people of color. The Black Archives were not interested in most things the museum proposed, and that led to outrage. I functioned as a mediator between both organizations. Assumptions that were made by museum colleagues affected me deeply, such as the subtle microaggression of being *overly surprised* that the exhibition was inspiring, well-researched, and looked good, and all with a budget that was fully crowdfunded. There was so much bias that remained unacknowledged, and it felt unsafe for me to keep addressing it at all times. I realized that marginalized voices could only be amplified through the museum if this power balance would shift, and if these voices and their needs would be valued on an equal level, instead of merely considering benefits and risks for the institution. This collaboration later became a key point of reference within the museum for reflecting on our position in relation to smaller initiatives and grassroots organizations.

In the same month of the opening of *Black and Revolutionary*, the Amsterdam Museum **212** opened *Gold! From the Collection Lopez-Suasso* (November 10, 2017 – April 2, 2018), displaying over 150 objects such as watches, jewels, and broaches from the museum collection. The show highlighted a 19th-century female collector, but left out issues regarding wealth, inequality, and privilege, and did not mention (the lack of research on) the provenance of the gold and jewels. This compartmentalization of so-called inclusive projects and regular projects was not uncommon for cultural institutions where inclusion had just started to get more attention. And even if inclusion was a priority, the focus was often on gender and sexuality or cultural diversity, instead of a broad and overlapping range of issues. From today's perspective, it is striking how quickly ideas around this shifted within the field in only a few years. Less than two years later, in September 2019, a *New Narratives* project would spark a public debate around the term "Golden Age", making inclusion a more widely discussed topic (Blanca van der Scheer et al.). The museum's semi-permanent exhibition *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age* (November 29, 2014 – September 30, 2019) consisted of over twenty large-scale 17th- and 18th-century Dutch Masters that filled a large room. The whiteness of the city's portrayed regents, civic guards, and merchants represented Amsterdam as merely a center of wealth, powerful families, and virtuous (often) gentlemen. The striking absence of colonialism with its violence and enduring societal inequalities was not an image that we wanted to continue reproducing. We commissioned an artistic project by Jörgen Tjon A Fong, at that time artistic leader of the theater production company Urban Myth, to counter this one-sided view on these centuries. The exhibition had the same title as his growing project, *Dutch Masters Revisited* (September 30, 2019 – September 13, 202), and featured thirteen photographic portraits of prominent Dutch individuals posing as Black people from Amsterdam in the 17th and 18th centuries, also large in size. They were displayed among the Dutch Masters of *Portrait Gallery of the Golden Age*. The Black presence strongly contrasted the whiteness of the group portraits representing Amsterdam's citizens and wealth.

The museum's ongoing projects and conversations with activists, grassroots movements, and other initiatives in the city that have been fighting for equity for a long time had enhanced an awareness of ongoing inequalities. We knew that a clear choice was needed, and decided to no longer use the term Golden Age as a synonym for the 17th century, especially in the exhibition's title, which we renamed *Portrait Gallery of the 17th Century*. It was a decision that was only possible now that inclusion had become a priority, in part due to a new artistic directorship of the museum that formally established inclusion as part of the museum's core mission. Still, the decision caused tension within the museum, as many colleagues felt overwhelmed with the consequences and (often negative) initial reactions. After the announcement, the topic was extensively discussed in the media: from newspapers and talk shows to the radio, and even internationally in *The New York Times* (Siegal). The then Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte, responded within hours that it was nonsense and that he was actually proud of the Golden Age. With *New Narratives*, I was striving for change within the museum. However, our statement evoked a public debate on a national level. Terminology was the point of departure, but discussions varied from debating the meaning of Dutch identity to skeptically questioning freedom of speech. We received numerous hateful and threatening messages via e-mail and social media. Racism and misogyny could be seen in how the messages addressed to me were far more explicit and personal than to white and cis male colleagues. However, my focus was on the support that we received. I consider this a major turning point, not only for the museum, but for the (Dutch) field in general: we were able to contribute to change, as these topics concerning colonial legacies and racism were still almost exclusively discussed in the margins of society.



**Figure 2**

Installation view of *Dutch Masters Revisited*,  
(Photograph by Monique Vermeulen)



So, to what extent has *New Narratives* sparked change in the museum in terms of how we deal with colonial histories and legacies? One of our learnings concerns working with marginalized voices. We now aim to collaborate from a place of reciprocity, in a way that benefits an existing struggle. We are still learning to clearly define our role within each situation, for example, as facilitators, connectors, mediators, and/or listeners who want to learn. As more museums deal with these questions, we aim to contribute developing a practical methodology through an upcoming publication with practical tools and examples regarding *co-creation* (Awater et al.), a concept that is at the core of our other current program line, *Collecting the City*.<sup>5</sup> Another lesson is to be precise about terminology. “The Golden Age” is merely one example, and conversations within the museum around language have deepened. *New Narratives* tours are still ongoing and consist of Female Gaze Tours, Queer Gaze Tours, and Decolonial Gaze Tours. We opted for *decolonial* to express the discourse within which our work is embedded. Over the last years, most projects we initiated within this context were responses to urgent issues in society, such as collecting and presenting materials from anti-Zwarte Piet activists. A first step to becoming more self-reflective was our recent exhibition *Colonial Stories: Work in Progress* (March 9 – September 15, 2022), for which we investigated the many ways in which the city and our collection are still interconnected with colonialism.<sup>6</sup> It revealed several areas for further research in the future, such as provenance investigations on ivory objects and jewelry, as well as colonial terminology used in the context of fashion and textiles. Some of the museum’s developments have contributed significantly to telling more inclusive narratives. For example, although the museum is still predominantly white in terms of staff, it is more culturally diverse, and the themes and issues we address, the partners we work with, and the expertise we bring in—through guest curators, research teams, advisors, and sounding boards for all major projects—now reflect a much broader segment of society. And placing inclusion at the core of the museum’s mission has impacted the organization on many levels, from hiring policy to acquisitions for the collection. We have ongoing collaborations and projects regarding colonial legacies, from research on our fashion collection to dialogues with Indigenous communities in New York City regarding the Dutch invasion 400 years ago, and we commission contemporary artists and makers to critically reflect on urgent issues in society for exhibitions like *The Golden Coach* and the biennial *Refresh Amsterdam*. It is hopeful to see these changes, but will the museum ever be decolonized? Perhaps not. Still, as long as the museum exists, we have the responsibility to offer our audiences access to information about ideologies that have been purposefully created, rather than solely reproducing these ideologies. In *Colonial Stories* we scratched the surface of the museum’s institutional history regarding dealing with colonialism. Examining exhibitions from the 1960s until the 2010s, it became clear that—even though we do represent more inclusive narratives about the city today than a few years ago—this is not a linear process. Most important for the future is that we hold ourselves accountable. That we keep asking questions such as: What is our institutional responsibility today regarding ongoing inequalities? And what does it mean for a white institution to commit to decolonization?

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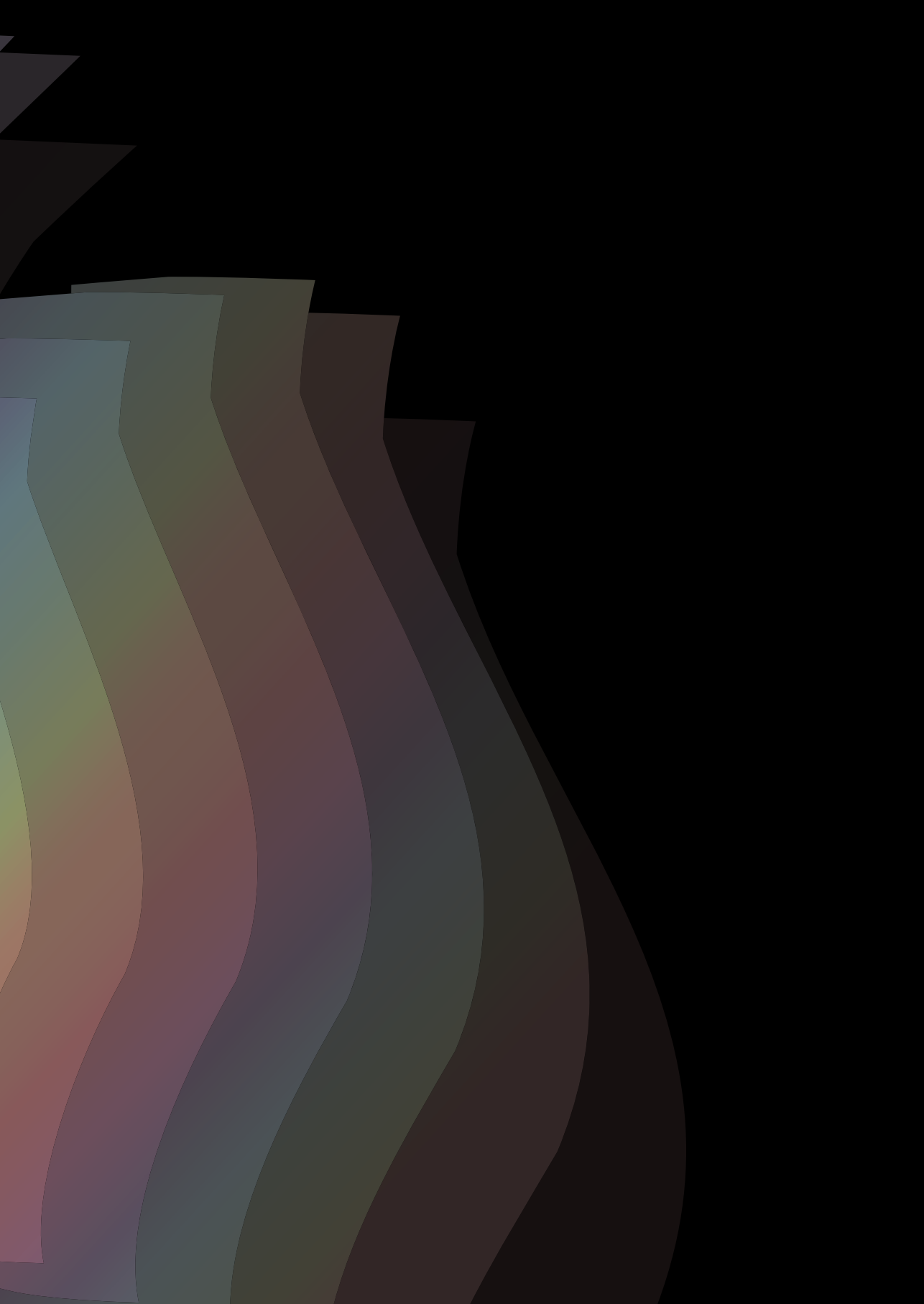
## Notes

1. Simone Zeefuik, together with Tirza Balk and Hodan Warsame, initiated #DecolonizeTheMuseum, a collective that critically questioned ongoing colonial ideas and practices of Dutch ethnographical museums in particular. They brought attention to issues on social media via the hashtag #DecolonizeTheMuseum and in dialogue with museums.
2. *Black Amsterdam* was initiated in the context of the first Dutch Black Achievement Month, with a focus on Black role models. I co-curated the exhibition with Annemarie de Wildt (Amsterdam Museum).
3. Other members of the *New Narratives* project team were Tom van der Molen (curator, specialized in 17th-Century Dutch/Netherlandish paintings), Mirjam Sneeuwloper (educator and initiator of the museum's programs on *queering*), Vanessa Vroon-Najem (anthropologist and initiator of the museum's advisory group for inclusion AM all-in), and Valerie Veenvliet (project coordinator).
4. VOC stands for *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*.
5. I co-curated *Colonial Stories: Work in Progress* with Inez Blanca van der Scheer and Maria Lamslag.
6. Through the program line *Collecting the City*, we collect and share recent or underexposed stories in the city and organize programs and exhibitions, in close collaboration with inhabitants of the city and partners.



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# Repair and Redress

**T**his chapter explores the lasting impact of colonialism and efforts to address its consequences. The essays examine the importance of understanding the specific pain inflicted by colonial history, before embarking on the healing process. In this context, the essays encourage museums to go beyond restitution by surrendering the idea of authority and embracing inclusivity. This is important, as museums may play a crucial role in dealing with the Dutch colonial past. The chapter delves into the restitution debate, revealing that addressing present-day colonialism requires more than just repatriation. The concept of colonial alienation and the need for museums to move away from the perspective of universal heritage is explored. The essays are complemented by provocative interventions highlighting the importance of meaningful interactions between former colonizers and the colonized in the process of repairing and redressing, as well as the need for intelligence and wisdom to address Dutch colonialism in Indonesia and foster mutual liberation. These texts contribute to the ongoing dialogue on decolonization, justice, and healing by examining key themes such as colonial legacies, museum roles, repatriation, and challenging established norms while deepening our understanding of the complexities involved in decolonization and social transformation. An interview with postcolonial scholar Rolando Vásquez concludes the chapter.

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# Representing Humanity? The Role of Museums in Addressing Colonial Alienation<sup>1</sup>

BY CATHERINE LU



ABSTRACT: Can modern museums be decolonized? What does decolonizing modern museums entail? What is the aim of decolonization with respect to institutions of cultural representation? I develop answers to these questions by examining how modern museums perpetuate colonial alienation, through usurpation of representational authority and misappropriation of cultural representation. The chapter then discusses how museums may decolonize through embarking on institutional transformations that promote disalienation and nonalienation, and how these efforts can contribute to the ongoing struggle to decolonize democratic and global politics. The role of museums in addressing colonial alienation may best be served by their ability to help bury the idea of a neutral and objective account of 'the heritage of humanity'.

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modern museums of natural history, ethnography, civilization, and world cultures have claimed to represent humanity in its unity and diversity.<sup>2</sup> Yet how did such museums come to be the representatives of humanity? And what has shaped the way such museums have represented humanity? These questions point to the heart of major contemporary controversies surrounding modern museums across Europe and North America. While their purported allegiance to conserving and curating humanity may seem to transcend the vagaries of international politics, modern museums are not only products of colonial and imperial politics infused by racialized civilizational hierarchies, but many continue to be structured as state agencies. For example, the 2016 Heritage Act (*Erfgoedwet*) "identifies the Dutch State as the owner of the national collections. Any recommendation for return and thus permanent transfer of ownership (alienation) of cultural object(s) in the national collection out of the custodianship of NMVW will require the assent of the Dutch State through the Ministry and Minister".<sup>3</sup> Museums such as the British Museum, the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, and those that comprise the NMVW (Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen) thus act as "custodians" of large collections of material culture from non-European worlds, which are legally owned by present-day states that acquired them when they were colonial powers.

The contemporary predicaments faced by modern museums are nothing short of constitutional and existential. The existential crisis faced by museums is twofold: on the one hand, in struggling to maintain a self-congratulatory self-image as representatives of the world for the world, they risk becoming warehouses of relics from a past that is increasingly disconnected from the world beyond museum walls; on the other hand, museums that take on anticolonial and decolonial tasks in conditions of structural injustice may risk their marginalization as spaces of collective reflections and contestations about difficult pasts, contested presents, and irreconcilable futures.

I understand the critical scrutiny of modern museums to be sparked by increasing **226** acknowledgement of their colonial origins, and to be sustained by increasing recognition that the legacies of colonialism have afterlives in the very constitution and organization of museums, as well as museums' custodianship and representations of material culture, which function to reproduce colonial alienation, especially in former colonial states that have become liberal democracies. The predicaments faced by museums are not mainly about museums being the products or beneficiaries of historical colonial wrongs, but about their continued contemporary function in reproducing colonial alienation. Museums have thus become sites where contemporary agents fight over the unfinished project of decolonization. I understand the project of decolonization to involve the dismantling of colonial structures of hierarchy and power and the construction of decolonized subjectivities that can support non-alienated flourishing.

Can modern museums be decolonized? What does decolonizing modern museums entail? What is the aim of decolonization with respect to institutions of cultural representation? I develop answers to these questions by examining how modern museums perpetuate colonial alienation, how museums may decolonize through embarking on institutional transformations that promote disalienation and nonalienation, and how these efforts can contribute to the ongoing struggle to decolonize democratic and global politics. The role of museums in addressing colonial alienation may best be served by their ability to help bury the idea of a neutral and objective account of the "heritage of humanity".

## Colonial Alienation in Cultural Representation

One way to understand how the work of museums contributes to colonial alienation is to examine them as institutions of cultural representation that aim to represent humanity. While research in political theory on representation has focused largely on democratic processes and institutions of politics, questions of what makes agents legitimate representatives, and what makes for good representations (Fossen 2019), are highly relevant to understanding museums as institutions of cultural representation. As the ICOM definition controversy reveals, museums have for a long time been associated with the mission of conserving, communicating, and curating the "heritage of humanity". The construction of humanity, however, has been thoroughly imprinted by the European colonial project. Modern museums have historically been paradigmatic colonial institutions that collected, organized, and presented material culture in ways that implicitly or explicitly articulated a Eurocentric theory of civilization and human development (Bennett 2017; Hetherington 2015). Although museums claim now to represent a diverse humanity, they are only starting to grapple with the fact that it is precisely this normative framework of humanity that has structured the hierarchies that persistently alienate the colonized (Graf 2021).

In critical theory, alienation has been theorized as a critique of a social condition in which subjects either have lost or are denied their standing as morally autonomous agents and hence are dominated (Forst 2018) or have lost or are deprived of their subjective freedom to participate in the making or appropriation of the social order and hence are oppressed (Jaeggi 2014). Alienation denotes a social condition that is dominating or oppressive of certain human potentialities.

There are two ways that modern museums' claims to represent humanity can be considered alienating. One form of alienation through representation is by usurpation. Museums that claim to

be representative of, in the sense of acting for or as representatives of cultures of the world, **227** need to answer the following questions: Who decides that they should be a representative (act on behalf of) a culture or humanity? What makes a representative legitimate? Alien or remote control of cultural artifacts can be viewed as a continuation of colonial domination or usurpation and indicates the alienation of the represented, raising problems of the legitimacy of museums as representatives (acting for) cultures and civilizations that were subject to colonization. Such alienation as a form of violation of right is apparent when one examines the provenance of museum holdings, and can show the illegitimacy of how museums acquired parts of their collections, through colonial war, conquest, slavery, or exploitation. Thus, for example, in the case of the Benin bronzes that were plundered during the British military expedition of 1897 (Hicks 2020), colonial alienation is reproduced by European museums' continued retention of such objects as a form of alienating control or representative usurpation.

A second form of alienation through representation is by misappropriation. Museums that claim to represent humanity typically provide representations or portrayals of cultures of the world. Such a claim leads to the following questions: Since what a culture is, is partly shaped by how it is represented (or portrayed), whose appropriative agency matters in shaping a culture? How do museum processes of representing heritage support or undermine the appropriative agency of those being represented, or their freedom to participate in making the cultural heritage *theirs*? What makes for a good representation or portrayal of a culture? This form of alienation is manifest in the problem of cultural misappropriation, which inhibits forms of self-realization that are meaningful or resonant from the standpoints and lived experiences of those represented.

The alienation of the oppressed through their colonized subjectivity has been well documented by anticolonial activists and scholars (Adu Boahen 1987). Colonial alienation as misappropriation is exemplified by practices of assimilating the colonized into the worldviews of the colonizers. Misappropriation can also be exhibited in how the story of humanity is structured, such as in stadial theories of civilization that relegate the colonized to primitive cultures and backward traditions. By setting up Eurocentric standards of civilization and humanity and positing them as neutral standards or conceptions, modern museums relegated other traditions to the status of footnotes, often producing an internalized devaluation by members of those groups themselves (Young 1990). Alienating representations in this sense deny, inhibit, or distort the appropriative agency of the colonized and frustrate their self-realization in the social world. The alienation of the oppressor's colonizing subjectivity is also apparent in Aimé Césaire's trenchant critique of the museums that came to acquire and display artifacts from the colonized and conquered and dispossessed, institutions that served the purposes of building empires and states, and entrenching European racial superiority: they cultivated "smug self-satisfaction" among Europeans, as well as "a secret contempt for others", a racism that dried up sympathy and fed "the delights of vanity" (1950, 71). Museums contribute to cultivating and sustaining the hegemony of Western epistemology ("coloniality of knowledge") and aesthetics (coloniality of being), which feed a disproportionate sense of self-congratulatory entitlement to tell the story of humanity (Mignolo 2021, 76).

