



Contesting Cultural Heritage: Decolonizing the Tropenmuseum as an Intervention in the Dutch/European Memory Complex

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INTRODUCTION

Much of what is considered cultural heritage in Europe—especially in Western and Southern European countries—originates from a past in which these countries were substantial colonial powers. Though the Netherlands has a 400-year history of colonialism, it has long received little attention in terms of the national commemoration and education of that colonialist history (van Stipriaan 2007; Essed and Trienekens 2008; Weiner 2014a; Wekker 2016). The rare times that colonialism is mentioned in educational programs, there is usually hardly any reflection on the way colonial history has affected the current privileged position

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of Europe or the global West (Weiner 2014a; Wekker 2016). This is an issue that is found in many colonizing countries, as can be seen in studies of school curricula.¹ There is also a lack of attention for the colonial past and its consequences in art and ethnographic museums, both in what they present and in how art and ethnographic material is distinguished. Art museums have long shown the grandeur of the colonizing nations, while ethnographic museums highlighted exotic difference. Generally, when attention is given to the colonial past, it is still often done in a positive way, emphasizing the nation's (former) greatness or showing how the international orientation of a country is grounded in the past. For the Netherlands, this can be exemplified by a speech of Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende, who in 2006 encouraged the Dutch to regain their "VOC mentality" and attempt a "return" to that era's strong work and business ethics and economic prosperity.² Balkenende was criticized, for example by Socialist Party MP Jan Marijnissen, for praising an era in which the Dutch colonized and acted brutally towards other people (Dutch Parliament, 28 September 2006). This example shows that, besides the widespread uncritical ways of remembering the past, there is also a long, ongoing debate on this topic in politics and the media. Historians have long been doing historical research on colonialism and slavery. Historian Gert Oostindie, however, states that in a broad sense "one cannot speak of active silencing, but neither of a broad understanding" (2011, 149).

The currently dominant way in which the Dutch colonial past is simultaneously remembered and non-remembered has consequences for the in- and exclusion of postcolonial (post-)immigrants who migrated to the Netherlands from its former colonies, or whose parents, grandparents, or earlier ancestors migrated to the Netherlands, whether through voluntary or involuntary trajectories. As discussed by Johanna Turunen in this volume, colonialism has not only affected the former colonies, but also the very constitution of modernity in Europe (Ahmed 2000, 10), its Eurocentric views, and the lives of its (post-)immigrants.³

¹For the Netherlands, see: Weiner (2014a); for Italy: De Michele (2011); for Spain and France: Pousa and Facal (2013); and for Portugal: Errante (1998).

²The VOC, or Dutch East India Company, was a trading company and military-political-economic complex that dominated trade as well as many parts of the world for 200 years (starting in 1600), after which it was nationalized.

³How this specifically accounts for the way slavery has contributed to European modernity is discussed by Gikandi (2011).

From a postcolonial-theory perspective, a lack of attention for the colonial past or uncritically representing that past is problematic, as it ignores power positionings that were created in the past, not to mention the way these privilege white people and negatively impact (post-)migrants, particularly people of colour, preventing diverse societies from being more equal, just, and inclusive (Gilroy 2004). In that sense, decolonizing is a practice aimed at rethinking heritage in a way that exposes such processes of power (as well as otherness, or alterity) in order to foster more equal and just societies and connections, even if a truly just society is hard, if not impossible, to achieve. Delmos Jones (1997) writes: “The just society is never achieved; instead it is a continual process of becoming, and this always involves struggles” (cited in Allen and Jobson 2016, 139). Similarly considering the goal of postcolonial thought and decolonization, Hawley (2015) writes: “As a central post-colonial concept, alterity seeks to move beyond the objectification of others (and beyond the objectively inaccurate imagination of them) to a moral leap of imagination that sees the distinction between oneself and the other, but also intuits enough similarity so that a true dialogue (which does not simply homogenize all difference) is truly possible”. In other words, one of the aims of postcolonial thought is to rethink distinctions that are made (e.g. in or by heritage), not in order to dissolve them but to create new conversations.

In recent years, change agents with postcolonial, (post-)migrant backgrounds, people of colour, and white allies have all struggled to counter the dominant Dutch ways of (non-)remembering the past. Though there were many earlier protests (van Stipriaan 2007; Balkenhol 2010, 77; Oostindie 2011; Esajas 2014), in recent years these protests have become visible to a wider public as they started to push for changes on a national level and perhaps beyond. In this chapter, I analyse one of these interventions as a counter-narrative and tentatively explore to what extent and how they change Dutch/European heritage and the attendant memory complex—the latter referring to the way the past is remembered in the present in a broad sense, including memory, heritage, and identity (Macdonald 2013), which, as I will argue, happens in a way that is not unified but inherently contested. The intervention I tackle here concerns recent protests by an activist group called Decolonize the Museum regarding the way colonial history is portrayed in Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum. Studying these interventions at this ethnographic museum can help understand (potential) other interventions in the national as well as European contexts.

First, though, I will discuss key concepts in discussing the way we remember the past, which leads up to my main questions. After the empirical section of this chapter, I will then contextualize the interventions both nationally and in the larger European space.

CONCEPTUALIZING CONTESTED HERITAGE AND INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

By (cultural) heritage, I mean physical objects, the immaterial meanings and memories attributed to these objects, as well as other immaterial culture, that are all seen as worthwhile to display, preserve, and pass on to future generations. Although one can say heritage is always dissonant (Kisić 2013, 29), heritage is more visibly contested and more rapidly changing at certain moments in time than at others. The concept of dissonant heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) can therefore highlight disharmonies and power relations within heritage at times that might seem harmonious from the perspective of more privileged subjects, as well as at times when interventions take place that can enable more radical or structural change. Highlighting social interventions by change agents who have (post-)migrant and postcolonial backgrounds and who protest against colonial ways of remembering is also intended to oppose dominant and dominating discourses within the Dutch/European memory complex and beyond. In reference to the Netherlands, Guno Jones (2012) sees a conflict between two main discourses: a dominant ethno-nationalist discourse and a postcolonial discourse. The first assumes an unambiguous representation of the past that presumes and reproduces a division between “real Dutch people” and “the other”. This is part of a geographically wider discourse which Goldberg (2006, 352) has identified as part of a process he calls “racial europeanization” that also implies a silencing of race, and it is comparable with the preoccupation with autochtony, or (racial) belonging to the soil, which Geschiere (2009) identifies in other parts of the globe as well.⁴ Postcolonial discourse, in

⁴The ethno-nationalist discourse is furthermore strongly anchored in, and overlaps with, the dominant neoliberal discourse. Both discourses neglect historically constructed structural inequalities. For neoliberalism, this is based on individualism and the idea of ahistorical individual merit and responsibility. In case of ethno-nationalist discourse, in its extreme, both the perceived disadvantage and privilege of the “other” (or just their “otherness”) can be the basis of claiming their non-belonging.

contrast, refers to “a critical rereading of history, heritage, cultural practices, national symbols and representations against the backdrop of colonial history and its inherent power-relations”.⁵ It includes diverse ways of revealing and critiquing knowledge production in which essentialist notions are (re)created that rigidify cultures as fixed bordered entities and perpetuate global social inequalities. Postcolonial discourse and its dissonance with ethno-nationalist discourse is also not limited to the Netherlands, nor to Europe, postcolonialism being articulated in extensive international and interdisciplinary academic and activist work (Said 1978; Spivak 1999; Wekker 2016). To be sure, Jones does not see the two discourses as strict opposites and notes overlapping positivist epistemologies within these discourses: both engage with representing “the truth”, and critique other, older, or newer representations as biased.⁶ Yet there is also a difference in where these discourses are primarily positioned. Ethno-nationalist discourse is strongly articulated in populist right-wing politics and in left and centre political parties that are shifting towards the right, whereas postcolonial discourse is more strongly located in academia and left-wing activism (although these domains are not free from ethno-nationalist discourse either).