How can these forms of alienation in representation be addressed or redressed? Critical theories of alienation as a social condition aim to reveal the dysfunctionality of social structures, with a view to forwarding an emancipatory agenda. Thus, alienation critique can be tied to a normative agenda of

## The Tasks of Disalienation

The critical aim to overcome structural domination and oppression prompts the need to develop theories and practices of resistance and struggle that agents located in unfavorable conditions may take up. But how can such agents be motivated to take up these challenges? If museums seek to halt reproducing colonial alienation, they will need to engage in practicing disalienation and fostering nonalienation. Both tasks can aid in reorienting the way that contemporary agents see the surrounding world, and even more fundamentally, how they view their selves.

Frantz Fanon articulated this question as a challenge of “disalienation” as a response to colonial domination and oppression: “Before embarking on a positive voice, freedom needs to make an effort at disalienation” (Fanon 2006). According to Fanon, both the oppressed, as well as the oppressors, need to make an effort at disalienation for a new politics to be born. The task of dismantling unjust social structures thus involves a process of disalienation of those who have developed their subjectivities (or sense of self and world) in conditions of structural domination and oppression. Effective disalienation must address the question of how agents formed with social identities and positions defined by structural injustice can come to develop the motivational resources necessary to seek progressive structural change (Lu 2023).

Disalienation pertains to developing practices to disorient agents’ old identities and beliefs, provoking recognition of discordant identities and reorienting them in ways to support the desired transformation of social identities, norms, and practices. Disalienation practices need also to provide positive motivational resources for agents to do the hard work of self-reflection and transformation. Curatorial practices, for example, should be concerned with supporting the moral motivation of agents to invite immanent and external forms of critique and self-reflection. The stability and sustainability of structural change involves reorienting agents’ subjectivity so that they are sufficiently motivated to support, or at least not oppose, structural transformation. We can consider, for example, the actions of the Congolese activist Mwazulu Diyabanza and his associates as having a disalienating function. By removing objects with colonial provenance from museums across Europe as a form of political protest, his actions draw attention to the illegitimacy of museums as the custodians of colonial dispossessions.<sup>4</sup> Hakim Chergui, the lawyer for the defendants, claims that the case “is not really about the trial of the young activists”, but rather about “the trial of the ‘colonial continuum,’” a term that references “the permanence and maintenance in France of a colonial mentality, which refuses to face its past” (Artnet News 2020).

The goal of disalienation can also help to reframe requests for restitution as more than just about returning stolen property. As a framework for restitution, disalienation is more robust than the framework of stolen property. This is because the finding of theft or involuntary separation in many cases of objects of unknown provenance or that were sold is difficult to substantiate, creating the logic of recursive dispossession (Nichols 2020).<sup>5</sup> Restitution as a demand of disalienation, however, punctures claims that world heritage or universal cultural value can justify overriding restitution, since the concept of representational alienation (that disalienation partly addresses) precisely



calls into question who can have a legitimate claim to represent the standpoint of the world, **229** humanity, or universal culture.

While disalienation as a response to colonial usurpation may not require restitution in the sense of the return of cultural objects to their place of origin, it does call into question the former colonial power as the legitimate owner of museum collections. The implication for museums is that redress could entail the revocation of the proprietary rights of former colonial powers over museum holdings. If museums maintain their custodianship of world cultures, they may become custodians that answer to a multinational assembly, rather than the state of France, the Netherlands, or Belgium. Diversifying the owners of collections, or denationalizing collections of cultural heritage, could go beyond statist representation and include non-state peoples, such as the Herero in present-day Namibia. At the same time, redressing representational usurpation through decentering the former colonial state, as well as the state form, could very well entail that the modern museum “learn to let go of their resources, even at times of the objects, for the benefit and use of communities and agendas far beyond its knowledge and control” (Boast 2011: 67; see also Golding and Modest 2013).

By providing spaces and resources for civic engagement with these struggles, museums may offer a relatively safe and private space and context for processing the pain that attends the recognition of the audience’s attachments to their own colonial subjectivities, as well as that of others. By playing a constructive role in dismantling or repudiating alienating colonial representations in material culture, museums can stimulate their destruction in our social and political imaginaries and politics (Lonetree 2012; Phillips 2011; Sleeper-Smith 2009). Museums can develop strategies of *critical custodianship*, which entails playing an active and constructive role in providing the mental, emotional, visual, and discursive spaces in which contemporary agents may work to repudiate and dismantle their distorted colonial subjectivities, of themselves and of others. In other words, critical custodianship entails developing collecting, curating, and displaying practices that foster disalienation, repudiating self-congratulatory narrative structures that posit the superiority of Western modernity and self-demeaning narratives internalized by the subjugated, which the current movement of museums toward presenting inclusive, diverse humanity fails to accomplish.

## Non-alienation, Cultural Resurgence, and an End to Humanity

How can museums stimulate the decolonization of their audiences from colonial constructions of the self, the other, and the social world? In conjunction with disalienation, another practice that can support decolonization is to cultivate non-alienated agency. For those who are dominated, alienation makes it difficult to engage in struggles against injustice or domination: the alienated are unlikely to have the requisite self-respect required to mount a radical critique or to participate effectively in the space of public reason distorted by structural injustice, nor is their public engagement likely to conform to the standards of sober social analysis (Lu 2019). Alienated agency can also produce engagement with unjust structures that are limited by those structures. Glen Coulthard has thus argued that the politics of liberal multicultural recognition are not enough to redress the ongoing settler-colonial domination and oppression of Indigenous peoples. Following Fanon, he argues that dominated agents need to struggle to create new decolonized terms of association that they can call their own and not only seek equal justificatory status based on structures of colonial power, otherwise

"the colonized will have failed to re-establish themselves as truly self-determining: as creators of the terms, values, and conditions by which they are to be recognized" (Coulthard, 39). As Leanne Simpson has put it, "We [Indigenous peoples] need to be able to articulate in a clear manner our visions for the future, for living as Indigenous Peoples in contemporary times. ... [This involves] articulating and living our legal systems; language learning; ceremonial and spiritual pursuits; creating and using our artistic and performance-based traditions" (2011, 17). **230**

For the oppressed, rejecting alien representation may thus involve a refusal of the social position or identities one has been assigned in the dominating social structure (Simpson 2014), and withdrawal from the social world, as well as creative reappropriation and strategies of self-development. Indigenous thinkers have been careful to distinguish resistance to colonialism from Indigenous resilience or resurgence. Heather Iglooliorte, for example, recognizes resistance as a term indicative of a reactive form of decolonization, whereas resilience is about "fortifying the culture from within, rather than reacting to outside opposition" and is "more in line with the Inuit worldview" (2010, 29). Redressing the second form of alienation as inhibited appropriative agency thus invites strategies of self-affirmation and cultural resurgence for those who have experienced colonization.

How can museums support the flourishing of non-alienated agents? One way of promoting non-alienation is to decenter, and even to set aside, the narrative of humanity. With this in mind, museums can facilitate such decentering and displacement by returning or framing cultural artifacts so that their significance can be told from the standpoint of a different protagonist embedded in a different cosmological narrative. An example of a returned object that served this purpose was the Stone Cross of Cape Cross, which Germany returned to Namibia in August 2019. It was erected in 1486 by the Portuguese explorer Diogo Cao as a navigational and political marker of Portuguese claims in Africa and taken by the German Imperial Navy in 1894, eventually ending up in the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) in Berlin after reunification.<sup>6</sup> As a Portuguese relic, it symbolizes Portugal as a 15th-century great power and fits into a European narrative of exploration and "discovery", as well as the history of technology. In Namibia, however, the cross is part of the story of earliest encounters of Africans with Europe that led to colonization and genocide, as well as the introduction of Christianity (Silvester 2019).

Addressing such representational alienation through standpoint theory (Kohn 2019) may inform museum curatorial practices of representation and involve the participation of cultural groups in the presentation of material culture. Societies may also seek to remove objects that have sacred significance from display. Decentering and dislocating may also involve curatorial practices structured by the viewpoint of those whose culture is being represented. For example, "A [museum's] collection, in Māori terms, is not just the collection; it's also the Māori viewpoint. They're not just collections; they're ancestors".<sup>7</sup> Standpoint theory may thus buttress the dismantling of center-periphery dynamics of asymmetrical power by dislocating representational authority and knowledge away from the museums that have claimed to be the great definers of humanity. Ultimately, the role of museums in addressing colonial alienation may best be served by their ability to help bury the idea of a neutral and objective account of the "heritage of humanity".

Modern museums of ethnography, history, civilization, humanity, and world culture originated as “colonial museums” and cannot make the leap to being “museums about people” (Tropenmuseum 2020) without embarking on anticolonial and decolonial tasks. Decolonizing museums can rejuvenate the contributions of institutions of cultural representation to building and sustaining a healthier democratic political culture internally, as well as establishing more equitable global connections between those who share painful, shameful, and complex colonial legacies. Rather than obscuring the persistent alienation of constructions of humanity with spectacles of human diversity, museums can practice critical custodianship to counter colonial alienation through supporting the twin tasks of disalienation and non-alienation. Disalienation entails addressing the legitimacy deficits of museums as representatives of the “heritage of humanity” in ways that may lead to the destruction of museums as they exist and the formation of new ones, as well as enable new non-dominating curatorial agents and practices to form. Nonalienation refers to a regulative ideal that museums strive to provide intellectual, social, and material spaces to facilitate the cultivation of cultural resurgence by oppressed groups and the decentering of representational authority and knowledge. Museums as institutions of cultural representation can contribute to the project of decolonization by building the motivational resources among museum publics to contest deeply entrenched global structural hierarchies of domination and oppression that rely on representations of humanity. Ultimately, to decolonize museums is to decolonize our selves.

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  2. From 2007 until August 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defined museums as institutions responsible for conserving and exhibiting "the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity", (Sandahl 2019, 2). The newly approved definition refers only to "tangible and intangible heritage" (ICOM 2022).
  3. <https://www.volkenkunde.nl/sites/default/files/2019-05/Claims%20for%20Return%20of%20Cultural%20Objects%20NIMVW%20Principles%20and%20Process.pdf>
  4. In mid-October 2020, he was fined 1000 Euros for such an action at the Musée Quai Branly - Jacques Chirac (ArtNet News 2020).
  5. The international legal basis of restitution and repatriation of cultural objects can be found in

several sources, including the 1954 UNESCO Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict, the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, the 1995 UNIDROIT Convention on Stolen or Illegally Exported Cultural Objects, the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the 1998 Washington Conference Principles on Nazi Looted Art. For the development of international law on restitution of cultural objects, see Vrdoljak 2009.

6. Thanks to Lukas Meyer for bringing this case to my attention. <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-returning-stone-cross-artifact-to-namibia/a-48768706>
7. Rose Evans (Te Ati Awa), Former Objects Conservator, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, NZ. Quoted in <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/caring-sacred-culturally-sensitive-objects.html>







This  
wholeness




# Show Me Where It Hurts

BY CARINE ZAAYMAN



ABSTRACT: As museums across the 'Global North' focus on questions of restitution, these pursuits do not in themselves address the persistence of those colonial dynamics that facilitated acquisition of museum objects in the first instance. It is therefore necessary to expand questions of restitution to include considerations of 'repair'. However, in order to apprehend what is in need of repair we have to account for how and where the colonial wound manifests in the present, and across the world. Museums need to widen their conception of what constitutes knowledge in relation to the objects in their collections, especially as concerns who are deemed the custodians of such knowledge about those objects and their life-worlds are and surrender the illusion of authority.

 If the era in which museums find themselves today is marked by questions of restitution, it has also become clear that the return of objects is but one fragment of the work required. Restitution does not, by itself, address the persistence of the colonial dynamics that facilitated acquisition of these objects in the first place. Consequently, scholars, artists, and activists, along with some museum workers, are calling for restitution to be thought of in relation to "repair".<sup>1</sup> But do museums and those who challenge them agree on what precisely is in need of repair? When it comes to the museums, what is the "wound"?

A joke circulates among those who, like me, are immigrants to the Netherlands, namely that Dutch doctors will prescribe paracetamol for absolutely any ailment. You have a fever? Take paracetamol! You have a broken foot? Paracetamol! You have a bleeding wound? Still paracetamol!<sup>2</sup> While the joke is, of course, hyperbolic, the habitual reaching for a panacea reminds me of the way in which European museums have approached the notion of "repair". Have these museums spent much time understanding the specific wound they are seeking to repair, or are they too easily reaching for a prefabricated fix? What is more, do we even agree on the diagnosis?

Were we to clearly apprehend the "wound" causing the pain and anger expressed by people from former colonies and diasporic communities toward museums and other institutions of knowledge and memory, we first need to locate it. In Western parlance, "the past"—pointedly, the colonial past—is habitually imagined as being behind us. We look "forward" to the future, forging a path away from the past. However, in a place like South Africa, where I am from and where I think from, the colonial past makes itself known in daily life. For South Africans, the past is not so much behind us as next to us. We see the past not only in colonial architecture from the periods of Dutch and British occupation, or even the collections in our museums that in many ways were established to imitate European examples. We see it most explicitly in the spatial design of our cities, the unequal



distribution of wealth, and the exploitative labor practices that shape the sociopolitical landscape of our country.<sup>3</sup> When something is behind you, it is also out of sight, easier to ignore. If the wound is located in a past imagined to be behind us, it can be easily deferred. But when someone stands next to you bleeding, it becomes a much more urgent matter. **240**

In South Africa, where colonial inheritances continue to be felt in the present, those working in museums on the whole already understand their work to be constituted by the “present-past” of coloniality.<sup>4</sup> They know that the communities where their institutions are located and the audiences convened by their exhibitions demand that, through restorative historical narrations, museums help rebuild the dignity of those that coloniality dehumanizes. Contrariwise, in discourses around museums that occur in Europe, colonial wounds are too easily framed as being in the past, rendering them objects of study positioned at a remove from the present. This discursive constellation produces conflicting perspectives between those who experience colonial wounding in the present and institutions that act publicly as custodians of past. In this essay, I aim to surface some insights we might gain if we, across the world, were to take our lead from voices articulating the colonial wound from those places where it is most keenly felt every day. If we were to heed these voices, we may start by imagining the past as being beside us, so that we may better understand the wound that museums are being asked to repair.

## The Whole Object

Museums have the double task of taking care of objects and mobilizing them in the staging of exhibitions. Taking care of objects is in the present moment understood to include their restitution, a recognized (and necessary) process by which museums conceive themselves doing the work of repair. However, in the performance of the second task, the staging of exhibitions, museums can also contribute to the work of repair by bringing the colonial wound into view. Curators can realize an encounter with the colonial wound for its visitors by drawing attention to objects with problematic provenances within their collections, but also by employing exhibitionary tactics that unsettle the authority of museums.

The curatorial strategies by which museums stage their collections indicate how objects are interpolated by these institutions and where the institutions conceive the limits of the objects to be. A conundrum lies at the heart of museum collections used in this way, namely the ontological question of what constitutes “an object”. As Donald Preziosi (54) notes, objects in museums are both present and absent. He argues that, while museum objects are “quite obviously materially part of its position (situation) in the historiographic theatre of the museum”, they are also “unnaturally abstracted there from some ‘original’ situation”. The framework of the museum supplants the contexts in which objects existed prior to being collected and displayed, thereby rendering the “original” context absent. Thus, a museum object can be understood as being constituted by several contexts: its past environment (likely signifying the reason the museum values that object), its museum environment (in the storeroom or on display, linked to its accession number and other metadata), and the present-day site from which it is now absent. Museum objects denote a multitude of absent contexts in which they *continue to have* value and significance that lie beyond the control of the museum. Such absent contexts are not generally taken into consideration or given form when an object is pressed into service within an exhibition.

In pursuit of the goal of restitution, museums have been focusing on intensifying their provenance research. Even though this work is important and valuable, the significance of an object cannot be explained purely in relation to a fixed point from whence an object might have been plucked. Rather, there is also the question of what work the object is being asked to perform in the present. This question concerning the irrevocably alienated/dislocated object is not one that can be answered purely by densifying the knowledge around the *source* of the object—in a past that is imagined to be behind us. We can know everything about where an object came from, and still press it into service in ways that do injustice to its absent context(s) in the present. **241**

The Iziko Social History Centre in Cape Town, South Africa, holds in its collection a VhaVenda divining bowl known as a *ndilo*. When curator Thembakazi Matroshe elected to include the bowl in the *Object Ecologies* (2018) exhibition at the Iziko South African Museum,<sup>5</sup> she chose to shield it from view by fitting the vitrine in which it was shown with a veil. Matroshe was guided in her decision by the way in which such a bowl would have been handled by the people who created and used it. She draws on the work of J. Loubser, who has observed about this bowl, “Before any of the participants could look at the bowl, they had to rub their eyes with kingfisher droppings in the belief that this ritual protected them against going blind when staring at the bowl” (Loubser 19). Knowing that, for those people who used the object, it was not something to be gazed at, Matroshe felt it would be inappropriate simply to subject it to the dynamics of exhibition, where impulses of showing and looking dominate. If Matroshe believed that the absent context, the “original situation”, of the *ndilo* bowl was something that belonged to the past, she could set it aside in favor of the present context of the museum hall. However, her curation shows that she did not believe the past usage of the bowl could be set aside in favor of museological conventions:

*“Its anthropological classification in the [Iziko Social History Collection] archive has led to a dissonance between the ndilo’s original context and its embedded spiritual and cultural meaning. I want to make sense of the ndilo as part of a larger narrative that reimagines sacred objects in the colonial archive. This involves seeing it outside of the colonial lexicon, which is simplistic, reductive and problematic. The ndilo, once a living and breathing part of a community, instrumental in carrying out community rituals, has been left in the storerooms of the ISHC, leaving very little room for it to be remembered or revered as an object instrumental in cultural and religious traditions.... The ndilo should be treated with respect, reflection and compassion”*

(MATROSHE).

For Matroshe, the importance of acknowledging the object’s past in its present display is partly occasioned by her desire for the object to be apprehend in its wholeness. But what is more, by insisting that the past usage of the object should inform the modes of its display, Matroshe is symbolically re-instantiating that past, resisting its occlusion within the vocabulary of museum display.

The contexts in which museum objects functioned before their collection, and within which they had significance, did not cease to exist upon acquisition. Communities who used the objects had trajectories of their own into the present, trajectories that include the imprints of those objects. Contemporary contexts from which these objects are absent are as much part of the whole object

as their provenance. Thus, the severing of objects from their contexts is not something **242** that only happened in the past, but is enacted each time they are exhibited in modes that disregard this wholeness of objects. Museum objects contain the possibility of revealing the co-existence of these worlds, that of the museum itself *and* the community that bears the imprint of the absent object. For museums that aspire to do the work of repair, this potential offers a vital opportunity to engage with those worlds meaningfully and listen to what they need to be repaired.

## Bodies of and Bodies with Knowledge

Through exhibitions and public programming, museums perform pedagogical functions as much as custodial ones. Rethinking which (his)stories are narrated is clearly a crucial step toward doing the work of repair. Accordingly, many European museums have endeavored to include neglected stories in their offerings.<sup>6</sup> However, the way in which knowledge of the past is endorsed, namely what is deemed appropriate as sources and evidence, determines what can be articulated in relation to the past. In this way, the production of knowledge, as understood from an Enlightenment perspective, has been enfranchised as a product of a particular kind of scholarly labor, itself implicated in colonial frameworks. As a project intent on escalating global trade, colonialism rendered labor valuable only inasmuch as it contributed to economic productivity. Consequently, those whose labor did not contribute to the generation of capital are rendered invisible, a burden to the state. Babalwa Magoqwana (75) argues that the leadership provided particularly by elderly women in the economies and the households of precolonial African societies was eroded by colonialism. Magoqwana speaks of *uMakhulu*, meaning “grandmother or elder Mother in isiXhosa”, but not merely in a literal sense. The term *uMama-Omkhulu* (elder mother, shortened to *uMakhulu*) is used to assert isiXhosa as a source of knowledge. Using this term avoids the inherent epistemological challenges provided by “grandmother” in reinserting the notion of “extended family” as the norm (Magoqwana 76).

She explains that once colonial operations relegated the labor of these women in providing leadership and transmitting knowledge intergenerationally, they were—and remain—reduced to “an ugly face of poverty (Magoqwana 76)”. Magoqwana argues for the recognition of female elders as bodies of indigenous knowledge. She suggests that reintegrating “local languages and values carried over by our grandmothers in dealing with social, political and economic challenges in our societies” holds the promise of “epistemic redress” that “will commence a healing process for our communities from the destructive impact of centuries of colonial thought systems and their impact on our social organization in our African households”. Magoqwana’s appeal is, of course, centered on South African society, but her argument nevertheless has bearing on European museums. Severing the object from the context of its production in the course of collecting also transfers the authority of “knowledge” about the object to the (European) museum or the scholar, thereby erasing the authority and knowledge of (among others) the female elders. “Repair” needs to take heed of this erasure and work toward its undoing by recognizing and centering the knowledge embodied by those positioned outside the institution.

Like Magoqwana, June Bam identified the importance of female elders as custodians of indigenous knowledge in Khoekhoe and San communities in Southern Africa. *Ausi* (its plural form being *Ausidi*) is a Khoekhoegowab<sup>7</sup> word denoting “the wise, first-born woman in the family... [and is] linked to water, is a motif denoting ‘fountain,’ ‘blood’ or ‘big snake.’” In her book *Ausi Told Me* (2021), Bam



offers a deep and far-reaching exploration of the various ways in which *Ausidi* support their communities through their cultural, botanical, and agricultural knowledge (among other capacities) toward food security, human rights advocacy, and mental health. Moreover, with her background as a teacher in South Africa, Bam is profoundly concerned with pedagogy. Through her pedagogical and scholarly work she advocates for the decolonization of institutions of learning and scholarship, especially universities. She notes that the colonially shaped discursive frameworks governing these institutions position people like *Ausidi* as objects of study, while ignoring their embodied ways of knowing, “the matrilineal voices promoting Khoi and San knowledge and archival ritual were considered taboo in historically white universities when the history of people and places were discussed and debated” (Bam 5).

Central to both Magoqwana and Bam’s theses lies the recognition of how knowledge and intergenerational memory circulates within extended sociopolitical networks in which women play leading roles, even as they are judged “unproductive”. Their work resonates with scholars from all over the world who explore the variegated ways in which knowledge is conveyed. Diana Taylor, for example, argues that “we learn and transmit knowledge through embodied action, through cultural agency, and by making choices” (xvi). For Taylor, these embodied actions (for which she employs the term “performances”) constitute a repertoire, a dynamic set of practices that “transmits memories, makes political claims, and manifests a group’s sense of identity” (xvii). Moreover, Magoqwana and Bam demonstrate that knowledge is not irrevocably entwined with “productivity”, that labor entails not only those actions that generate capital. Maintaining and sharing knowledge is a form of labor which, while rendered invisible in neoliberal cultures, is key to any discussion of repair. As Bam argues, “everyday, decolonial-knowledge ecologies on the Cape Flats provide important pointers for reimagining the hybridized, precolonial pasts” (xi). To what extent are forms of embodied knowledge taken seriously by European museums, who yet tend to position people like *uMakhulu* and *Ausi* as objects of study rather than as custodians of the past, as bodies of knowledge? If one were to recognize the relegation of the knowledge work performed by *uMakhulu* and *Ausidi* as a colonial wound that persists in the present, its repair entails a drastic reconceptualization of how knowledge is produced and maintained.

## Medice, cura te ipsum<sup>8</sup>

Colonial wounds can be found in places, whether physical or intangible, that colonialism has rendered out-of-sight. To “repair” these wounds requires museums to see such places clearly and address them directly in their work. If the past is understood as being beside us, we need to develop curatorial methodologies that can stage the wholeness of museum objects. Moreover, when museums employ these objects in their public narratives, they need to account for the ecologies of knowledge and memory of which they form part, especially when these are situated outside the museum.

By mobilizing their significant economic resources, European museums produce a wealth of outputs such as exhibitions, symposia, publications, and so forth that come to dominate public discourse. European museums are now, ironically, in the position to stage many more events themed around “decolonization” than museums in sites where resistance against and undoing of colonialism are most prominent. This imbalance is made possible by their access to financial resources that far exceed what is available to institutions such as those in South Africa (for example). Perhaps

European museums have too readily assumed that it is they that should be taking up the role of the physician, the one who performs the labors of repair, when they are themselves most in need of it. If museums in Europe would take the work of repair seriously, it might serve them to undergo training by healers from places that are facing the realities of postcolonial life on a daily basis. **244**

I am not suggesting that those who suffer the wound of colonialism should be conscripted to “heal” European museums. Instead, I am advocating that the very idea of restitution as panacea be jettisoned, because we have yet to understand how and where the colonial wound manifests in the present across the world. Rather than enacting the conceit that they are *par excellence* repositories of objects—and crucially, custodians of knowledge about these objects and the people who made them—museums can start the work of repair by surrendering this illusion of authority. If museums were able to envisage their part in the process of repair as extending beyond restitution, to a fundamental reconfiguration of the institution and its practices, they may yet be able to heal themselves.

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## Endnotes

- 1 The work of Kader Attia is notable in this respect, as for example his *Museum of Repair* exhibition in Athens (2021).
- 2 A typical example of this joke can be found in the *Dutch Review*: <https://dutchreview.com/dutch-quirks/dutch-quirk-104-be-prescribed-only-paracetamol-by-every-dutch-doctor/>
- 3 This is not to say that every South African equally acknowledges the presentness of colonial and apartheid wounds. In a society where inequality and privilege are widespread, those who fear their material comforts most threatened by restitution are more likely to want to see the past as over-and-done. Nevertheless, addressing the legacy of colonialism holds a great deal political cachet in South Africa precisely because it is experienced as being in the present.
- 4 With this assertion I do not mean to romanticize the museum world in South Africa, as the capacity of institutions to address colonial inheritances varies greatly across the country. This is due in part to slow and uneven placement of Black curators and directors, as well as institutional structures that make decolonial work very difficult. However, I maintain that, as a society marked by extreme inequality, in South Africa it is not possible to ignore the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, even if one fails to address them adequately.
- 5 The *Object Ecologies* exhibition was a project by the Centre for Curating the Archive at the University of Cape Town in which students from the Honours in Curatorship course collaborated to curate a series of objects from the collection of the Iziko Social History Centre for an exhibition

at the Iziko South African Museum (<https://www.objectecologies.co.za/>).

- 6 The *Slavery* exhibition staged in 2021 at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is a good example of how museums have been broadening the scope of stories they tell.
- 7 Khoekhoegowab (also referred to as “Nama”) is one of the languages spoken by Khoekhoe people in South Africa and Namibia. It is today the most prominent of the family of Khoekhoe languages in this region.
- 8 “Physician, heal thyself”



An aerial photograph of a lake with several islands. The water is a deep blue-green color, and the islands are covered in dense green and yellow foliage. The sky is a pale blue with some light clouds. The text 'Self-image of repatriation' is overlaid on the lower right portion of the image.

Self-image  
of  
repatriation







Repatriation as  
Means of Repair  
and Redress?  
Dutch-Indonesian  
Repatriation  
Debates,  
1949–present

BY CAROLINE DRIEËNHUIZEN

**ABSTRACT:** The debate on restitution is one of the most pressing socio-cultural issues today. Instead of regarding restitution or repatriation as the solution to all past colonial injustices or as a mere political act, I consider it as part of a larger complex set of issues, deeply rooted in colonial thinking and doing that is having an effect to this day. Until those issues are addressed, the returning of objects to countries of origin is not a repairing or redressing of colonial injustices. By examining the Dutch repatriation debate on Indonesia's heritage after 1945 in more detail, we gain insight into this coloniality and the step towards this repairing and redress will become clear.

**R**epatriation (the return of objects to a nation or state at the request of a government) or restitution (the return of cultural artifacts to an individual or community) of colonial heritage is currently a subject of debate everywhere in Western Europe (Arts Council England 2). To some, repatriation, understood as the "return of property wrongfully taken", is the magic resolution for all colonial wrongdoing in the past (Simpson ed. 313). For those it is a form of "repair" that is seen as "the disappearance of the [colonial] wound" and its societal traumas caused by the injustice, like the taking and looting of cultural artifacts, done to the colonies (Twitchin 54-61). To others in the West, repatriation is a great, politically motivated act, forced by the spirit of the times and changing morals (Ribbens).

I consider the *actual* act of repatriation of cultural heritage from the former colonies highly important, but its contribution to the repair and redress of colonial injustice is only limited. Repair is often understood in the West as repairing the damage done, in this case, to the former colonies in the past. It can be spoken of in political and legal terms, which often involve monetary reparations and official apologies of government officials, but also in sociocultural, psychological terms that often involve the healing of communities, the "undoing" of the entire colonial past, finding justice, and a return to a former state of being (Immler 5; Glass 118; Mignolo and Vazquez)

However, it is questionable whether this last conception of repair, which is the most socially fundamental, is possible anyway if, as influential sociologist Aníbal Quijano shows, the long-standing colonial structures of power, control, and hegemony did not cease to exist after the political decolonization of the colonies but still continue to influence societies today and shape Eurocentric forms of rationality and modernity (Quijano 533-580).

In this article, I will show through historical discourse analysis how, since Indonesia's independence, once the most important Dutch colony, debates in the Netherlands on repatriation of Indonesia's heritage have been rooted in coloniality. By exploring the repatriation debates from the moment

of Indonesia's political independence in 1945 until the present, and interrogating them **252** critically by considering them as discursive productions in which certain ideas and suppositions have been legitimated as truths by those in power, we gain insight into how current debates on repatriation in the Netherlands are for a large part still rooted in colonial thinking and doing, which results in an attitude toward the Dutch colonial past that came into being shortly after Indonesian independence. Because of this coloniality in the present, mere repatriation does thus, I believe, not lead to a complete repair of the historical injustices caused by colonialism.

As long as the discussion and people's attitude toward repatriation in the Netherlands continues in the same manner, with the same wording and intentions, it fails, at best, to address these deep-seated injustices of colonialism. At worst, a focus on mere repatriation will reinforce the continuing coloniality in countries like the Netherlands. I call for a more critically and historically comprehensive approach to the debate on repatriation, in which the repatriation of objects is just one aspect of a complex set of issues that is rooted in the coloniality of modern European societies.

## "Secure the loot": Indonesia's Political Decolonisation and Cultural Heritage, 1945–1970

Four years after Indonesia's independence, and just before the Dutch transfer of sovereignty, there were Dutch voices, like a certain D. Schurink from the Dutch town of Winschoten, pleading for the repatriation (called "restitution" at that time, but due to the now-changing meaning of the word, I will refer to repatriation in this article) of cultural objects to the new nation-state and former colony (Van Beurden 79-90). The cultural agreement of the negotiations between the Netherlands and Indonesia, part of the Round Table Conference of August 1949, provided for the return of Indonesian artifacts of cultural or historical value but was, however, never enacted (van Beurden 127; Scott 652). And although both countries agreed on settling repatriation requests in ad hoc committees, this also never took shape. The Netherlands was very reluctant to address the issue of repatriation.

This can probably be explained by the still prevailing colonial mentality at that time. There was a firm Dutch belief that the Dutch, especially in the case of Indonesia's cultural heritage, had acted as "benevolent colonizers", leading its population to a better future and guarding Indonesia's heritage by restoring their monuments, gathering knowledge, and "saving" artifacts by collecting and placing them in museums. This is evidenced by the fact that, for a very long time, colonizing nations like the Netherlands did consider their own confiscated heritage during the Second World War as unlawful loss of possession, but did not regard their own confiscated objects from the colonies as such, as historians Gaudenzi and Swenson showed (Gaudenzi and Swenson 491-518).

As a result, not only the Western conception of heritage, focusing on conservation and preservation of material objects and monuments, but also institutions, especially in combination with the representation of cultures in museum displays, were complicit in the ideology of colonialism and its unequal power structures. The Dutch colonial conviction that they had rescued and preserved cultures and their objects from destruction caused by historical changes, the so-called "salvage paradigm", did not disappear with Indonesia's independence. It was so deeply rooted in Dutch thinking and part of the generally accepted Western heritage discourse that repatriation of objects was especially inconceivable in the immediate postcolonial years.

For Indonesia as a newborn nation, the return of their cultural patrimony was considered very **253** important in this period. Their nationhood was negotiated “on the wide cultural front” and cultural artifacts were considered as the material witnesses of Indonesia’s glorious and important precolonial past (Lindsay and Liem 94-96). The return of cultural heritage was therefore, on the one hand, an attempt to enforce Indonesia’s political rights as a nation-state with regard to the former colonizer (and thus their legitimation as a full-fledged state) and, on the other hand, a necessity in shaping their nation’s new identity (Drieënhuizen 94-98).

These two beliefs clashed. In 1951, Mohammed Yamin, member of the Indonesian parliament and later Minister of Education and Culture of the Indonesian Republic, openly pleaded for the return of objects such as several paleontological skulls and fossilized remains like Java Man (early human fossil found at the end of the 19th century on the Indonesian island of Java), and the 13<sup>th</sup> century Hindu-Buddhist statue of Prajñāpāramitā, the goddess of wisdom (Drieënhuizen and Sysling 290-311). Dutch civil servants, unable to reconcile with the nation’s postcolonial status and convinced of Dutch good deeds as a colonizer, interpreted the requests as political bullying and considered Yamin’s wishes in light of what they regarded as an “anti-Dutch moral reign of terror” prevailing in Indonesia at that time (National Archives (NA) 2.10.35.04). Furthermore, they were unable to recognize the Indonesian need for cultural objects, as they were convinced that an “own Indonesian culture” was “unthinkable”. Yamin was simply trying to “secure the loot”, they reported. He was being “unsympathetic” and “provocative” (NA 2.10.35.04).

More than ten years later, in 1963 and 1965, through the coordinating minister for People’s Welfare, Muljadi Djojomartono, Indonesia once again asked in the press for the return of cultural objects (Van Beurden 129). Officials in the Netherlands refused, taking refuge in the confidence that the Netherlands had fulfilled their legal responsibilities at the transfer of sovereignty (Legêne and Postel-Coster 271-288, 274). Undoubtedly, the Dutch conviction that they had done the right thing in terms of cultural goods also played a part. Furthermore, as historian Cynthia Scott pointed out, the return of objects held in the Netherlands was always seen by the Dutch government as a way to maintain cultural influence in its former colony. When relations between the two countries reached rock bottom in the 1950s and early ’60s and there was no more influence to exert, the need to proceed with restitution also faded (Scott 653).

As a result, no sense of legal urgency was felt concerning the return of the objects, and Dutch civil servants also made sure it stayed that way. In 1970, the Netherlands like Belgium and the United Kingdom, refused to ratify the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the export and transfer of cultural property ownership fearing establishing a precedent that could have consequences on a continental scale (Van Beurden 133-134). The UN General Assembly Resolution 3187 of December 1973, which stated that former colonies were entitled to their own cultural heritage taken away by former colonial oppressors also had little effect in terms of repatriation of objects. All in all, these top-down attempts to break out of the Western heritage discourse of the correctness of colonial salvage and preservation had little effect in the West. While we see how Indonesia culturally shaped its own nation and claimed objects from the Netherlands in this period, the Netherlands continued to be influenced by colonial thinking and doing. As a result, Dutch officials mainly took refuge behind legal and paternalistic cultural arguments against repatriation.

## “Indonesia wants everything back”: First Returns of Indonesian Objects, 1970–1980

Despite these different outlooks, rapprochement took place between Indonesia and its former colonizer, intensifying after Indonesian president Sukarno's forced resignation and with the arrival of new president Suharto (r. 1967–1998), thereby increasing the opportunity for the Netherlands to exert some influence through culture (Scott). On July 7, 1968, a cultural agreement was signed between the two countries and as a result some cultural objects were repatriated (van Beurden 131). For instance, the *Nagarakṛtāgama* manuscript was returned in 1970 and the Prajñāpāramitā of Java statue in 1978. In 1975, the Netherlands also decided to help strengthen Indonesia's museum infrastructure (van Beurden 149).

Although there was political willingness by the Dutch to return objects to Indonesia in this period, they were very reluctant. Reluctant, probably because it went against entrenched beliefs in the Netherlands of the benevolence of its colonialism and the prevailing heritage discourse of salvation and safeguarding. In 1969, Dutch Prime Minister Piet de Jong was willing to repatriate objects in order to, as it was considered, fill in the gaps of the “much bigger volume of authentic cultural goods” in Indonesia, but he favored maintaining the “status quo”, as he believed the return of objects impaired the Dutch “unity of a collection” (van Beurden 132). Many Dutch museum officials shared the same feelings. Especially Dutch museum directors P.H. Pott (of the National Ethnographical Museum) and W. Vervoort (of the Natural History Museum) in Leiden were adamantly opposed to repatriation of a part of their collections. Both argued Indonesia's claims were unlawful and condemned the repatriation claims, like many Dutch civil servants, as “emotional” reactions (NA, 2.27.19).

With this last argument, Vervoort and Pott harkened back to old, internalized colonial ideas of colonized people's character in their judgements—emotional motivations they considered the opposite of what they considered legitimate, rational, and therefore “scientific” grounds (Leeuwarder Courant). On these grounds, they rejected the legitimacy of the Indonesian demands. In their argumentation, Vervoort and Pott conveniently forgot their own emotional reactions; museum director Vervoort, in particular, wrote very dramatic letters to the Dutch ministry (NA, 2.27.19).

What these statements also reveal is a clear lack of feeling for the new sociopolitical relationship and situation, and thus little empathy for the “other” side (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 33-66, 56-57). Colonial thinking, outlooks, standards, values, and feelings still guided actions. By way of illustration: in the case of Java Man, Pott, as a member of an advisory committee, even pleaded for a reversal of the burden of proof and insisted that Indonesian scholars should demonstrate that the Netherlands had obtained the demanded objects illegally (Boersma).

The lack of empathy and reverting to legal arguments based on Western laws that had validated colonialism as a legalized structure of racial inequalities, oppression, and destruction of cultures are even also visible in the reactions of museums that were more inclined toward repatriation, like the Tropenmuseum (nowadays Wereldmuseum Amsterdam), formerly the Dutch Colonial Institute (Veraart). In response to the 1973 UN resolution, the museum argued that most of the objects in its collection had been legally obtained: “[Many objects have] come here through sincere donations from natives to foreigners (Holland)... and through honest purchase. (Stories of looting are often greatly exaggerated—the [Catholic] mission did play a questionable role at times)” (NA, 2.20.69).

This echoed a feeling generally shared in the Netherlands and visible in Dutch newspapers. **255** Journalists quoted the Indonesian minister of Foreign Affairs, Adam Malik, saying “Indonesia wants everything back” (Van der Velden). They also stressed the absence of facilities to properly store the objects in Indonesia and stated Indonesians never cared for their own antiquities (De Jong; Leeuwarder Courant; NA 863). Other newspapers declared that there were not so many “stolen” treasures in Dutch institutions and that the issue was “a problem, blown up disproportionately” (de Jong). Indonesia was framed as a greedy, backward country with undeserved reproaches and demands. We need to understand these responses in the light of pervasive colonial thinking and, as we have seen, such thinking clearly did not disappear with Indonesia’s independence. A colonial cultural archive, the complex of imperialism-based rationales, knowledge, and attitudes that influenced cultures and of which Western heritage convictions were part, continued to define Dutch mentalities, acts, and attitudes toward Indonesia (Wekker).