Ethno-nationalist discourse, furthermore, strongly resonates with the content and shape of the Dutch “cultural archive” (Wekker 2016; see also Trakilović in this volume). Wekker defines a cultural archive as “a repository of memory” (referring to Stoler 2009, 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 commonsense everyday knowledge, and all of this is based on four hundred years of imperial rule” (Wekker 2016, 19). Wekker sees that the history of colonialism and slavery has profoundly affected the dominant meaning-making processes concerning race (2016, 3; referring to Gilroy 1993, 178). The Netherlands specifically has a cultural archive that rejects race as a meaningful concept. This is paradoxical, as the use of the concept of race invokes passionate responses, including aggression,

⁵I have translated this quote from the Dutch (Jones 2012, 59): “‘kritische’ ‘herlezing’ van geschiedenis, erfgoed, culturele praktijken, nationale symbolen en representaties tegen de achtergrond van het kolonialisme en de daaraan inherente hiërarchische verhoudingen.”

⁶Guno Jones (2012) analyses overlapping epistemologies within these discourses, showing how positivist arguments prevail in public discussions on a Dutch documentary about slavery.

in these white Dutch people, while they at the same time “innocently” see themselves as tolerant and free from racism (and sexism, ableism, homophobia, etc.) (Stoler 2011; Weiner 2014b; Wekker 2016). For the Netherlands, this reluctance to criticize racism has been connected to WWII, after which strict distinctions were drawn between collaborators and those who resisted, between good and evil, creating a false understanding of the Netherlands as a nation of resistance during the war (van den Broek 2014, 269; Hondius 2014, 273). In this process, being called racist became a grave accusation, implying one would be on the wrong side of history or support the Holocaust, making it hard to address subtle but still highly constraining forms of racism (van den Broek 2014, 269). The collective remembrance of WWII also overshadowed the memory of earlier, colonial forms of violence, as well as the remembrance of the decolonization war with Indonesia (1945–1950). Many veterans, former colonizers, and people of mixed Dutch and Indonesian descent who migrated to the Netherlands after decolonization, were reluctant to, or actively protested against, discussing the “old wounds” of colonialism and decolonization, or preferred to entertain nostalgic memories of the colonial past. These forces prevented a more open critical discussion of the colonial past. Similar processes are seen in other European colonizing countries as well (Buettner 2016).

The relation between national (Dutch) heritage and European heritage in that sense is constituted by the way European countries deal with their colonial heritage in similar ways and in the way European colonial history has affected current societies (Buettner 2016, 498), including geopolitical structures, ethnic/racial inequality, and conceptions and hierarchies of race (Goldberg 2006). Contestations of cultural heritage should therefore not be seen as taking place in isolation within the Dutch nation state. This does not mean that there is one unified European colonial heritage, or memory complex, as there are also many differences in the way colonialism was and is part of nations and regions within and beyond Europe, the way this has affected current societies, and the way this is criticized. Yet it is useful to examine the interventions studied here within both the national and transnational historical contexts to understand Europe’s continuing privileged position on a global scale, its continuing and increasing interconnectedness, as well as hierarchies within Europe.