While Dutch officials and journalists were dominated by ways of thinking and beliefs formed in colonial times, Indonesian officials opposed those beliefs and arguments. They underlined in diplomatic relations with the Netherlands the cultural and social independence of their state. The diametrically opposing attitudes of the Dutch and Indonesian officials are also reflected in speaking about and acting upon the cultural objects in the Netherlands that qualified for repatriation. For instance, the leader of the Indonesian delegation, Ida Bagus Mantra, director-general of the Ministry of Culture, refused to speak Dutch in his opening address to the Dutch delegation (Van Beurden 139). During Mantra’s term of office, Indonesian officials spoke about *menyerahkan*, the handing over or delivering up of cultural objects to Indonesia (“Memorandum”). This irritated Dutch civil servants. They phrased it as “transfer” and continued to stress the Netherlands’ willingness and kindness in donating the objects (Bloembergen and Eickhoff 53; Leeuwarder Courant; de Jong). By using the word transfer instead of restitution or repatriation, they emphasized the legitimacy of the colonial objects in the Netherlands and dismissed the political recognition of their unjust taking of the objects.

Dutch argumentation, including its conceptualization of heritage (conservation), in this period was thus a clear sign of coloniality that still shaped people’s worldviews. It also manifested on a political level. Van Beurden already pointed out that the Dutch help offered in the museum field in 1975 just meant a strengthening of Dutch cultural-political influence and thus was a type of neocolonialism. Historian Cynthia Scott argued that these repatriations were more than anything else about Dutch officials negotiating an understanding of the nation’s own past and future and “renewing the presence of experts in the former colony”.

Although the act of repatriation meant legal redress by returning artifacts to the rightful owners, this and the repatriation debates in this period were far from repairing colonial injustice or healing a colonial wound. In fact, the opposite was true: the returns and repatriation debates can be seen as the continuation of Dutch sociocultural and economic influence in Indonesia, in which Dutch museums and a Western conceptualization of heritage were complicit.

## Beyond Indonesian Repatriation Claims, 1980–2005

In the two decades that followed the repatriation of several objects from the Netherlands to Indonesia in the 1970s, the Dutch repatriation debate quietened. In the first half of the 1980s the few

# Provocative intervention

BY BAMBANG PURWANTO

THE DUTCH COLONIAL PAST IN THE INDONESIAN:  
PRESENT AND FUTURE IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

According to one of the dominant historical perspectives, there was almost nothing good about colonialism. Likewise with the long reality of Dutch colonialism in the Indonesian Archipelago. The past, which started from the presence of traders at the end of the 16th century and continued until the end of the Dutch East Indies government in 1942 and the failure of the recolonization efforts during 1945-1949, was filled with the fact that it was no longer in accordance with the standards of human values and modern civilization. This of course leaves various problems, if the narrative from the dark past will continue to be carried into the future. There are many things that need to be repaired and redressed, so that a single event shared by Indonesia and the Netherlands in the past is not trapped in a dichotomous construction and exaggerated subjectivity.



Indonesia needs to maintain the historical narrative of Dutch colonialism to legitimize its existence as an independent and sovereign nation-state. The existence of the nation's memory of Dutch colonialism is still needed to understand the historical roots of Indonesian nationalism. This includes the history of the formation of consciousness that unites various previously separated things into one new entity and identity called Indonesia. Likewise, the various realities that exist in Indonesia at present, which are well realized, were also formed during the Dutch colonial period.

On the other hand, the Dutch have tried to forget and to liberate themselves from the realities of colonial history. Maintaining the memory of colonialism will be a disgrace, and at the same time a persistent feeling of guilt or blame. In fact, the Netherlands wants to show the world that she is a civilized, law-abiding nation and cares about human rights. However, the existence of collections stored in various museums, colonial archives, and social and academic institutions which have special reference to Indonesia and the Indonesian Dutch community or Dutch people born under or within the colonial situation, for example, makes it difficult for the Dutch to deny that there is a historical relationship with Indonesia through colonialism.

In addition, what cannot be forgotten is the recent uproar among the Dutch themselves, related to evidence of structural violence carried out by

the Dutch military after Indonesia proclaimed its independence in 1945. This places the Netherlands in a “colonial karma”. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the recent repatriation of Indonesian heritage stored in the Netherlands and other previous academic and cultural policies are part of the Dutch efforts to erase their public memory that the Dutch had ever colonized Indonesia.

So, how to fix it? A way that can present the colonial reality of a past that was full of ugliness and mistakes becoming something that is good for the present and the future, both for Indonesia and the Netherlands. One thing that can be done is to deconstruct an established historiography. One of the serious problems in both Indonesian and Dutch historiography regarding Dutch colonialism is the conception of colonial space. The space of colonial history is limited to the colony in the Indonesian Archipelago, which is separated from the European metropolises that initiated and enjoyed colonialism. As a result, almost all historical narratives state that only the colony was influenced by Europe, while denying the fact that the colony also influenced the reality in metropolitan Europe.

Second, the duration of colonial memory is short and not holistic. This denies the existence of a process of hundreds of years of interaction, which enabled the formation of a unique human relation and civilization both in the colony and metropolitan Europe. For Indonesia, colonialism is only remembered as

exploitation, discrimination, or segregation, which has an impact on impoverishment, lack of education, and humiliation of the local population. While, for the Dutch, the colony was a place to practice Western superiority, civilizing local populations and accumulating wealth through a capable entrepreneurial spirit. When Indonesia denied its weaknesses for being controlled by the Dutch, the Dutch in turn also denied the economic and political greed of colonialism.

The historiographical differences and memories between Indonesia and the Netherlands regarding the Dutch colonial period in the Indonesian Archipelago are very real. Even if it is the same thing, that is, feeling like a victim. Indonesia always considers itself as being a victim throughout the colonial period, while the Netherlands also felt victimized when Indonesia proclaimed its independence. Even though there are fundamental differences between Indonesia and the Netherlands in interpreting this fact. For Indonesia, all the tragedies that occurred after Indonesia proclaimed its independence have a causal relationship with the long history of Dutch colonialism. Meanwhile, Dutch historiography denies this. Therefore, intellectually and culturally, both intelligence and wisdom are required simultaneously to repair and redress the issues of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia, in order to liberate both sides from long-standing resentment and the principle of blaming each other in the future.

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newspapers that still reported on the UN resolution of 1973 problematized its consequences. **260** One journalist condemned it as “cultural terrorism” and feared repatriation of several objects would set an undesired precedent (Jansen). Another pointed out that the Netherlands played an exemplary role in the world, returning important objects like the Prajñāpāramitā and archives to Indonesia. These were gestures of friendship and goodwill, the journalist stressed (Evenhuis), not of remorse or redress for the Dutch colonial past (Scott 194).

This old self-image of the Netherlands as a role model and moral guide in the world proved to be persistent in the Netherlands. Colonialism as a legal system of control with racial inequalities and economic, social, and cultural exploitation and destruction, and thus the legitimacy of the existence of the objects acquired in this period in Dutch museum collections, was not questioned at all in newspapers or policy documents. On the contrary: one journalist claimed that, after the colonial era, the smuggling, robbery, and plunder of cultural heritage occurred in the now independent former colonies. With this, the journalist highlighted the “bad behavior” of the former colonies and implicitly underlined the “correctness” of the Dutch concern for the colony’s culture in the past (Lockfeer).

Journalist and Dutch historian Ewald Vanvugt seems to be the only one who drew conclusions from the Washington Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art (1998), in which nations agreed on resolving issues around confiscated art during the Nazi period, when it came to the issue of colonial heritage. He asked for the return of Indonesian objects by pleading for the application of the Washington Principles on colonial cultural heritage. He called it “cultural *Wiedergutmachung*” thereby brushing aside the Dutch self-image of repatriation of objects as gestures of goodwill and friendship and stressing the need for compensation for the consequences of Dutch colonialism, in which the presence of Indonesia’s heritage in the Netherlands was, in his view, one of many injustices.

However, for most Dutch museum professionals and scholars, talking about the return of artifacts was not about restoration of the (continuing effects of the) injustice of colonialism itself, but solely about the legality of the artifacts. For Pieter ter Keurs, curator and involved in an important exhibition in 2005 on Indonesian cultural heritage in the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, the objects on display were legitimate in Dutch museum collections. “Looking back, you can’t just make a moral judgement like that”, he claimed (Steenbergen). Several journalists concluded from the exhibition that talks about Indonesian cultural heritage were no longer centering on repatriation, as they had for over the past 35 years, but finally moved away from such “legal matters” to a “joint investigation into a shared past” (Steenbergen; Van den Boogaard).

Repatriation thus seems to be qualified by those in power, like the Dutch curators of the objects at issue, as not only legally but also morally illegitimate: the consequence of an unjust moral condemnation of the past and rejection of Western ideas on proper heritage conservation. In this view, colonialism and its uprooted heritage did not need be repaired through repatriation; examining a shared past was sufficient, and even better.

## A New Age? 2005–present

This Dutch conviction of repatriation being “no longer” an issue changed after the first decade of this century. The debate on the repatriation of colonial heritage accelerated after French president

Macron's speech on the repatriation of African objects in 2017 and the resulting Savoy-Sarr report in 2018. The debates, however, showed and still show little awareness of its deep-rooted colonial structures (Busseler with Groof). In the Netherlands, but also in other countries like Belgium (as scholars like Eline Mestdagh, Lies Busselen, and Matthias Groof have been pointing out), the debate on repatriation continued along the same lines as it had for decades, stressing financial assistance to former colonies, legal issues, social and cultural cooperation, and Western countries being in control of the debates as well as the repatriation process (Ardiyansyah 179). **261**

In the Netherlands, in response to the Savoy-Sarr report and reports elsewhere in Europe, an advisory report appeared on the policy framework for colonial collections. This report, under the chairmanship of jurist Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You, speaks of the historical injustice done to former colonies, but links this, and thus possible repatriation, to involuntary loss of possession (Adviescommissie Nationaal Beleidskader Koloniale Collecties 6). Other objects should be able to be returned if they represent "a special cultural, historical or religious interest", but in that case the report advises the interests in repatriation must be weighed against other relevant interests (Adviescommissie Nationaal Beleidskader Koloniale Collecties 6-7).

This means that the report actually starts from the premise that the legal status of Dutch ownership of the objects is unproblematic (Veraart). A premise that is confirmed by the statement in the report that the approach to repatriation requests is not so much a legal as an ethical issue. Thus, the report does not morally and legally problematize colonialism as such, nor does it acknowledge the deep-rooted injustices intrinsic to it. It just builds on Western conceptions of heritage and convictions of rescuing, preserving, and conservation (Adviescommissie Nationaal Beleidskader Koloniale Collecties 62, 64).

Moreover, the Gonçalves report discusses only objects in Dutch state ownership (and not those held privately or by societies), once again placing the decision of repatriation in the hands of the former colonizer. And, like more than 70 years before, the latest report emphasizes the return to the nation-state. Although it is recognized that "communities to whom these objects belong" must also "benefit" from their return, the actual exchange takes place between nation-states and not between individuals (Adviescommissie Nationaal Beleidskader Koloniale Collecties 5).

Because these countries are asking for it themselves, improving the museum infrastructure, particularly in the case of Suriname, and conducting joint provenance research, in the case of Indonesia, there remain powerful spearheads in the Gonçalves report and ensuing discussions (Adviescommissie Nationaal Beleidskader Koloniale Collecties 5). Also, the most vocal voices in the Dutch repatriation debate and the people conducting the provenance research are still Dutch museum professionals and scholars like myself. Surinamese, Caribbean, or Indonesian partners are heard, but continue to play second fiddle.

As we have seen in the historical discourse analysis on the repatriation of Indonesian objects, all these principles echo arguments that have been formulated by Dutch policymakers since the 1950s. It also continues to confirm and maintain the unequal historical power relations, Dutch paternalism, and the continuance of legal arguments to deny claims and convert repatriation to a "paternalistic act of charity" (Veraart 5).

Historian Eline Mestdagh considers repatriation as a ritual performance: a practice that performatively marks a transition from an old situation, namely one of injustice, to a new situation in which historical injustice is restored as much as possible (Mestdagh). For the performance to succeed, however, it is necessary to understand and acknowledge that the historical injustice of colonialism has lasting sociopolitical and legal effects in the present, and thus also in the decades-old debates on repatriation of objects and the Western conceptualization of heritage.

This requires us to recognize that repair as a return to the old, precolonial situation is never possible until we put coloniality behind us, if that is ever at all possible. If that happens, repatriation can be a “a remedial legal action”, at once symbolic and able to create trust and hope in a shared sense of responsibility and values (Zótkoś 1; Urban Walker 28). If none of this is recognized and considered, repatriation can only lead to the maintaining or even strengthening of coloniality. Mestdagh warns, for example, that repatriation can also lead to complacency on the part of governments, as they may feel that the past has been dealt with and they can start again with a clean slate. In that case, repatriation casts a veil over structural and contemporary injustices (Mestdagh; Schütze). Legal philosopher Wouter Veraart points to the fact that a legal solution has to be offered, “in order to make progress” (Veraart 7). Otherwise, repatriation remains an act of paternalistic charity and an affirmation of Dutch coloniality—as it has been for over 70 years.

We have to understand that repatriation, especially if only a small part of all colonial heritage is eligible for repatriation (because current restitution policies focus only on heritage in institutions and not in private hands), is just one aspect of a complex set of issues. A set of issues that is deeply rooted in a Dutch colonial cultural archive, including a Western conceptualization of heritage and legal thinking that continues to perpetuate coloniality to this day. As long as these aspects are not recognized and criticized as being legacies of a colonial past and morally unjust, and the law is not changed, I believe the historical injustices of colonialism and its unequal cultural-political and legal power relations and paternalism will remain. In the absence of material witnesses to the colonial past and their advocates when repatriation has taken place, these injustices may even be reinforced.

Perhaps it makes sense to start from artist Kader Attia’s understanding of repair: he sees it not as a return to the loss of original status or the “undoing” of injustice and traumas, but as a cultural strategy, a counter-reaction, in which the fracture and transformation of an object are recognized and “honored”. The wounds and injuries inflicted by history cannot be cured and are, in his view, a mark of time and history that has to be acknowledged and rethought in the present (Twitchin). Only through a consideration of worldviews like that of Attia and a critical engagement of Dutch coloniality can repatriation as a means of repair and redress of colonial injustice be achieved.

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Disinfected,  
photographed,  
classified





The Museum  
in Reverse:  
Luke Willis  
Thompson at the  
Weltkulturen  
Museum

BY CLÉMENTINE DELISS

ABSTRACT: In her essay, Deliss analyses an artwork by indigenous Fijian/New Zealand artist Luke Willis Thompson in which he turns around the restitution of human remains held in ethnographic museums into a discussion on contemporary practices of repatriation performed under the radar of contemporary civic society. Deliss interviews Luke Willis Thompson and asks him to reconsider his artwork ten years later. The essay opens up debates on artistic interventions and the remediation of the colonial past providing an alternative political and ethical approach to restitution.

**A**

s a curator and cultural historian, I am interested in the possibilities raised by the redesign of museums, particularly those that were established under the cultural politics of colonialism. Museums are civic spaces that, together with universities and art colleges, perform an important educational role. But how can one make their vast collections of historical artifacts active while the world is becoming increasingly virtual? Can one reorganize the exhibition rooms of a museum with mobile workspaces for researchers and students and bring collections into the venue's central space, filling it with artifacts, archives, documents, and the necessary technology to analyze these materials? Are we perhaps at a moment when the conflation of exhibitions and new research is possible once again, as it was during the time of Aby Warburg or Carl Einstein? For Pontus Hultén, the curatorial brain behind the planning of the Centre George Pompidou in Paris, a collection was not a shelter into which to retreat, but a source of energy for the curator and the visitor. These considerations formed the basis for my direction of an ethnographic museum, the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, which I ran between 2010 and 2015. The aim was to encourage experimentation inside the museum by developing dialogues with artists, writers, and historians from the outside.

*"It is not the 'factual' interconnection of 'things', but rather the conceptual interconnection of problems, which forms the basis for zones of inquiry. A new 'science' emerges where new problems are pursued by new methods and truths are thereby discerned which open up significant standpoints"*

(MAX WEBER, 1904).

Established in European cities between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries, ethnographic museums followed a largely evolutionist and comparative paradigm. Worlds were inserted into an encyclopedic framework that legitimized extensive collecting expeditions aimed at removing, in serial replication, a wide range of artifacts and ritual objects originating from cultures deemed to be in the process of dying out. Back at base, everything was locked up in inhospitable storage units, disinfected, photographed, classified, and conferred the aura of an authentic, unadulterated

cultural testimonial of the Other. Anthropology's intrinsic connection to colonial governance and industrial exploitation was peppered with contradictory affect for Indigenous peoples ranging from pity to persecution, and from admiration to mourning. Lothar Baumgarten's photographs and art installations from the 1980s, often produced in dialogue with anthropologist Michael Oppitz, point to these complementary expressions of exoticism and racism. In the recently published book *Decolonize Museums*, Shimrit Lee argues for the abolition of museums that, like monuments, can no longer justify their presence in civic society. She proposes dismantling these edifices of imperialism and advocates a position that in its rhetoric refutes any cosmetic rearrangements. Indeed, conceptually, the "ethnographicmuseum" can no longer exist without perpetrating the discursive underpinnings of its colonialist and racist origins. **270**

As part of their genesis, so-called "ethnographic museums" aimed to acquire every aspect of the lives of other cultures. Depots contained the contents of entire kitchens, living rooms, armories, wardrobes, as well as technologies of sailing, hunting, fishing, and building, with architectural elements ranging from roof structures to stilts, poles, matting, and much more. This was museological anthropophagy: the total appropriation and consumption of the ingenuity of colonized people. Over time, the greed that once engendered these large-scale acquisition strategies gradually petered out, only to be substituted by protocols of conservation. Policies and guidelines implemented by custodians and conservators would aim to reduce access to the multitude of plundered goods. The keeper held the keys, determining the route that every visitor took through the stores and keeping human contact and public visibility to a minimum. Museum staff devised exhibitions that would appeal to the local public, presenting only the smallest percentage of the collection, a synecdoche capable of representing the whole wide world.

More recently, museum anthropology has shifted its focus onto the politics of restitution. What counts today is the transaction of distinct iconic regalia or human remains that can be negotiated between European governments and countries of origin. In the somewhat cynical words of Tristram Hunt, director of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, restitution is a necessary act of "disposal", as if to continue acquiring one needs to thin out a collection from time to time.<sup>1</sup> With restitution comes a wave of newly instituted and well-funded provenance studies that work to resuscitate the foundational logic and moribund expertise of the ethnographic museum, all the while atomizing public attention onto a handful of masterpiece works. Shiny new universal museums with high-expenditure architecture and consumer-friendly displays are built in Berlin, or in London's Docklands. Even open storage has come back into fashion, producing institutional pride and public gloating at the volumes of similar objects owned by the museum, ordered into categories originating from the colonial period. For many visitors, this is what the museum should offer: the "wow effect" of a macrocosm of difference.

When I arrived at the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt in 2010, I knew that the institution could never heal from within. It felt ravaged and compromised by anachronistic curatorial models and little, if any, new self-critical research was being undertaken. I thought about the dilemma facing these mountains of historical artifacts that had been brought together to epitomize a universalist understanding of the world. To make them accessible for the purposes of *post-ethnographic* inquiry would require another procedure, potentially iconoclastic toward the discipline and aesthetics of anthropology. I decided to turn down offers for traveling exhibitions and make the collection central to all future work in the museum. Collection-centric inquiry would generate exhibitions





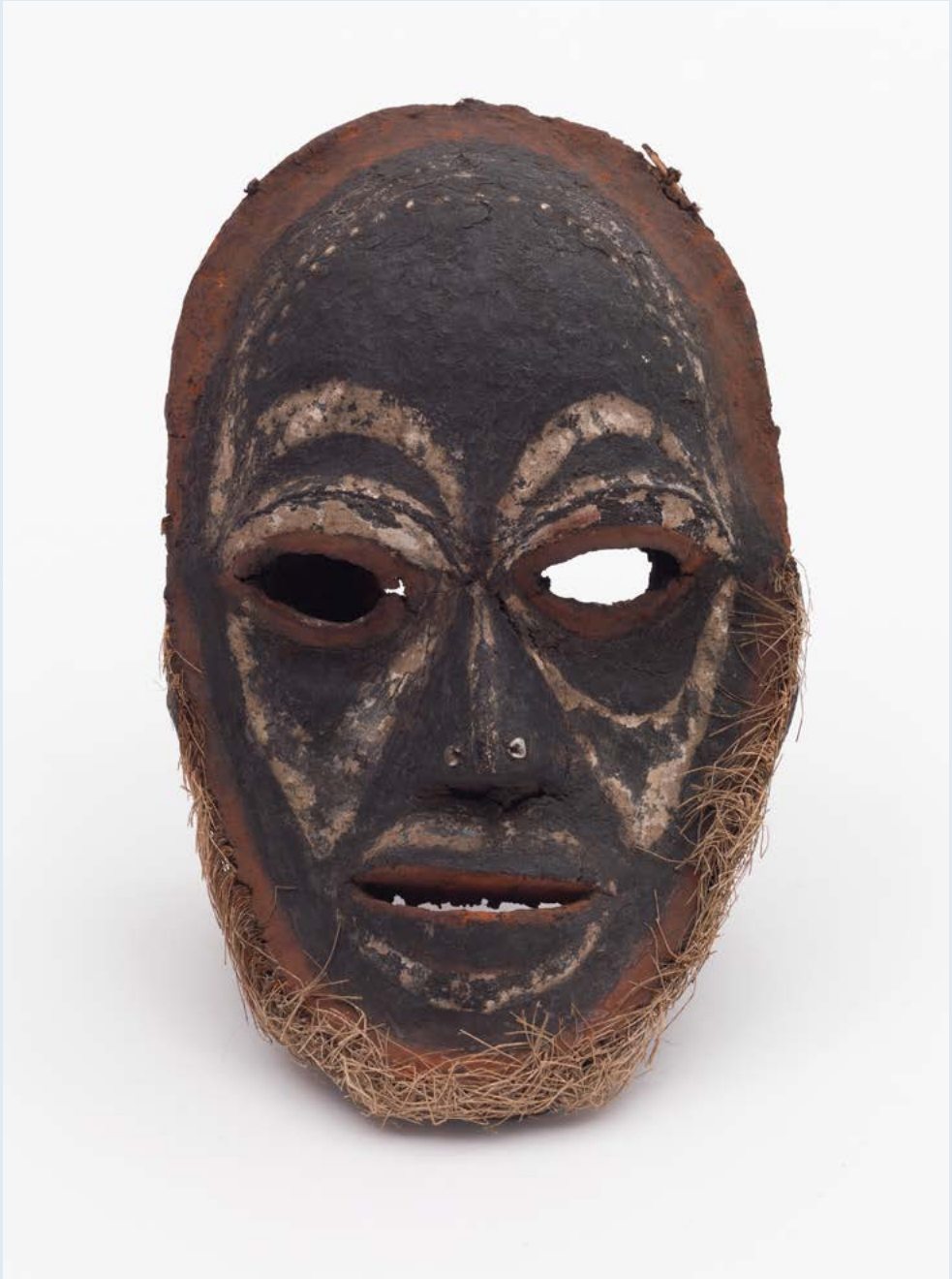
**Figure 1**

Installation *Luke Willis Thompson - Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)*, 2014-2015 at Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt, (Photograph by Wolfgang Günzel)



**Figure 2**

Shackles and skull mask from the installation *Luke Willis Thompson - Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)*, 2014-2015 at Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt, (Photograph by Wolfgang Günzel)



**Figure 3**

Front of skull mask (*Lorr*) collected by Dr. Carl Gerlach, 1879  
New Britain, Papua New Guinea, Collection Weltkulturen  
Museum Frankfurt, (Photograph by Wolfgang Günzel)



**Figure 4**

Back of skull mask (*Lorr*) collected by Dr. Carl Gerlach, 1879  
New Britain, Papua New Guinea, Collection Weltkulturen  
Museum Frankfurt, (Photograph by Wolfgang Günzel)

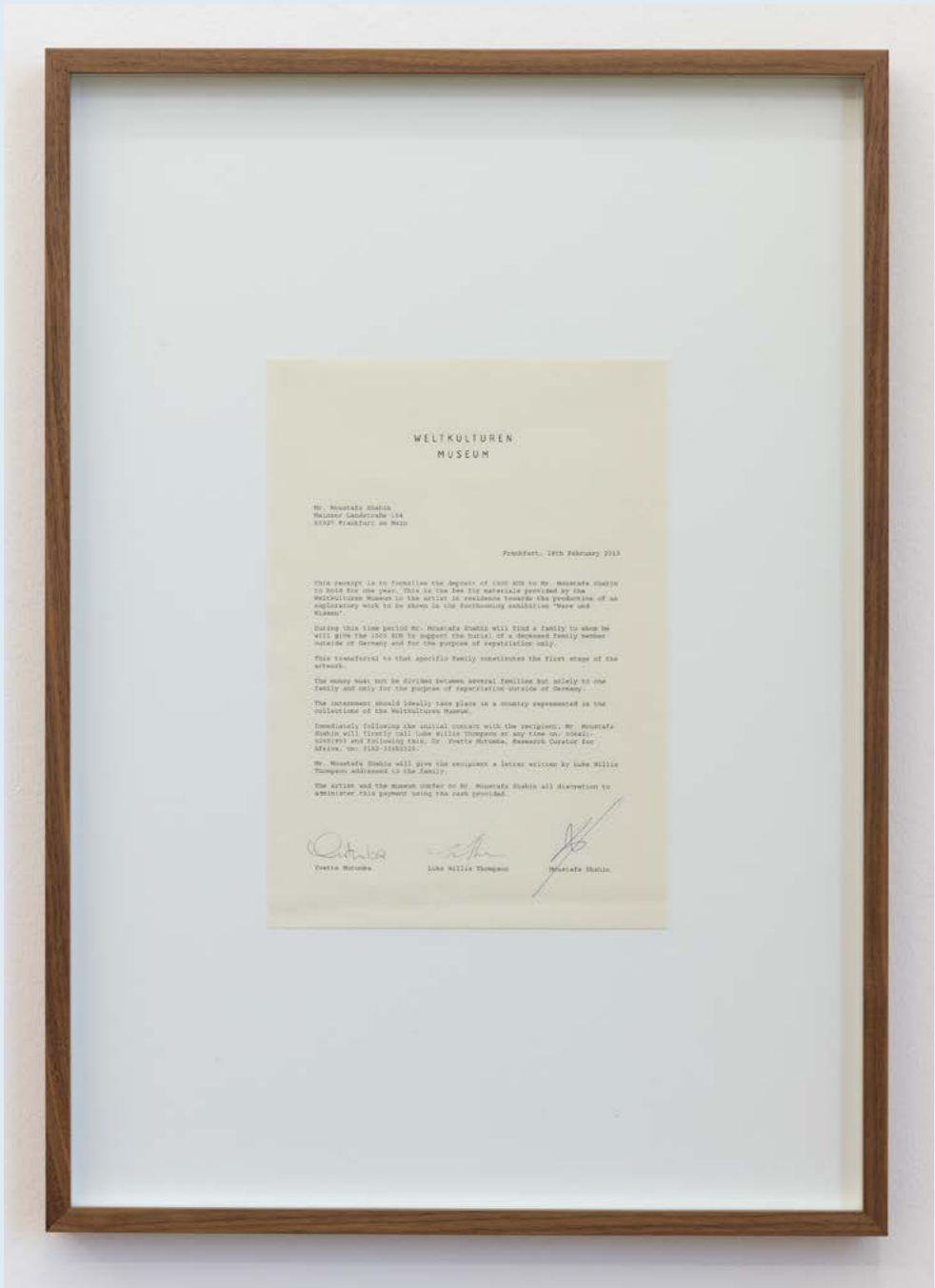
and public programming, all to be devised on-site through the input of guest artists and cultural practitioners. Each resident in the museum had the freedom to build incongruent assemblages from the nearing 70,000 artifacts in the stores. Inevitably, such constellations frustrated the implementation of disciplinary taxonomies and academic forms of contextualization. With this methodology of *transgressive adjacency*, I sought to encourage transversal practices of interpretation that intersected with the global routes of people whose urban experience was one of multiple, contiguous, and temporary communities. The agency of the artist as a *remediator*, or *entre-pologiste*, would help to reconfigure relations between the inner worlds of this controversial museum, bound in time warps and stasis, and the outer worlds of today's decolonial imperative and geopolitical shifts. **274**

A decade later, in 2022, the modus operandi of *remediation*, translated from Paul Rabinow's work on bioethics, continues to prove relevant to the combined procedures of healing and signifying (Deliss and Keck). Following Rabinow, to remediate is to seek to correct a deficient situation by adopting media capable of generating new, emergent meanings in contradistinction to those produced and canonized by earlier colonial anthropology. In his words, "the exercise is how to present historical elements in a contemporary *assemblage* such that new visibilities and sayable things become actual, inducing motion and affect". At the Weltkulturen Museum, the inchoate, transgressive adjacency produced by these new assemblages appeared to contravene custodial norms while offering a conduit into the space of the contemporary. The artifact could be seen as relevant yet incomplete, generative yet unfinished, and thus similar to a *prototype*.<sup>2</sup> In the following pages, I reassess the operational methodology of remediation by returning to one specific case study at the Weltkulturen Museum: the intervention of Indigenous artist Luke Willis Thompson and his *Museum in Reverse*.

Born in 1988, Luke Willis Thompson is of Fijian and New Zealander heritage. His professional trajectory is marked by the reception of international art prizes for a body of work that needles entrenched presuppositions on colonialism, identity, migration, and law.<sup>3</sup> Thompson investigates ritualized practices of negotiation and the trajectories of ancestral affiliation, centering much of his work on the commemoration of migrant workers to the Pacific. He uses analogue photography and celluloid film to both enhance and limit representation, taking something away in order to dislodge the veracity of the document.

Having seen his work in Auckland, I invited Thompson to a residency at the museum in January 2013. As with all other guests, he was provided with a large, renovated one-bedroom apartment under the roof of the 19th-century villa that looks onto Frankfurt's banking district. On the floor below was his studio, additional workshop areas, and the *Green Room*, a gallery used by art students from the Städelschule nearby. The heart of the operation, the laboratory, took over most of the ground floor and was next to a wood-paneled salon and large, well-equipped kitchen. In the basement was the photographic archive with over 100,000 images and films. Thompson, like all guest artists and researchers, received a personal fee of 4,000 euros and a modest material budget of 1,500 euros. Not only did he live in the museum but he also had 24-hour access to the laboratory.

On arrival, Thompson visited the concrete bunker where the museum's collection was housed. He selected various objects that were duly packed up, insured, and transported to the villa's inhouse laboratory. To prepare his work in the lab, he asked the museum's research curators to find "anything



**Figure 5**

Letter Dr. Moustafa Shahin, 2013, Collection Weltkulturen  
Museum Frankfurt (Photograph by Wolfgang Günzel)

made from bone; anything used in sleeping; anything used in marking monuments, graves or events; anything that represents a person or a profession; any object that helps a body negotiate space; conversely any object that holds a body, binds it and shackles it; and any object that rejects trauma as a point of contact. In short, objects that have been in close proximity to a human body" (Deliss 90). 276

His selection and subsequent assemblages contained artifacts from Melanesia, West Africa, and North and South America. Most significantly, he requested a headdress made from a human skull, an artifact which today would be high on the list of urgent repatriation. For a period in the mornings and evenings, Thompson sat down and stared at his grouping. In particular, he gazed at the decorated skull mask, or *Lorr*, from New Britain, an island belonging to the Bismarck Archipelago off Papua New Guinea. After three weeks, he handed me a one-page concept:

*My proposal to the exhibition Gift, Legacy, Acquisition, Exchange,<sup>4</sup> is to use my artist's fee to aid a family wishing to repatriate the body of a deceased member from Germany. The funding of this will ask for no direct reciprocity from the family, however, the artwork will consist of a negotiation for documentation. The work is a conceptual response to the history of the museum and its shifting perceptions toward dislocation and relocation. The work is to operate with a question, if the existence of peoples was to be material evidenced through historical ethnography, how can immaterial histories constitute (post, contemporary) ethnography today?*

*Realization of the project: Research will need to be made into pre-existing strategies for how communities negotiate the process of internment across national lines. The work will not seek to alter these strategies but to look at the various forms this takes and to document this where appropriate. This research will place us in connection with how families resource this process, i.e., what financial aid is made available, or how and where self-resourcing is taking place. Where possible it may be useful to work with members of NGOs or community leaders. There are ethical problems with the work, however, as a member of a source community who deals intimately with such problems, there are also immense benefits for a gift of this kind. The most care will need to be taken around the offer of this funding, no application process would be appropriate, and the simple selection of a family could be equally offensive.*

*Outcome for gallery: The final outcome for the exhibition would be a collection of any documentation installed in the space in a minimal way, possibly consisting of readymade documents, images or moving image. The work would be accompanied by a short text explaining the gesture. All documentation would be installed with one artistic requirement, to be positioned on a wall on the axis toward Mecca, if compatible with the belief system of the family.<sup>5</sup>*

The work of the museum involved finding a broker, who could pass on the artist's gift. With Yvette Mutumba, by then Research Curator for Africa, Thompson identified an imam who had created the



first English-speaking Mosque in Frankfurt and now ran an organization dedicated to helping Muslim communities. After discussing the project at length, the imam agreed to act as the interlocutor between the artist, the museum, and a specific family who would receive the money. Thompson explains, "I believe his willingness came from the fact that his 22-year-old son passed away two months earlier. His son was a German citizen, and for a whole host of reasons the young man had to be buried in Frankfurt against the wish of his family to bring him back to Egypt". The broker then instigated an essential shift in the artwork. He felt that asking the family for documentation of the deceased, as requested by the artist, might create difficulties around their acceptance of the donation. His suggestion was to separate whatever occurs in the gallery from whatever happens in the real world. "So, we had an artwork that took on a bifurcation: the body and the money traveled in one direction, whereas objects that function as memorials traveled in another: toward the museum" (Thompson, 231).

Later, when Thompson's laboratory work was exhibited, it consisted of a certificate from the museum authorizing the imam to receive the gift on behalf of an anonymous person, a vitrine with the skull mask, slave shackles, and a chain made from bone. On the wall hung a series of amateur snapshots of the imam's deceased son. Rather than ideologize the restitution of human remains, the artist had pointed to the here and now of dying in a city as international as Frankfurt. He demonstrated the complexity of practices performed below the radar of mainstream cultural institutions, pointing to current procedures that combine economic, religious, and ethical imperatives. His work critiqued the assumptions promoted by local politicians that the world cultures museum had the wherewithal to address marginalized communities either historical or contemporary. In this manner, Thompson formulated a "museum in reverse" built on dissemination and dispersal, on giving away rather than accumulating.

Executed ten years ago, Thompson's work at the Weltkulturen Museum still resonates with unanswered questions around the status of the ethnographic museum. At the time, he described the museum's collection as a mass of "objects in crisis that have witnessed the humiliation of ethnography".<sup>6</sup> To reconsider his intervention and the methodology of remediation, Thompson and I met during his visit to Berlin in the summer of 2022. In the following conversation he responds to his initial concept and fine-tunes questions surrounding restitution politics and the repatriation of human remains.



# This article continues as an interview between Clémentine Deliss and Luke Willis Thompson

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: How would you describe what you did at the museum ten years ago?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: I remember that you had not selected me on the grounds of ethnicity or cultural identity, but on the basis of an artwork I had made.<sup>7</sup> As an Indigenous person who thinks about the matrix of identity, that was unexpected. I continue to think about how exciting it was to be invited to the museum with the radical open plan that you presented to me. But also, to be somewhat incognito, culturally speaking.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: While you originate from Fiji, you didn't look at only Fijian works.

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: Yes, that's right. I don't recall finding any Fijian objects in the collection that interested me. So, I let artistic freedom and desire guide my selection. I remember feeling that there might be a benefit in setting up a constellation of objects that would be uncomfortable to the curators at the museum, potentially exposing its past as an institution.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: When you selected the *Lorr* skull mask from New Britain, were you consciously thinking of human remains and of restitution?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: I didn't have the restitution argument in mind then, but the object clearly posed ethical questions by its sheer presence in the collection. There was very scant information on the mask. We knew when it was collected and by whom, and that it came from New Britain in Papua New

Guinea. But I never found out anything meaningful about it. I was interested to learn about the social function of the mask, as it reminded me of a Fijian object called an *ulumate*, a wig made from shaving the head of a person during mourning so that it can be worn by another during their own grieving process.

I'd look at the skull mask in the evening and morning, just attending to it. It began and ended my day. I came to see it as inherently desmological (*desmos* is the Greek word for nodes and bonds). I connected the logic of the mask to its presence in the museum.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: The remarkable aspect of the *Lorr* mask is that to wear it, you place your own head into another person's skull and bite on a stick attached to the jaw joints. Did you show it to other people?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: I did not show it to anyone else. I put it on my skin but not in my mouth. I tried to look through the eyes.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: You decided not to push to have the *Lorr* skull returned to New Britain, but instead to take on a more contemporary understanding of repatriation and find a living agent. At which point did you get the idea to switch the issue of restitution from an historical object to a recently deceased person? Were you interested in the movement of corpses?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: There is a Pacific practice whereby you dig up the bones of a loved one, wash them in the ocean, and rub them in coconut oil before re-burying them. I believe it takes place about ten years after a death. I began to think about my own father who had passed away five years earlier. I wondered whether we might exhume him and perform this practice. I would receive the knowledge by undertaking and learning from this act, and we would give the museum a wrapped bone.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: From my position as museum director, it was interesting to see how you managed to develop a focused, legitimate reason to engage with different communities in Frankfurt. Do you think that the aim of an artwork like the one you produced is to bring communities into ethnographic museums that otherwise don't visit them?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: I'm against the principle of outreach. It is more relevant to de-territorialize the museum in Frankfurt by taking it to different sites within the city.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: Why was it so difficult to find a deceased person? People die and are born every day of the week. Was this activity of repatriation considered illicit?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: I didn't want our contact with a potential recipient to cause any further distress to them. I knew that we needed a broker, who could make the smooth transfer of money take place. I began by going through a list of state and NGO social workers. I hoped they would pass me on to other people with deeper community ties. I also went to airlines. For example, if you fly to Pakistan on an adult ticket, you can take a body with you in the hold.

In retrospect, the money that the museum was able to give away was relatively small. If it had been more, say 5,000 euros instead of 1,500 euros, then the different community stakeholders I met might have put in the extra work to find a recipient. It was always made clear to them that this was not an act of charity but a more complex exchange. I saw myself as an agent of this decolonizing, experimental museum. I wanted to embrace your hypothesis of the prototype as unfinished, and harder to pass on and process. The narrative, or story of this transaction, would become the property of the museum and constituted my artwork.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: Since you mention the term prototype, can you tell me what it means for you? Is it the skull?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: No. I think the prototype is the act of meeting. The prototype is going to these different persons and communicating that "we are going to do this strange act, and would you like to be a part of it?" Making this work was the most radical shift in my education as an artist. We developed a model for bringing in Indigenous practices into the museum. We didn't use those terms, but it was about having a *speaking practice*, a practice for which the meeting becomes the prototype and the artwork.

Through the project, I established a method for my works to develop by staging a particular type of conversation. Mr. Shahin, the broker we identified in the end, interrogated me thoroughly about the project's intention. I learnt a lot about who he was, his work, and how he saw his community. We shared poignant stories from our own lives of failures in immigrant repatriation. We built a lot of mutual respect and reciprocity between us. Even more critically, we began to recognize our mutual implications in the project. There was a muddling of ownership. The artwork, as a piece of intellectual property, was mine, but the action in the world was his. This is what I mean by a method of Indigeneity. There was exchange but there wasn't extraction. That's where the reverse comes in, as in the *reverse museum*: a collection formed through dispersion. We gave something away. It was the first time that I worked with people who were strangers. I have no idea what Mr. Shahin actually did with the money, the artwork, but it does not matter. I know he will have distributed it somehow.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: The remediation process you engineered was not about sending the

skull home. To heal the situation—hence the remedy in remediation—you were able to transfer the inquiry onto another plane, another medium. Do you think that process of remediation is convincing? Or do you feel that issues of restitution, of returning objects, is the essential purpose of these museums today?