The way heritage, discourses, the cultural archive, memory, as well as identity are intertwined in their material and immaterial forms can be captured by the term memory complex (Macdonald 2013; also discussed in this book by Mäkinen and by Trakilović). A memory complex is a loosely interwoven whole consisting of different elements that have to do with collective and individual pasts. It therefore entails a wider understanding of remembering than what is generally understood as heritage. The term encompasses memory, heritage, and identity in “non-exhaustive patterned combinations and relationships” (Macdonald 2013, 5). Though helpful in combining several ways of conceptualizing the way the past is remembered, it is important to be cautious of some potential problems. Macdonald does highlight diversity and fluidity within “the” (European) memory complex, but conflict, inequality, power, and resistance should also be part of the conceptualization. Furthermore, because MacDonald identifies “the” European memory complex, even if not strictly bordered or characterized in an essentialist way, this still runs the risk of representing memory, heritage, identity, and their internal connections in a falsely harmonious way, especially when conflict is not explicitly mentioned. I therefore suggest a use of the term that explicitly highlights contestation and dissonance, which is especially needed in a European memory complex with a cultural archive that silences the violent sides of colonial history and its consequences. I will consciously use the term in a way that highlights dissonance by also discussing the cultural archive and contesting discourses.

In order to understand changes that occur in dominant ways of remembering, and to further explore the aforementioned concepts, I ask the following questions in this chapter: How do recent interventions in ways of remembering the past impact (Dutch) cultural heritage and its cultural archive and memory complex? How do the interventions’ (in) visibility, materiality, and conceptions of intersectional positionings (in this research: race, gender, and disability) contribute to their impact? Lastly, I will reflect on how the interventions and changes can be seen as part of a broader (European) transnational process and whether changes at the Tropenmuseum can be indicative of further change.

As data, I use written and visual material that is accessible on activist websites and on social media (352 tweets starting from the introduction of the hashtag #Decolonizethemuseum until the end of

the fieldwork: October 2015–November 2017). I also interviewed six change agents—activists and curators⁷—and conducted observations in the Tropenmuseum before and after recent changes (January 2017–November 2017). I then compared these observations and have related them to the interventions and the changes as proposed on web-pages, in interviews, and on Twitter, and to the national and international context.

THE TROPENMUSEUM: A SHORT HISTORY AND OBSERVATIONS FROM EARLY 2017

Before moving to Amsterdam, the Tropenmuseum first opened in Haarlem in 1871 as “the Colonial Museum”, with colonial propagandistic motives: to convince people of the benefits of the colonies and of participating in colonial trade (van Dartel 2009, 29). The collection consisted of trade products as well as artefacts originated from private collections of Dutch colonizers and missionaries who brought back “curiosities” from the colonies. The museum moved to Amsterdam in 1910 and has since then changed its objectives several times (ibid.). The museum was also a centre for the study of physical anthropology, importing human remains from the Dutch Indies in order to study and display them. It was also briefly called the *Indische Museum*, referring to the Dutch Indies. After the formal decolonization of Indonesia,⁸ the museum tried to back away from “the colonial association” and focused on collecting artefacts from the rest of the tropics, showcasing the daily lives of ordinary people there (ibid.; van Dartel 2008, 32). In 1949, the museum was therefore renamed the Tropenmuseum (which translates to the Tropics Museum). In the 1970s, there was a shift towards exhibitions of development projects and contemporary societal issues, such as water management, disease control, and agricultural issues.

Arguably, the Dutch colonial legacy had consequences for the museum’s collection of colonial artefacts and representations of people of

⁷In this chapter I use the term curator for curators of exhibition, curators and conservators, who have different roles in creating the exhibition.

⁸Indonesia proclaimed itself independent in 1945, but the Dutch only acknowledged it as independent in 1949, after a war of independence. Only in 2010 did the Dutch government acknowledge 17 August 1945 as Indonesia’s independence date.

the Global South⁹ as “the other”. Since the 1990s, the museum more actively started to develop ideas about (re)exhibiting colonial history, including the role of the museum itself. The temporary exhibition *White on Black*, for example, which ran from December 1989 until August 1990, showed stereotypical images of black people in popular European culture, this in an attempt to criticize by exposing these images, but not very explicitly (Pieterse 1990; van Dartel 2009). In 2003 a permanent exhibition on colonial history has been created, called *Oostwaarts!* (meaning *Eastward!*). The curation of this exhibition was headed by Susan Legêne, a scholar in postcolonialism.