CLÉMENTINE DELISS: A lot of the arguments against restitution center on whom one is sending the collection to, and how to ascertain whether it will be cared for or manipulated for political gains, adopting the identity of the past, and recreating cultural heritage. The question of the *remediator*, which is how I see an artist like yourself, is still hard to pinpoint. If you are going to hand

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# Ritualized practices of negotiation

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: I don't think transferring the inquiry onto another plane forecloses the actual repatriation of the mask. I hope it assists it. I'm not sure I want to take more of a stand on the question of restitution than that. Not because I'm afraid of the politics in any way, but because my perspective is still unfixed. I often hear Pacific people speak of objects such as that mask as their ancestor who needs to come home for a proper burial. That is hard to deprioritize. However, I'm currently convinced that a necessary step exists prior to the question of restitution. That is, to give true political power to the people who are concerned. As a museum, I don't believe you automatically have the right to send objects from your collection back to their source. Because what actually needs to be returned can't be sent back! Here we are talking about the reconstruction of philosophies and cosmogonies that these objects were once a part of.

over power to a group of people, it's not their ethnicity that is central. It has to be their desire, their sensitivity, their engagement, their proposals. How do you know who your interlocutor is?

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON: My time in the art world has made me anti-philanthropy. Anti-philanthropy advances the idea that it is healthier to run the risk that money is lost, wasted, or even stolen than to pursue paternalistic financial relations across nations. I'm not saying a museum should be willfully naïve about its restitution process, but the potential for the loss or destruction of an object simply does not justify stasis in Europe. To wait for the perfect museological condition cannot be the model for every return. That would enforce a capitalist precondition to repatriation, demanding that a people or a nation have the requisite amount of power and wealth.

Either the museum stays out of the lives and afterlives of the people who were subjected



to its ideology and practices and for which restitution politics also plays a role, or it re-establishes subjecthood in civil society. This would require *metabolizing* – to use your terminology – the violence it performed and the unrepayable debt the museum owes to the peoples and nations from which it extracted so much. This process might begin to restore its right to speak and act as an institution. There may be descendants of former colonies, now diasporas, who wish to learn the traditional rites of their peoples and are willing to facilitate the movement of bodies, perhaps as agents of the museum. Why wouldn't a museum follow a culture to a site of death, migration, and healing? If a museum undertook a program to give 10,000 euros a year for repatriation, it too would have to look for interesting interlocutors to give the money away to. What the broker really does here is to protect their side of the equation.

## Conclusion

Working with collections necessarily addresses the “stuff of the body” (Merleau-Ponty) out of which the world is made. I wonder whether the currency of care work can be adopted within the museum? My commitment to this process is to push toward legislation for the right of access to colonial collections held in European museums. Only the right of access can generate a museum of the commons, and with it an equitable reassessment of historical collections while they are stored in Europe. New institutions, wrote Ivan Illich in 1970, “should be channels to which the learner would have access without credentials or pedigrees—public spaces in which peers and elders outside of his [sic] immediate horizon would become available”. Today, a renewed engagement with archives takes the museum beyond its existing definition toward a more radical understanding of curatorial and educational urgency. It may lead to a

restive, unruly kind of institution, one in which new formulations are created through the clash of references, the friction between materials and economies, and the unforeseeable polyvalent relations that can be drawn between different elements.

The museum of the 21st century is a museum of movement and change, but above all, it negotiates this new understanding through an intergenerational model. This dialogical constellation is both curative and adventurous. In the world today, there is value to be gained in listening to life histories, in making visible former human networks, and building new partnerships. Museums can fulfill vital functions for a range of friends, guests, students, and visitors whose time in the museum has no limit. The public is welcomed into a foyer of experience, sitting, reading, watching, and conversing with one another, in short, all those activities that were central to museums prior to 19th-century colonialism.



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## Notes

1. Dan Hicks writes: "In recent years, Hunt has produced a stream of articles variously arguing that 'for a museum like the V&A, to decolonize is to decontextualize,' that work towards restitution is merely 'identity politics' and that 'the cultural left' should stop regarding 'museums as reactionary vestiges of the colonial past with looted collections.'" But now, *The Times* reported, he is calling for a change to legislation so the United Kingdom's national museums would be "free to return looted colonial artefacts". And yet, tellingly the language used by Hunt in a BBC radio interview that morning was of "disposals" rather than restitution, repair, restorative justice, or what Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy called in their landmark restitution report "relational ethics". *Hyperallergic*, July 6<sup>th</sup> 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/745527/the-risks-that-lurk-in-europes-scramble-for-decolonization/> Last viewed July 18<sup>th</sup> 2022.
2. The prototype is a polysemic term that I continue to deploy. Here it constitutes both the historical object and new decolonial innovation indicating that its status and meanings are unfinished.
3. Luke Willis Thompson was born in Auckland, New Zealand, in 1988. He studied at Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland between 2006 and 2010, and at the Städelschule, Staatliche Hochschule für bildende Künste, Frankfurt am Main from 2013 to 2015. In 2014 he received the eminent Walters Prize, and in 2016 the highly rated Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Prize. He was a nominee for the Turner Prize in 2018. A selection of solo exhibitions includes *Kunsthalle Basel* (2018); *Luke Willis Thompson*, Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington (2018); *autoportrait*,

Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland (2017); *Luke Willis Thompson*, Chisenhale Gallery, London (2017); *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin (2016); *Misadventure*, Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Brisbane (2016); *Sucu Mate/ Born Dead*, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland (2016); and *nicht mehr, nicht minder als der Sugar*, Reisebürogalerie, Cologne (2015).

4. This was the working title of what later became *Foreign Exchange (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)*, 2014.
5. Concept drafted by resident artist Luke Willis Thompson, 2013.
6. Interview with Clémentine Deliss, January 2013, published in *Foreign Exchange*, 2014, *ibid.*
7. "inthisholeonthisislandwhereiam", Hopkinson Cundy, Auckland. For this exhibition, Thompson won the Walters Prize in 2014.

# Provocative intervention

BY NAAZIMA KAMARDEEN  
REPAIR AND REDRESS

The post-World War II era has witnessed some of the most fundamental challenges to our system of values and beliefs. That today there is a general proscription on the use of force in the settlement of disputes between states, or legal frameworks that would govern the right to invade and occupy another territory, or that the practice of slavery has been illegalized are a only few examples of how our thinking has changed. The rise of natural law jurisprudence has affirmed the necessity of ascertaining the moral content of law. Against this backdrop, laws and practices across different domains of life have evolved in a manner more consistent with a revised *rights framework*, which incorporates and accommodates this moral content of law. These changes, while far reaching, have, however, not been taken up in all aspects of life. Indeed, one area



that has lagged behind considerably is that related to cultural property taken during European colonial expansion and occupation in the 16th to 19th centuries.

The concept of *redress* is well established in international law and provides a means for past wrongs to be righted. This may be effected through restitution, which restores the status quo to the position prior to the wrongful act being committed. It may also be achieved through the payment of compensation. With regard to cultural property, even though international conventions have laid down the position that the improper outflow of cultural property is detrimental to the rights of a Home State, these conventions have been careful to exclude colonial cultural property from their purview. Therefore, while the rights framework has expanded to permit redress for historical injustice, it has excluded colonial cultural property from benefitting from such expansion.

One of the major factors supporting such exclusion may result from the establishment of the legal norms themselves, originating as they do from those very nations that are guilty of causing the outflow of colonial cultural property in the first place. A closer examination of the legal norms supporting the taking and retention of colonial cultural property reveals that these have been constructed and enforced by the perpetrators of this act. Subsequent custodians of

this property, also located in these former colonizing nations, have been reluctant to change the position as there is no perceived benefit for them.

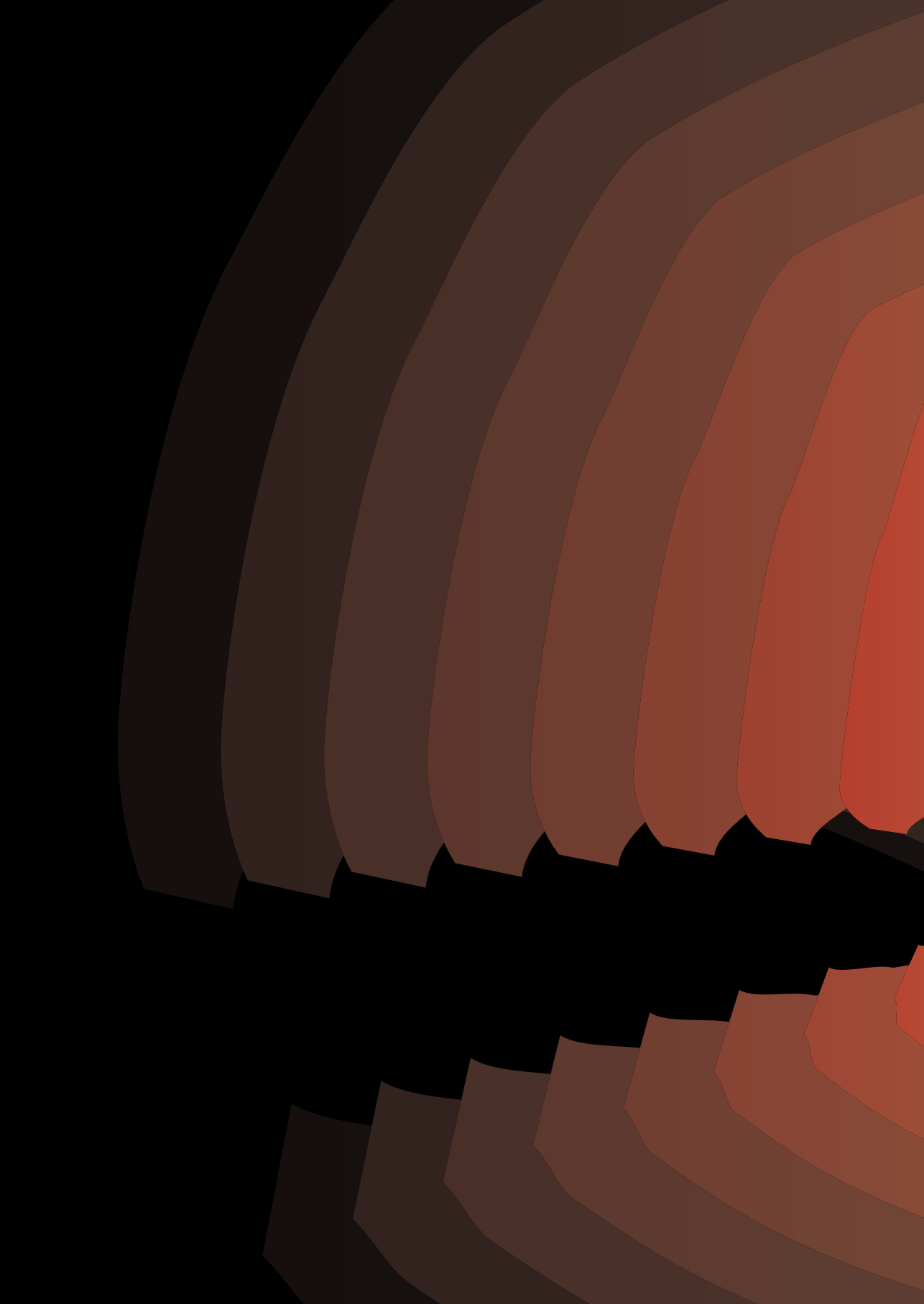
Another relevant factor, yet one that does not find easy expression, is the relationship between the custodians of this colonial cultural property and the people of the Home States who are asking for their return. The presumed superiority enforced by colonialism has seemingly left a lasting legacy of “white skin” entitlement, which brings with it a certain level of impunity and a lack of accountability or equity in dealings between the parties.

Recent encounters between these parties have not done much by way of allaying any of these fears. Attempts made by staff at a Dutch museum holding Sri Lankan colonial cultural property to collaborate with Sri Lankan researchers in doing extensive provenance research revealed the extent of the legacy of entitlement and mistrust. The researchers of the Home State approached the collaboration in the (mistaken) belief that restitution was in the cards; something the museum staff categorically denies on the basis that the right to make that decision was never theirs in the first place.

It must be understood that where the legal and social standards have changed, yet remain somewhat unchanged, good faith must play a vital role if the wrongs of the past are to be addressed, let alone repaired or redressed. The moral strength to stop

hiding behind a carefully constructed facade can only emerge from meaningful and honest interactions with those suffering from the pain of the past.

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# Concluding remarks

**T**he critical reflections by the authors included in this book add to the polyphonic academic discourse on the future of the Dutch colonial past. The choices made in terms of structure and form are part of this critical discourse too. As such, we conclude this book with two meta reflections. First, the essay by Susan Legêne focusses on the concept of provocations, the label given to the short interventions added to each chapter. This critical note is an appropriate final remark on text, as the book as a whole can be considered a provocation. Designer Raul Balai's words on his choices for form close out the book. He explains the rationale behind his choices for *The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past*, which are multimodally provocative in their own right.

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Overcome  
with  
laughter





# Provocation? Red-White-Blue: Integrating the Colonial Past in the Present

BY SUSANE LEGÈNE

ABSTRACT: Provocations in this volume are short opinionated interventions. According to the Dutch dictionary, however, a provocation is likely to cause anger, or to induce a violent reaction. This chapter starts from this understanding of the term. Playful provocations play with common values in order to test reactions. In our polarizing, or rather polarized world, however, provocations too often lead to 'real' violence, whereas even without physical violence, they can radiate violence through feelings of unsafety for those implied at the receiving end of the provocation. Focusing on the major provocation in the summer of 2022 of the Dutch national flag turned upside down by farmers all over the Dutch countryside, this chapter tries to relate environmental degradation in the Netherlands to the future of the colonial past in museums. How playful can museums contribute to an urgent dialogical transformation of common values in order to help solve this major controversy; would invoking the colonial past help?

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Provocation" is the label chosen in this volume for short, opinionated interventions. According to the Dutch dictionary, a provocation is likely to cause anger, or to induce a strong, even violent reaction. That is my understanding of the term, indeed. I am therefore not convinced that it is the right time to use provocation as a literary metaphor in this edited volume about the future of the colonial past. Raising questions while invoking common values is key for dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Provocations can be playful, toying with common values in order to test reactions. In our polarizing—or rather, polarized—world, however, provocations too often lead to "real" violence, whereas even without physical violence, they can radiate violence by making those implied to be at the receiving end of the provocation feel unsafe. In this contribution to *The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past*, a volume that originated in the dialogical process of the making of the exhibition *The Golden Coach* at the Amsterdam Museum in 2021, rather than writing a provocation myself, I try to come to terms with what provoked me the summer of 2022: the national flag of the Netherlands turned upside down all over the Dutch countryside. By inverting the Red-White-Blue, for months farmers nationwide expressed their discontent regarding governmental measures to drastically curb environmental degradation through limiting intensive animal husbandry in the Netherlands.

I will try to explain why this symbol of protest not only provoked but also implicated me, and made me think about a way out of the dilemma by drawing a relation between the environmental degradation caused by farmers in the Netherlands and the future of the Dutch colonial past in museums. Why

and how should museums answer this provocation, and how playfully can they contribute to an urgent dialogical transformation of common values in order to help solve this major controversy? Would invoking the colonial past help? In order to find answers, I start off with my initial, fragmented recollection of provocations, personal or in the public sphere in the Netherlands. **296**

## Provo

Playful were the still-legendary "Provos" in 1960s Amsterdam. The Provos embraced this term as their nickname<sup>2</sup> and played with the authorities by teasing the police who had been mobilized to prevent their "happenings", as they called their public performances. Offering currants to the police, for instance, was received as an offense and met with a truncheon charge.<sup>3</sup> Robert Jasper Grootveld was one of the outspoken Provos. His mysterious slogan, *Klaas komt* (Klaas will come), painted all over Amsterdam, was perhaps a reference to Sinterklaas, the *goedheiligman* (literally, good holy man; the figure of Sinterklaas is based on Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas)), the patron saint of the city who according to tradition arrives by steamship from Spain to the Netherlands each year around the beginning of December, riding a white horse and rewarding obedient children with presents while teasing the naughty ones.<sup>4</sup> Provocative as well were the Saturday evening ritual dances Grootveld organized starting in spring 1964 around *Het Lieverdje* (the dear rascal, beloved little one), a statue honoring the honest but mischievous working-class youngster of Amsterdam (for example, the protagonist in the Dutch film *Ciske de Rat*).<sup>5</sup> Grootveld, who was a nicotine addict, organized these anti-cancer "happenings" around this particular statue because it had been financed by a cigarette company. Dressed as a shaman, he mimicked a tribal dance while blowing out smoke and repeating a deep smokers' cough. White smoke was produced with self-made "nonviolent" smoke bombs.<sup>6</sup> I would argue that the performance echoed references to Karl May's *Winnetou*, or the Dutch series of books about "Eagle Eye" and "White Feather" by Jan and Paul Nowee, part of the cultural archive deemed unproblematic at the time.<sup>7</sup> His was an anti-capitalist provocation, challenging middle-class bourgeois consumer culture and the power of industrial capitalism. The events which took place at Wounded Knee in 1890 in the United States were hardly reported on in the Netherlands; the song about it not yet an international hit. The 1973 Wounded Knee Occupation would come later; only in 2022 did the Dutch publisher decide not to reprint *Winnetou* anymore.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the *Klaas komt* slogan that played with unspecified prophetic expectations of change and suggested a millenarist movement did not take issue with the racist stereotypes of Zwarte Piet, the helper of Sinterklaas, which would become the focus of the Kick Out Zwarte Piet movement that started in 2011. Yet Provo did criticize the colonial past; for instance, in their happenings at Van Heutsz monuments in Amsterdam and elsewhere that glorified this Lieutenant-General and Governor-General of the Netherlands East Indies because of what was regarded as his achievements in the Aceh War and the "pacification" of Indonesia under Dutch colonial rule.<sup>9</sup> However, on March 10, 1966, the playful provocations made headlines around the world after the arrival of another "Klaas", Claus van Amsberg, the husband of the future Queen Beatrix. On their wedding day, the Golden Coach, on its way to the Westerkerk for the solemnization of the marriage, was suddenly surrounded by white smoke. It was a protest against the monarchy and Claus, who had been member of the Hitler Youth and was enrolled, as a young conscript, in the German army during World War II.<sup>10</sup>

Provo disbanded in May 1967, when the provocations by some became too destructive in the eyes of others.<sup>11</sup> Provo and their sites of provocation, like the square with *Het Lieverdje* or the Van



Heutsz monument in Amsterdam (rebaptized the Monument Indië-Nederland in 2004),<sup>12</sup> **297** have become part of the living memory and history of Amsterdam. The Amsterdam Museum emphasized the playfulness of the Provos in its semi-permanent exhibition. Moreover, in 2015 the museum organized a special exhibition on Provo, framed within the context of 1960s flower power.<sup>13</sup> This was certainly a relevant context: make love, not war. An earlier exhibition, in 2008, on the sometimes turbulent relationship between Amsterdam and the House of Orange, had featured Provo in connection to the marriage of Princess Beatrix and Claus van Amsberg, including the smoke bomb. It was that exhibition that invited many in Dutch society to really look at the panels decorating the Golden Coach, the royal vehicle that had been a present from “the people” of Amsterdam to young Queen Wilhelmina in 1898 and would become the centerpiece of the 2021 exhibition in the same museum (and subsequently the rationale for this publication on museums and the future of the Dutch colonial past). The 2008 exhibition featured drawings and historical photographs of the making of the Golden Coach, and snapshots of how the royal family presented themselves in the coach to their subjects throughout its history. Through its spotlight on the gift, the Golden Coach itself, instead of its passengers, the exhibition made us, as museum visitors, aware of the (until that time) generally overlooked side panels showing colonial subjects paying homage to the Dutch Maiden on one side and allegorical figures of Peace, Education, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Commerce, Music, the Army, and more, all with European (Dutch, white) appearances, on the other.<sup>14</sup>

At the time when they were painted by Nicolaas van der Waay, around 1898, the side panels of the Golden Coach presented a true vision of empire and imperial (Victorian) ambition. When the smoke bomb was thrown in 1966, and a few decades later, on February 2, 2002, a paint bomb during the marriage of Prince Willem-Alexander and Máxima Zorreguieta, these were not acts against the decoration of the Golden Coach as such; rather, they were directed at the monarchy as an institution and the choice of spouse of the future heads of state. That the royal family publicly announced in 2022 that they would keep—for the time being and until consensus is reached in society—the Golden Coach in the Royal Stables instead of using it as a ceremonial vehicle, is arguably because of its current potential to “act” as a provocation. The state coach, which for more than a century was never regarded as being provocative as such, is now recognized as just that.