Still on display at the beginning of 2017, the *Oostwaarts!* exhibition represents colonialism by showing objects that were collected in Asia (mainly in Indonesia, but also in India), as well as objects, images, and memories of the everyday life of colonizers (representing the beginning of the twentieth century). A display of life-sized wax statues, called “Colonial Theater”, shows archetypes of white (Dutch) characters who lived in the colonies: a Governor-General, a military officer, a missionary woman, a tobacco planter, and a scientific explorer. They are placed in a jungle-like environment including bird sounds.¹⁰ Audio devices enable visitors to hear the colonizers’ stories. A native Indonesian man and woman who worked for the Dutch also appear, revealing complicit or in-between positions, and showing how inequality was constructed in complex ways, yet it does so without explicitly offering such context or problematization. The scientific explorations of the Dutch are also represented, including in the form of a head-measuring device (craniometer) that was used to “measure” anatomical differences between ethnic groups. According to curator¹¹ Pim Westerkamp

⁹The Global South is a term that is used as an alternative to the “Third World” or “developing world” (i.e. Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia; but there are also “southern” sectors of the prosperous north, and “northern”/“western” sectors in the south) (Braveboy-Wagner 2003, 11). The term is used here because the other two terms have Eurocentric connotations.

¹⁰Simone Zeeffuik from Decolonize the Museum has publicly critiqued these sounds, because she saw it as a colonial representation of the former Dutch Indies as primarily a jungle (interview, 14 August 2017).

¹¹For legibility reasons I refer to all who are professionally involved in creating exhibitions curators, whereas the Tropenmuseum differentiates between curators, exhibition builders, and conservators.

(interview, 7 December 2017), displaying this object was intended as a critical representation of currently outdated scientific practices, but such a problematization was not included in the text accompanying the object.

The representations reveal memories of colonialism that were previously hardly ever visually represented in museums, nor in Dutch education in general. Though the wax statues are in fact a critical reaction to the objectifying way people from the Indonesian archipelago were represented in a 1938 exhibition organized in honour of the 40-year jubilee of Dutch Queen Wilhelmina (in an exhibition called *De Symbolische Troon*, Dutch for “the symbolic throne”), neither the display nor the rest of the exhibition offers such an explanation. The images and texts also do not show or help understand the violence and exploitation colonialism entailed, nor how colonized people resisted. Whereas white colonizers are shown as complex human beings with status, there are no such representations of colonized people.¹² A film showing white people on the streets and cafes of Batavia (current Jakarta) even looks like a commercial for colonial life. There are some exceptions. A displayed letter by Kartini, a feminist activist for independence and women’s rights (1879–1904), evinces resistance against the colonizers (see also Connell 2015). Both sides of the 1825–1830 Javanese war, in which the Javanese fought against Dutch rule, is also represented in *wayang* shadow-puppet form, including general Diponegoro on the Javanese side (now a national hero in Indonesia).¹³ Lastly and crucially, though the struggle for independence (1945–1949) is mentioned, no images are shown that represent this war, making it seem less relevant. Not showing this part of colonial history exemplifies how the struggle for independence has been silenced in the Netherlands; an issue that can be seen in other European

¹²This issue is also brought up in a presentation by Hodan Warsame and Simone Zeeffuik on 12–13 November 2015, <https://vimeo.com/164082870>, consulted 7 November 2017.

¹³According to the museum text, the puppets portray nationalist and anti-Dutch sentiments, which is conveyed by giving the Javanese/Indonesian puppets traditionally noble features and status symbols. The widespread and highly varied Indonesian puppet theatre, or *wayang*, tradition, has proven to have great contesting potential within and outside its borders. Wayang puppets have been used to criticize or ridicule colonizers; they have also inspired Afro-American artists such as Kara Walker (e.g. in her work entitled “Silhouettes”), as well as South African artist William Kentridge.

colonizing countries as well (e.g. Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Portugal) (Buettner 2016).