The Provos’ happenings in the 1960s, the visual and actual language they used, the acts they performed, challenged the common values with which they had been raised in the postwar Netherlands, while hardly taking notice of the immigrants who, by force or voluntarily, were immigrating in the wake of decolonization and as labor migrants.<sup>15</sup> For the Provos, decolonization and its implications for Dutch society was not an issue, whereas for many who today critique the Golden Coach because of its racist imperial connotation, the monarchy as such is not really the issue. The vehicle has become instrumental in a dialogue about common values in contemporary society, with other provocative dynamics at stake. The object makes present what seemed non-manifest in the self-confident references to distinction within the earlier notion of the imagined community provoked by the Provos.<sup>16</sup>

## Provocations and Performances

A site for provocation is not only offered by public spaces like the Van Heutsz monument or *Het Lieverdje* but also by the arts. Yet, even here, with all its potential for playfulness, things can easily

acquire a painful edge. I remember, for instance, that at a certain moment the Amsterdam theater group Dogtroep, famous for its "location theatre", had been invited to perform an "infiltration" at an exclusive conference and networking event for psychiatrists.<sup>17</sup> The actors developed a rather unsettling concept for the gathering, with each of them playing a specific unwelcome type of host or visitor. One of the actors (my late partner, Kiki [Henri] de Haas) decided to be a dog, acting out doglike behavior. It turned out that he was not the only one who transformed. The distinguished and learned people around him started to treat him like they would treat a dog, one of them even hurting him by stepping on his hand (paw) with his shoe in order to chase him away. While he remained an annoying dog, sniffing and barking, he was met with even more hostility. Afterward, when he shared what had happened, he was overcome with laughter; the provocation had achieved its effect. Still, the event also triggered his deep distrust of civilization and sociability, and confirmed his experiences of his Jewish family being persecuted during World War II, when, as a child of only six or seven, he was already aware that something terrible was happening. That evening, as an actor, he had provoked others, but it was not just a game; and, as happens with cultural archives, the provocation turned up several years later in his art. In one of his later paintings, a triptych, he depicted humans crawling on hands and feet, driven like sheep toward a burning furnace and, after the fire, reappearing as innocent babies blessed by a pope-like figure (Saint Nicholas again). The provocation had confirmed a childhood experience that dehumanization can happen suddenly and collectively, but it also evoked how society has a full repertoire to restore "innocence". In other works as well, perhaps implicitly referring to the *Klaas komt* years of Provo, De Haas also painted another theater of cruelty framed within the "Sinterklaas tradition".<sup>18</sup>

Another memory: aged eighteen at the time of my grandmother's funeral in 1973. I used to have an anti-Vietnam War button pinned on my overcoat, but that day I wore it hesitantly, wondering whether it was respectful to my grandmother at her funeral. I decided that it would be right to do so. The people in Vietnam were dying in an unjust war, which should stop, and everyone should at all times be aware of that—there is no pause from politics. My father was annoyed; in his eyes my button was a provocation. His youngest brother, my uncle Jaap, who was also the minister officiating at the church service, was supportive, however, with a casual remark of respect. In retrospect it was I myself, probably more than anyone else present, who was most aware of my button, trying to catch others' reactions to it. It was kind of a relief to take off my coat for the post-funeral social gathering with coffee with cake. By taking off the coat, I could relax the acute awareness of my own position.

That was different for artist Quinsy Gario. "Living in the Netherlands, I have been forced to be aware of my presence and the reactions to it", he writes. "My presence can create security, warmth, and privilege in certain situations, while in others be the focus of derision, exclusion, and mistreatment. There is an ebb and flow..."<sup>19</sup> In 2011, Black activists, among whom the artists Jerry Afrye and Quinsy Gario, wore shirts with the slogan "Zwarte Piet Is Racisme" (Zwarte Piet Is Racism) at a celebration of the arrival of Sinterklaas with his blackface helpers. Their act was not intended as a provocation, a happening or performance; it was not a game, and there was no option to stop by taking off the shirt. Theirs was a wake-up call by Black activists who intentionally broke a taboo in order to start a dialogue on the consequences of a common value of non-discrimination, forcing society to look from their perspective at the deep-rooted, racist Dutch tradition of blackface, in order to end it. "I became a public anti-racist killjoy", Gario writes.<sup>20</sup> After little more than a decade, they have succeeded in changing public opinion and the tradition as such among a majority of the Dutch population and the



authorities. But when these Black activists started their campaign in 2011, it was initially **299** regarded by many as a provocation that would despoil this “innocent” Dutch children’s tradition. The activists were met with critique as well as physical police violence and, in later years, with “pro-Zwarte Piet” counter-demonstrations. The violence which they encountered was at times quite traumatic. One example is the blockade of a highway in 2017 to prevent three buses with anti-Zwarte Piet activists from reaching the city of Dokkum in Friesland, where Sinterklaas and his blackface helpers would arrive with their steamship. (The “blockade Frisians”, as their nickname became, were put on trial and found guilty of blockading a highway, preventing a demonstration, and exerting force.)<sup>21</sup> Similarly, there was a violent attack on a gathering of activists in a neighborhood in The Hague on November 8, 2019, where anti-Zwarte Piet activists were assaulted with fireworks. The youngest attacker who was arrested afterward by the police was thirteen years old.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, by then the same police force was expected to protect those whom they had initially met with violence. But when rapper and poet Akwasi, in the flow of his rhetorically strong and at times also furious speech at the first Black Lives Matter demonstration at Amsterdam’s Dam Square on June 1, 2020, proclaimed that whenever he saw another blackface Zwarte Piet in the months leading up to Sinterklaas, he would smash them in the face, the media focused on this statement time and again. His words may have been a reaction to the violence the Black activists endured over the years (like Gario wrote: “I am a wounded storyteller”).<sup>23</sup> Akwasi was sued 44 times but not brought to court after he publicly distanced himself from his words, explaining that they had been metaphorical, with no intention of calling for real violence.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, it was not his art, not a poem,<sup>25</sup> no rap; it was not a painting depicting or a happening rehearsing a deepfelt experience of violence;<sup>26</sup> this was politics in polarized times.<sup>27</sup>

## Upside Down

Returning to the provocation that made me think about Provo and the deeper layers of frustration in society that cannot be solved by playful activism, at the time of writing this piece, the Red-White-Blue Dutch national flag flies upside down at farmhouses, along roads, and in villages close to where I am located in Friesland. Playing with the colors of the flag and with the orange of its pennant is a well-known and often playful expression by Dutch supporters of national sports teams, a way to provoke the opponent at international sporting events, combining face painting evocative of Native American traditions, orange-colored dresses or wigs, or Viking attributes. However, the farmers now turn these symbols against the national authorities: tractors block roads, torches are used to scare family members of government ministers, a police officer shoots at a sixteen-year-old boy (the son of a farmer who drove his tractor past police lines; he fortunately missed the boy), protesting farmers call the King a traitor of the nation while he visits an elder care home. The farmers are protesting proposed government policies aimed at curbing environmental degradation. It was their upside-down flag, ubiquitous across the countryside, which provoked me to relate to their cause. Despite my critique of nationalism, which, as I have now come to realize, does not make me immune to anti-national provocations with national symbols like the flag, I feel implicated. Implicated but not in solidarity.

I remember the Provo happenings, my late partner’s theatrics at a networking event, and wearing an anti-Vietnam War button at a funeral because I’m trying to come to terms with this massive campaign in which the flag is inverted. I don’t agree with the farmers’ response to the rigorous environmental measures that will force many to cease super-intensive animal husbandry, even

while I understand their worries and respect their right to protest. Still, I remain concerned **300** about what playing with the national flag in this way says about the possibility of nationalism running amok. Environmental problems and global warming are not limited to the Netherlands. If the outcome, after more protests and more negotiations, is that the farmers will wave their flags in the upright position again, then would that not mean that national short-term interest has won at the expense of others elsewhere, and of our next generations at large (future farmers not excluded)? Somehow the focus of the farmers' protests repeats but also challenges the provocations by the Provos, who themselves challenged and resisted the bourgeois values they regarded as no longer theirs in the 1960s, while also looking down on the farmers. In 2022, the upside-down national flag emphasizes in the farmers' rhetoric the distorted relation between the governmental elite affiliated with "The Hague", who look down on them, and the countryside whose responsibility it is to feed the nation. Whereas the Provos challenged the authorities by handing out currants, the farmers now do so by having a barbecue that blocks the highway. My problem is that they define the values for which they campaign as limited to Dutch politics, Dutch environmental calculations. Moreover, they ignore the major changes at stake that need *new* values within and beyond the borders of the Netherlands. One of those values, I would argue, should be an acknowledgement of the colonial dimension of environmental degradation at home. So what happens if their provocation is extended to a discussion about the meaning of the colonial past for sustainable agriculture? Compare it to the anti-Zwarte Piet movement: what they did was address anti-Black racism as a legacy of the colonial past while arguing for the need to co-define new common ground for an inclusive Dutch society today. This is at stake for the farmers as well. Can their symbol of the Blue-White-Red flag help to find those new values?

## Environmental Degradation as Colonial Legacy

At the new semi-permanent exhibition *Our Colonial Inheritance*, which opened in June 2022 at the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, four Dutch national flags are on display. One is a tiny drawing in a notebook of an Indonesian nationalist depicting the "flag incident", when a group of Indonesians improvised their national flag (Red-White) by tearing off the blue strip of the Dutch flag on September 19, 1945. The incident occurred when Dutch colonials lowered an Indonesian Red-White flag and replaced it with the Red-White-Blue of the Netherlands. This ignited a major revolt in Surabaya, during which thousands lost their lives.<sup>28</sup> Another Dutch flag on display is a "real" object. According to the donor, who gifted it in 2002, the flag was lowered for the very last time at the port of Tanjung Priok (Jakarta, Indonesia) in 1949, after the transfer of sovereignty. The third flag on display was hidden by a Dutch woman during her internment in Semarang during the Japanese occupation; the fourth was brought down at Jayapura in 1962, after the New York Agreement between the United Nations, United States, Indonesia, and the Netherlands established an interim rule by Indonesia in West New Guinea (today Papua) that would lead to the permanent inclusion of Papua in the Indonesian state.<sup>29</sup> The four flags in *Our Colonial Inheritance* thus symbolize four key moments of transfer of sovereignty. Their trajectories from Surabaya, Semarang, Tanjung Priok, and Jayapura to the museum in Amsterdam symbolize the shrinking of the territories of the Dutch flag; a shrinking that seems to continue outside of the museum, where the flag is now even turned upside down.<sup>30</sup> The four Red-White-Blue Dutch flags are almost casually on display, marking a political context of decolonization which today is accepted as a historical fact; no one will take offense that the flags ended up in a museum display. Somehow, in recent years, a certain majority consensus seems to

have emerged within Dutch society, backed by politics, along lines that frame colonialism as unjust, a wrongdoing of the past that needs historical understanding and apologies.<sup>31</sup> But this gradual change in values with respect to the colonial past has no links to the environmental struggle at the farmlands outside of the museum, or with the upside-down flags of today. **301**

In a probing way, environmental problems are on display at the Tropenmuseum. *Our Colonial Inheritance* shows environmental degradation as one of our colonial legacies, connected to past colonial appropriation of and control over natural resources and people, and the development of productive techniques and capacities. An impressive video installation shows the immense environmental destruction caused by gold mining, the oil industry, palm oil plantations, and more. This is shown in association with colonial histories of food, commodities, and raw material production—with sample museum objects referring to spices, coffee, tea, sugar, tobacco, ores, oils, rubber, quinine, etc. This exploitation of the Earth and its flora and fauna is a recurring theme in anti-capitalist critique; unrelated to colonialism, Provos in the 1960s were already questioning society's dependency on these consumer goods and the industrialization that preceded it (with an elitist critique of the proletariat for accepting being exploited themselves, both as wage laborers and consumers). The Tropenmuseum now explicitly links this to the colonial past. This made me wonder what the effect would be of adding the current incidence of farmers' flags to this section, as an addition to the four flags that survived decolonization—introducing an upside-down flag in order to bring the colonial legacy of environmental degradation home as well.<sup>32</sup> It should be easy for the museum to collect one from a highway, village, or farm; such flags are everywhere these days. The *Our Colonial Inheritance* exhibition intends to present a common legacy of colonialism in Dutch (and to some degree also European) contemporary society through the voices, eyes, and views of actively participating citizens whose personal histories are entangled with the colonial past. I wondered whether visitors would wish to also hear—whether I could insert for myself—the farmers' voices here. Would that flag on display be the dog spoiling the networking event? Would visitors take offense, would farmers feel reframed? Which histories need to be told and which connections need to be made in order to make clear that these different flag protests are related and might lead to new values?

I am not sure what would happen if the museum displayed the monoculture grasslands of Friesland next to the videos of gold mining, oil pumping, deforestation, and drought elsewhere, thus adding Dutch environmental degradation as likewise a legacy of the colonial past, understood as Dutch/European exploitation of *any* territories under their control and not just *foreign* territories in the past. The mines, factories, and plantations in the Global South and the grasslands and intensive animal husbandry in the Netherlands have a common source. Colonial collections in the Tropenmuseum—containing samples of gold ore, tin bauxite, aluminum, wood, plants, herbs, seeds, fibers, and human remains from all over the globe—share a common root with samples of salt, coal, soil, seeds, sperm, blood, wood, etc., in Dutch natural history or university collections. Their common root is science—science for the benefit of “man”, initially both scientifically and morally defined in clearly hierarchical racist terms with the urbanized scientist of the West at the highest level of human development, and gradually, at least analytically, understood in ever-more inclusive terms.<sup>33</sup> All of our contemporary sciences and their knowledge regimes are connected to colonialism; but that is an abstraction, which does not imply that we can abandon or dismiss science. On the contrary. The farmers' upside-down flag in the exhibition at the Tropenmuseum would confirm this paradox, since the farmers argue that we cannot trust scientific proof for environmental policies, whereas

in their rhetoric we also need to trust that technological innovation can solve many of the problems at stake. It is just one of the ways knowledge is challenged and invoked in a time of polarization in which the notion of “our”—in our colonial legacy, our traditions, our flag—no longer seems to indicate a common ground. “My presence connects me to a we that is explicitly not striving for claims of universality”, writes Gario.<sup>34</sup> **302**

## Not a Provocation

In its own obstinate way, the Golden Coach depicts and represents the full argument of this piece. With all the different histories, different past-present relationships, we are all inheritors of the colonial past, whether anti-black activists or white Dutch farmers. The decorated panels show the productive and subjected people of the East and the West, as well as the farmers, fishermen, and workers of the Netherlands, a windmill, and even a cow; they show the importance of Wisdom, Old age, and Youth, the role of Time and History, of Religion and Ethics, of paternal Strength and motherly Care, painted by Van der Waay in times of the Dutch Ethical Policy and the white man’s trust in progress. None of the artists who were invited in 2020 to create a (critical) work in response to the Golden Coach or to redesign it—and they came with powerful interventions, as this book also shows—none of them opted for a provocation. I don’t think that any visitor of the exhibition was provoked. Dedicated inclusion cannot be provocative.

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## Notes

1. I refer here to Hedwig te Molder's inaugural lecture *Dialogo tegen de stroom in: de waarden-schaamte voorbij*. Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit) 29-9-2021. See also: Lotte van Burgsteden, Hedwig te Molder, "Shelving Issues: Patrolling the Boundaries of Democratic Discussion in Public Meetings", in *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, E-pub ahead of print - 5 Apr 2022, DOI 10.1177/0261927X221079615 'Provocation' is written in the context of the program 'Pressing Matter. Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums', funded by the Netherlands National Science Agenda (2020-2025). See: <https://pressingmatter.nl/> (last accessed 24-7-2023).
2. They responded with this name to a sociological analysis by Wouter Buikhuisen's PhD thesis *achtergronden [sic] van nozemgedrag. Analyse und Deutung der Halbstarken-Erscheinung*. Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 1965; See Geert Buelens, *De jaren zestig. Een cultuurgeschiedenis*. Amsterdam (Ambo/Anthos) 2018:391. Also: Richard Kempton, *Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt*. Brooklyn, NY (Autonomedia) 2007; Roel van Duijn, *Provo. De geschiedenis van de provotarische beweging 1965-1967*. Amsterdam (Meulenhof) 1985.
3. Kempton, *Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt* 2007: 8.
4. Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas) is the patron saint of Amsterdam; legend has it that he brought back to life three children that had been killed. Allison Blakely, *Black in the Dutch World. The evolution of racial imagery in a modern society*. Bloomington (Indiana UP) 1993: 39-49. Elizabeth Buettner, *Europe after Empire: Decolonization, Society, and Culture*. Cambridge UK (Cambridge University Press) 2016: 19. Kempton *Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt* 2007: 30. Historians supporting the anti-Zwarte Piet movement argue that the blackface of the helpers of Sinterklaas is a 19th-century "invention of tradition", for instance: Han van der Horst, 'Zwarte Piet, wie kent hem niet?' Web column *Joop* 9-10-2013, <https://www.bnnvara.nl/joop/artikelen/zwarte-piet-wie-kent-hem-niet>. (last accessed 24-7-2023)
5. *Ciske de Rat* (1955), directed by Wolfgang Staudte; *Ciske de Rat* (1984), directed by Guido Pieters. See also Buelens 2018:523 on *happenings* and Antonin Artaud's concept of 'Theatre of Cruelty' (in: Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*. New York (Grove Press Inc.) 1958; Kempton, *Amsterdam's Anarchist Revolt* 2007: 8.
6. Van Duijn 1985:7. In this chronicle cum memoirs (1985:108) Van Duijn refers to the (white) smoke bomb as "provotarian weapon no. 1". The first smoke bomb was used by Provo in an anti-Vietnam War demonstration at the American Consulate in Amsterdam, on December 23, 1965.
7. Father Jan Nowee started the series in 1935; his son Paul continued after his death in 1958. At the time of Provo, some 30 volumes had been published; volume 63 was the last one, in 1993. Although these "cowboy books" were regarded as books for boys, as a child I read many volumes. ([https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arendsoog\\_\(kinderboekenserie\)](https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arendsoog_(kinderboekenserie))) (Last accessed 24-7-2023)
8. After the German Publisher Ravensburger Verlag decided to stop publishing the book and other merchandise in August 2022, the Dutch publisher Meulenhoff decided to do the same.
9. Provo happenings took place in Coevorden and Amsterdam. The activists were arrested and sen-