Beside these representations of colonialism, the exhibition also features many objects that the museum has collected over the years, and a special section presents objects from New Guinea: masks, musical instruments, clothing, statues, and decorated boats. An introductory text states that “rituals and ceremonies” were important in everyday life, yet it does not distinguish between New Guinea’s cultural groups and developments over time, thereby homogenizing and essentializing New Guinean culture, making it seem like the objects belong to one “fixed” culture that is foremost different from Europe or “the West”. The introduction also highlights that the Western part of New Guinea used to be Dutch, which disregards the longer history of New Guinea.

The section on Suriname (which I also visited at the beginning of 2017), which was a Dutch colony from 1667 to 1975, did not note the violence performed by Dutch colonizers, but in a way that offered little space for commemoration. Contemporary Surinamese artist Marcel Pinas traced the contours of an arch-shaped doorway with human figures taken from period blueprints made to maximize the number of enslaved people “loaded” in a slave ship. Other references to violence are a shackle, a whip, and a famous print of a black woman undergoing torture (from Stedman 2016 [1790]), all shown in one small display on corporal punishment.¹⁴ In another small, somewhat hidden space, a list of one of the slave-trading companies’ 62 ships is shown, next to a cross section of a slave ship. The list showed ships that transported enslaved Africans between 1740 and 1795, which falsely suggests the Dutch participation in the slave trade was limited to that brief period (van Stipriaan 2006, 72; Weiner 2014a, 8). Altogether, the images and information given are limited and cramped between other objects that show the history of various ethnic groups in Suriname.

These issues and more were criticized by the Decolonize the Museum activist group and by others who started using the #Decolonizethemuseum hashtag in support of their cause.

¹⁴Balkenhol (2010, 77) reflects on the historic use of this image, and the changing aesthetics of violence, in the abolition movement and in more recent protests in 1998, when Barry Biekman showed the image in Dutch Parliament in a plea for a slavery monument (which was eventually successful).

DECOLONIZING THE TROPENMUSEUM: INTERVENTIONS BY AN ACTIVIST GROUP AND CRITICAL CURATORS

In 2015, the Tropenmuseum invited a diverse group of experts and activists for a brainstorming session about how the museum could change its exhibitions to reach and connects with a more diverse audience.¹⁵ Three women in the group, Simone Zeefuik, Hodan Warsame, and Tirza Balk,—in their own words: “black women, women of colour” who have “different colonial histories” and grew up in the Netherlands¹⁶—decided to open a Twitter account and coin the hashtag #DecolonizetheMuseum by which they and others posted criticism of the ways the museum represented the colonial past, people of colour, and the Global South. By actively using the hashtag to flag what they regarded as problematic in the museum, the growing group collected and disseminated criticism of the objects on display, the way they were displayed, and the museum texts. Besides the direct contact and the use of social media, the Decolonize the Museum group started writing open letters to the boards of other museums. They exposed examples of uncritical, Eurocentric, and harmful representations. The growing group consisted of mainly people of African descent between the ages of 20 and 35.¹⁷ Except for criticism of the way colonialism was (not) remembered, they also criticized the lack of accessibility of the museum for people with disabilities and called for more attention to gender and sexuality, showing an intersectional perspective in their inequality activism.¹⁸ Warsame described the background of the intervention thus:

In our activism and organizing, we critique and challenge what bell hooks calls the white supremacist capitalist, imperialist, ableist, hetero patriarchy

¹⁵Zeefuik and Warsame point out that Wayne Modest (head of the research centre for material culture) and Laura van Broekhoven (head of curators) initiated this conversation (12–13 November 2015, <https://vimeo.com/164082870>, consulted 7 November 2017; interview Zeefuik, 14 August 2017).

¹⁶Presentation of #Decolonize the Museum at Global Annual Event: On the Poetics and Politics of Redress, by Hodan Warsame and Simone Zeefuik on 12–13 November 2015, <https://vimeo.com/164082870>, consulted 7 November 2017.