- tenced. Buelens 2018:391 and 895 ref. 14. Provo distanced itself from destructive acts against the Amsterdam monument (Van Duijn 1985:237) Van Heutsz's imposing tomb, a heritage site gloriously placed at the Nieuwe Ooster cemetery in Amsterdam, was moved to a less prominent location in 2003, the formal reason being that the tomb disturbed the historical design of the site. See [https://amsterdamopdekaart.nl/1850-1940/Kruislaan/Mausoleum\\_Van\\_Heutsz](https://amsterdamopdekaart.nl/1850-1940/Kruislaan/Mausoleum_Van_Heutsz) (last accessed 2-10-2022).
10. Buelens 2018:482; Van Duijn 1985:145-146; 1985:7 'Wat wij met die rookbom op 10 maart 1966 echter vooral hebben willen raken was het sprookje van de samenleving die zo gelukkig is van bovenaf geleid te worden. Het zwarte sprookje van het autoritaire denken.' At the marriage of Princess Beatrix' sister Princess Margriet on 10-1-1967, Provos again succeeded in deploying some smoke bombs (Van Duijn 1985:235).
  11. Van Duijn 1985:238-239.
  12. Besides the name change in 2004, it was also re-contextualized with photographs and texts, and as such inaugurated for the second time on December 18, 2007. See: <https://stadscuratorium.nl/collectie/monument-indie-nederland/> (last accessed 2-10-2022). It was a relatively early example of recontextualizations of (colonial) monuments in the public sphere; after the 2015 Rhodes must Fall movement in South Africa, discussion about and interventions with respect to colonial statues and monuments in the Netherlands became more intense as well.
  13. See also Buelens 2018:553 on the "Summer of Love" in Amsterdam.
  14. See: <https://archieff.amsterdam/beeldbank/detail/7c354ef9-2553-8bcd-e8ff-7765a3e6b032/media/c0e149a6-b378-bcb4-09e3-845ee2b-1c6e1?mode=detail&view=horizontal&q=van%20der%20waay&rows=1&page=21> (accessed 20-8-2022). On 16-9-2011, Barryl Biekman (National Platform Slavery Past), Harry van Bommel (MP of the Socialist Party), Mariko Peters (MP of the Green left party) and Jeffrey M. Pondaag (Comité Dutch Debts of Honour) published a plea to turn the coach into a museum object and stop using it. *NRC-Handelsblad* 16-9-2011, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2011/09/16/gouden-koets-is-heel-fout-rijtuig-12035573-a382060> (accessed 30-9-2022)
  15. In some writings, several of them addressed racial discrimination in the United States or Apartheid in South Africa, for instance, in their solidarity with Blacks in their violent confrontation with the Los Angeles police in August 1965 (Watts Riots) or Puerto Ricans in Chicago in June 1966, or they critiqued the Dutch government's response to the murder of Verwoerd. (Van Duijn, in the editorial of *Provo* no. 12, refers to the struggle of students (*provotariaat*) and the colored peoples in America, Angola, Vietnam, and South Africa (*proletariaat*) against their white suppressors.) (1985:226)
  16. This refers to the present-absent semiotic square as explained in Ewa Domanska, "The material present of the past", *History and Theory* 45, 2006:337-348. Also: Susan Legêne, *Spiegelreflex. Culturele sporen van de koloniale ervaring. Amsterdam* (Bert Bakker) 2010:226 "This is what the Golden Coach does today. While the new monuments [commemoration of slavery; commemoration of arrival of descendants of indentured laborers] add present-past relationships from



- the former colonies to contemporary society, the Golden Coach, passing by these monuments while every year carrying a new speech from the Throne, sometimes even with a new Head of State, may remind us that objects can make present what seems non-manifest in the notion of an imagined community". [My translation]. Gario (2018:80) refers to Latour's Actor Network theory "in which objects are recognized as also having agency within a whole that includes human beings". (cf B. Latour, *Reassembling the social. An introduction to actor-network theory*. New York (Oxford UP) 2005.)
17. I don't remember the date. About Dogtroep: Noortje Boer and others (eds), *Dogtroep*. Amsterdam (Lava) 2008; Warner van Wely, *Dogtroep. Werkwijzen van wild theater maken*. Amsterdam (Dogtroep/Uitgeverij International Theatre & Film Books) 1992.
  18. In the third panel of the triptych painting, after the fire, the people return as cleansed babies, being blessed by Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas), who brings the slaughtered children back to life with his holy powers. Depicted and with caption in Henri de Haas *Seeing is believing*. Amsterdam (Van Spijk Arts Project) 2002: plates 26 (2001) 'A beautiful soul,' collection Joods Historisch Museum Amsterdam; also: plate and caption 25 (1999) 'The camp,' collection Museum Belvédère, Heerenveen, and plate 35 (2000), 'The entry of Sinterklaas' collection Amsterdam City Archive. Also: Susan Legêne, 'Waar het hart vol van is. Het persoonlijke is geschiedenis' in Fred van Lieburg (red.), *Geschiedenis aan de Zuidas. Essays van VU-historici*. Amsterdam (Prometheus) 2018: 200-209. See also Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence. Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*. (Duke UP) 2016.
  19. Quinsy Gario, 'On Agency and Belonging', in M.F. Weiner and A. Carmona Báez, *Smash the pillars. Decoloniality and the imaginary of color in the Dutch Kingdom*. Lanham etc. (Lexington Books) 2018:75.
  20. Gario, *On Agency and Belonging*, 2018:78.
  21. <https://www.omropfryslan.nl/nl/nieuws/1016535/hoge-raad-veroordeling-zes-friese-a7-blokkeerders-blijft-in-stand> (last accessed 2-8-2023)
  22. *Algemeen Dagblad* 9-11-2019.
  23. Gario, *On Agency and Belonging*, 2018:80. The full quote is: "The internalization of being regarded as inferior alters your understanding of your agency and directs yours sense of belonging. This process of unlearning this violence also renders one unpredictable. In this regard, and because of the lasting consequences of my traumatic arrest in 2011, I am a wounded storyteller, to deploy Arthur W. Frank's (1995) concept. I am not just an unreliable narrator because of this trauma, but my narration itself is making sense of the situation that I am proposing for myself and those whom I invite into the world that I am proposing". Cf Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*. Chicago (Univ. of Chicago Press) 1995.
  24. See <https://nos.nl/artikel/2347773-geen-vervolg-akwasi-na-afstand-van-zwarte-piet-uitspraak> (accessed 20-8-2022)
  25. As in the poem "tikkende tijdbom" (ticking time-bomb), in which the poet cautions someone, who he knows loves cheese and Sinterklaas, that he will be delighted to soon see a supporter lose

- Zwarte Piet. Akwasi, *Laten we het er maar niet over hebben*. Amsterdam (Ambo/Anthos) 2018:103.
26. Cf Akwasi 2018:130 'voor alle zwarte kinderen' (to all black kids), or 2018:0 'vrijdag 1 december 1995' (Friday December 1 1995).
27. In the slipstream of the event, the Mayor of Amsterdam was severely criticized as well, because of the button she had pinned on her coat, with the date 1873. This button refers to the ten years after the formal abolition of slavery in Suriname in 1863, during which the formerly enslaved were forced to continue working on plantations.
28. Gert Oostindie et al, *Over de grens. Nederlands extreem geweld in de Indonesische onafhankelijkheidsoorlog, 1945-1949*. Amsterdam (Amsterdam University Press) 2022: 90-91.
29. Collection nbrs: TM-5635-6, drawing of Flag Incident in Surabaya 1945; 7082-S-4026-7abc, flag that was hidden during Japanese internment in Semarang 1943-45, gift from Mrs Trinet Kroese-Rutgers; TM-5995-1, flag from Tanjung Priok 1949; TM-5921-168, flag from Baliem Valley c. 1962, gift from J.Th. Broekhuijse.
30. Interestingly, the exhibition opens with a "flag parade", a video installation by Bibi Fadlalla called *Prelude to a Nation*, with playfully imaginative flags that combine various nationalities and always reference the Dutch red, white, and blue, but in my understanding also suggests that the territory of the Netherlands as a virtual space is much wider than what the Dutch flag actually demarcates. Flags by Navin Thakoer. <https://www.bibifadlalla.com/Prelude-to-a-Nation> (last accessed 2-8-2023).
31. The opening installation also includes a fragment of a speech by King Willem-Alexander of 10-3-2022 stating "For acts of violence committed by the Dutch side in those years, I would like to express my regret and apologise here now, following previous statements by my government".
32. I support the farmers, proud of the Farmers, No farmers no Food, etc.
33. Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity. Equality and Cultural Difference in World History*. Cambridge MA (Harvard University Press) 2017. Another corner in *Our Colonial Inheritance* discusses this scientific genealogy of current racism.
34. Gario, *On Agency and Belonging*, 2018:75.

# Appendix



# Biography

## The Board of Editors

PEPIJN BRANDON is professor of Global Economic and Social History at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam and Senior Researcher at the International Institute of Social History. He has published widely on the history of slavery in the context of the history of global capitalism, with special attention to the Netherlands.

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IMARA LIMON is a curator at the Amsterdam Museum. She studied Art History (BA), Heritage and Museology (MA), and Cultural Analysis (rMA) at the University of Amsterdam and specializes in socially engaged artistic practices. She has held advisory positions in arts funds, and is on the Board of Trustees of Centraal Museum Utrecht.

WAYNE MODEST is the director of content at the National Museum of World Cultures and the Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam. He is also head of the Research Center for Material Culture, the research institute of these museums and professor at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam.

MARGRIET SCHAVEMAKER is professor of Media and Art in Museum Practice by special appointment at the University of Amsterdam. In addition, she has been the artistic director of the Amsterdam Museum since 2019.

## The Authors

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INEZ BLANCA VAN DER SCHEER is a curator and PhD researcher specializing in the intersection of decolonial Caribbean philosophy and contemporary art. She has worked at various Dutch museums, including the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam and the Amsterdam Museum. As a student, she co-founded the University of Colour in 2015.)

MIKKI STELDER is Assistant Professor of Global Arts and Politics at the University of Amsterdam. They were a Marie Skłodowska Curie Global Fellowship recipient for their project *Maritime Imagination: A Cultural Oceanography of Dutch Imperialism and its Aftermaths*. In 2022, their article "The Colonial Difference in Hugo Grotius: Rational man, Slavery and Indigenous Dispossession", published in *Postcolonial Studies*, won the ASCA Award.

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CARINE ZAAYMAN is an artist, curator and scholar committed to critical engagement with colonial archives and collections, specifically those holding strands of Khoekhoe pasts. Bringing intangible and neglected histories

into view is a key motivation for her work. She is a Researcher and Research co-ordinator at the Research Centre for Material Culture (NMvW).

SUSAN LEGÈNE is professor of Political history and Dean of the Faculty of Humanities (2020-2024) at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. With Wayne Modest and Rosalie Hans she is leading the project 'Pressing Matter. Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museums' funded by the Netherlands National Science Agenda.

LIEDEKE PLATE is Full Professor of Culture and Inclusivity at Radboud University, where she researches the relationship between art, culture and inclusion. She is the author of numerous articles and (edited) books and was the leader of the NWO-funded project *Feeling the Traces of the Colonial Past* (2021-2022).

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MADÉLIEF FEENSTRA is a Research MA student in the Historical, Literary & Cultural Studies-programme at Radboud University, specializing in History. She holds a BA in Liberal Arts from University College Roosevelt, Middelburg, and worked on the *Feeling the Traces of the Past* research project as a student assistant.

CAROLINE DRIEËNHUIZEN wrote her PhD (University of Amsterdam, 2012) on the European elite in colonial Indonesia and its collections. Her interests lie in material objects and their biographies, museums and decolonisation processes. She works as an assistant professor at the Open Universiteit (Heerlen, the Netherlands).

CATHERINE LU is Professor of Political Science at McGill University, in Montreal, Canada, and author of *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). Her research focuses on critical and normative approaches in international political theory on cosmopolitanism, global justice, structural injustice, decolonization, alienation, and reconciliation.

PEPIJN REESER is a historian. He has worked for the Amsterdam Museum, the Limburgs Museum, the Nieuwe Kerk/Hermitage and the Dutch Open Air Museum, among others. He is currently writing a biography of Louis Bonaparte (1778-1846), better known as Louis Napoleon, king of Holland.)

ANNEMARIE DE WILDT a historian, is curator at the Amsterdam Museum. For *Mapping Slavery* she was involved as author for the 'Gids Slavernij-verleden Amsterdam' (Mapping Slavery).



JESSICA DE ABREU studied Social and Cultural Anthropology and Culture, Organization and Management at the VU University Amsterdam. Her passionate commitment to the field of African Diaspora led to research on upward social mobility in New York, Amsterdam and London. Her work focuses on post-colonial perspectives and intersectionality. She is co-founder of The Black Archives, one of the first historical archives in the Netherlands to focus on Black history in the Netherlands and beyond.

ISABELLE BRITTO is a historian and researcher, and active in the field of museums. She completed her bachelor's degree in history at the University of Amsterdam and a master's degree in North American Studies at Leiden University, where she focused on representations of Black women within the Black community of the United States in the early twentieth century. She was a researcher at The Black Archives and worked on various projects and exhibitions related to Afro-Diasporian histories.

MITCHELL ESAJAS is co-founder and chairman of New Urban Collective, a network for students and young professionals from diverse backgrounds with a focus on the Surinamese, Caribbean, and African diaspora. He is a social entrepreneur involved in various community projects in the areas of education, employment, diversity, and sustainability. Mitchell studied Business Studies and Anthropology at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In 2016, he co-founded the Black Archives in Amsterdam, a unique collection of books, documents and artefacts documenting the history of Black people and Black resistance in the Dutch context.

CLÉMENTINE DELISS is an independent curator whose practice intersects the fields of contemporary art, critical anthropology, and curatorial experimentation. She is internationally recognized for her seminal work across different platforms including publishing, arts observatories, exhibitions and research on subjects as varied as the post-ethnographic, African modernism, future academies, and interventionist practices in the visual arts. She has taught at numerous art colleges in Europe, is Global Humanities Professor of History of Art at the University of Cambridge, and was Associate Curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin between 2020 and 2023. She lives in Berlin.

HICHAM KHALIDI (1972) is director of the Jan van Eyck Academie and curator of the Dutch Pavilion for the 60th Venice Biennale. Khalidi is interested in the context and conditions of art-institutional practice and how the processes of coloniality affect this. He considers curating as working in coalition with other people.

TIRZA BALK is an Indo-Dutch writer and activist. Their work includes that of the University of Colour and Decolonize the Museum. They hold a summa cum laude degree in the humanities and are currently developing artistic strategies to respond to climate breakdown at the Planetary Poetics department of Sandberg Instituut.

ROCHELLE VAN MAANEN is an educator, creative producer and talent manager. Her expertise lies in (Dutch) slavery and colonialism in Indonesia, she has a bachelor in psychology. She writes think pieces for het Parool, and works to expand the education system on colonialism.

ROSEMARIE BUIKEMA is professor of Art, Culture and Diversity at Utrecht University and project-leader of MOED, the online Museum of Equality and Difference. Among her latest publications are *Revoltes in Cultural Critique* (Rowman& Littlefield, 2021) and *Cultures, Citizenship and Human Rights* (Routledge, 2020).

ASTRID KERCHMAN is the former project coordinator of MOED Museum of Equality and Difference, and is currently involved with the University of Melbourne as a research assistant. Before, Astrid was a lecturer Gender Studies and research assistant in the Graduate Gender Programme, both at Utrecht University.

RITA OUÉDRAOGO lives and works in Amsterdam. She holds a MSc in Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology from the University of Amsterdam. As a curator, writer, research and community programmer, her work is informed by her interest in African diaspora, 'decolonizing' institutions, institutional racism, popular culture and social issues. Ouédraogo worked on various projects aimed at making museum collections more widely accessible as well as on projects outside of institutional structures. She researches questions related to cooperation and solidarity that explores modes of collaborative practices across power differentials, especially within a 'decolonial' framework. She is the founding curator of Buro Stedelijk.

## The Designer

RAUL BALAI A.K.A. EL BASTARDO is an Amsterdam based artist. His work centers around the exploitative state of our minds, and how this subsequently frames the shape of the world. He provides insights into power structures: How they resonate in the way the story of history is told and reproduced, and how they lead to the society we have today.





# Photography

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by Jacek Sopotnicki

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SALT MOUNTAINS, BONAIRE as photographed  
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FIJI AS PHOTOGRAPHED by  
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LOON, THE NETHERLANDS as photographed  
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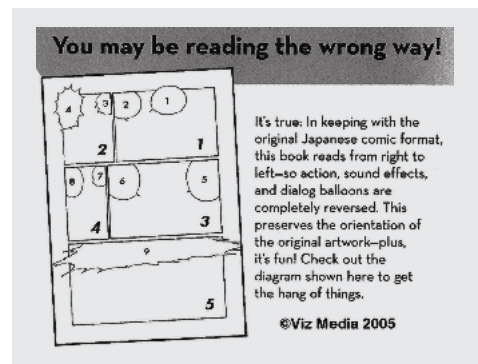
# You May Be Reading The Wrong Way

BY RAUL BALAI  
ON GRAPHIC DESIGN, READING DIRECTION,  
AND 'DECOLONIZATION'

The title "YOU MAY BE READING THE WRONG WAY!" is on the first page of every manga (i.e., comic or graphic novel from Japan) that is translated into English by VIZ-media publishers. During my final exam period in graphic design at the Hogeschool voor de Kunsten Utrecht (HKU) in 2005, I read one manga after the other while waiting for project meetings with my supervisors.

I was struck by how quickly I was able to switch to this opposite reading direction, not only in terms of reading texts from right to left but also terms of image sequence direction. These sequences and rules for reading are so self-evident to us, having grown up with the Latin alphabet and writing system, that we hardly question them.

I noticed that, when switching back to a 'normal' book (i.e., read from left to right), I missed the reverse ordering. For me, as a right-handed



**Figure 1**  
Reading directions by *Viz Media*,  
(Image by Viz Media 2005)

person, it is actually a more comfortable way to hold a book. Moreover, it was a breath of fresh air to step away from this learned dominance of reading from left to right. I expected my head to short-circuit from the constant switching between different forms of text organization, but that did not happen. And exactly this, I think, from a graphic design perspective, hints at a

certain nicety, which shows similarities with a process that we as a society/world are in the middle of, and what this book is also about. "Decolonization".

I place the word in parentheses because over time I have come to consider it a flattened and unclear buzzword. In 2019 I participated in the academic program The Black Europe Summer School (BESS). Every time we used this kind of terminology, Dr. Kwame Nimako asked us: "What do you mean, exactly?". Followed by an explanation of why he avoided it as much as possible. His standpoint is that everyone means something different when using this (or any other related) term, but few explain what they mean.

Because what do we, in the heritage and museum sector, actually mean when we say "decolonization"? One person may refer to altering the terms used for groups of people on signs with captions, someone else refers to revise the collection, others want to alter the structures of thinking and working in the institute they work at, yet another participates in a diversity training with their colleagues, and so on and so forth. Furthermore, I wonder whether, when we take into consideration the origins of museums, they can be "decolonized" at all...

In the cultural heritage and museum sector, "Decolonization", in my opinion, means changing the way that we think in terms of accepting the norm, about how there are multiple ways to look at things, about who has the right to speak, about which structures of thought we regard as *the* (or one of the) truth(s), and to what we assign value and to what extent. Additionally, it is about unlearning beliefs about norms and truths, whereby acknowledging what we (do not yet) know or see is important.

This is a slow process, a personal process for everyone involved, and it is not always easy or

unambiguous. A good example was literally brought to the table during the process of making this book. During one of the meetings with the museum, I took a biscuit from the bowl on the table. When I looked at the packaging, I was surprised to see a racial stereotype of a Chinese man. Sitting on bales of tea, smoking an (opium?) pipe, with the text "The Orient". At the organization that is the initiator of this book, nonetheless! We laughed out loud about this. The biscuit supplier was informed not to supply them anymore. It is a trial-and-error process for everyone.



**Figure 2**  
*Hoppe (2023), Variété Mix,*  
(Photograph by Amsterdam Museum)

For me, it is a clear example of how the colonial is omnipresent, in all shapes and sizes. I hope that the design makes this book a constant reminder to the reader of the change in structure we are trying to achieve, and that it helps to further familiarize oneself with the subject.

**Now, turn over the book.**  
**Start at the beginning.**

•



Institutions across the globe are increasingly questioned on how their foundations are rooted in colonialism and how they aim to 'decolonize'. *The Future of the Dutch Colonial Past* provides an overview of critical scholarly reflections on the history of Dutch slavery and colonization, as well as how this translates into critical cultural practices. It also explores possible futures: What can heritage institutions learn from (international) best practices regarding the 'decolonization' of museums? And what role can contemporary artistic practices take in these processes? Through a variety of essays, interventions, interviews, and a roundtable conversation, scholars and cultural practitioners address these complex questions.

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