¹⁷Hodan Warsame and Simone Zeefuik on 12–13 November 2015, <https://vimeo.com/164082870>, consulted 7 November 2017.

¹⁸Interview Simone Zeefuik, 14 August 2017.

[the group added “ableist” and “hetero” to hooks’ quote]. (...) We are not academics, we do not have a background of working in museums, but we work from an embodied experience of being confronted with the everyday effects of colonial thinking in its many forms; from our own experiences as visitors of the Tropenmuseum, which before this project has been absolutely essential in reproducing that colonial thinking. (Hodan Warsame, 12–13 November 2015)

On social media (Twitter), there were particularly many comments on texts, for example on a text that stated that people with a mixed European and Indonesian background (called Indos) were considered equal to (white) Dutch and Europeans: “Were Indos really equal to Europeans?? Tell the whole story please” (@Thifa, 3 April 2016). The use of maps and their lack of contextualization were also criticized. A map of North Africa in an exhibition on Africa, for example, showed straight borders, prompting someone to comment: “Are we really talking history without discussing ruler straight borders like these?” (@simbuktu, 3 April 2016). There are comments on words that are used in the texts without being problematized, such as “coolie” and “bush negro” (@Ernestine98270332, 16 April 2016). Furthermore, commentators also noted what was *not* shown or articulated: “The land grab, the slavery, the genocide are shamelessly hushed up” (@MarjanBoelsma, 10 October 2015). Several voices on social media asked whether there were people of colour working at the Tropenmuseum, or how many of them were responsible for writing the wall texts: “You need structural change: Hiring policy? Critical curators? Critical focus groups?” (@SamoraMakonnann, 23 September 2015).

There was also criticism of the prominent portrayal of colonizers in the exhibition on the Dutch Indies. The aforementioned craniometer was criticized in a Twitter post too. A picture of the craniometer shows the museum text, which says that “physical anthropologists” carried out expeditions, encountered “unknown peoples”, and measured racial characteristics. The post criticized the museum for representing the “exploring” of European physical anthropologists as an unproblematic “Disney-like adventure” (@uniofcolour, 12 September 2015).

Social-media comments also addressed issues the Decolonize the Museum group discussed in brainstorm sessions with the museum, for instance, “Words like ‘contact’ need to be put in perspective”, which points to the unproblematized power relations that the (first)

“contact” between Europeans and people in the Global South entailed. Suggestions made during these group sessions were also posted on Twitter: “Offer a critical tour that focuses on the colonial nature of the museum”; “You’ll reach communities by including communities”; “Book launches!”; “Offer your space!” (These are all tweets by Zeefuik quoting other people in the meeting, @simbuktu, 10 October 2015).

The initiatives led to a conference at the Tropenmuseum in April 2016, organized by the group and also titled Decolonize the Museum. The panellists were Dutch and international curators, artists, activists, scholars, and museum professionals.¹⁹ Issues were raised regarding ethnographic museums in the Netherlands and beyond. Eurocentrism, white supremacy, and the museum’s assumed neutrality were the main issues, as well as the issue “We base this critique on the museum experience of ourselves and our friends whose heritage is studied and analysed, but who, ourselves, are seldom the target group of ethnographic museums”. The articulated aim of the conference was to prevent the “neo-liberal conceptions of ‘diversity’ [to] become the limit of change”.²⁰

During the conference, words that made an impact were cited on social media, sometimes by several users of the hashtag. The following quoted analogy represents the aim of decolonizing efforts from the perspective of a visitor with a postcolonial background: “to walk into your own family album without finding that all your pages are ripped out” (@SYFUCollective, 16 April 2016, quoting Simone Zeefuik). A quote from an unknown speaker wishes that the agency of colonized and enslaved people were represented: “Agency is distributed so falsely; this is a misrepresentation of history” (@SYFUCollective, 16 April 2016). The comments also reveal an activist stance and a drive for agency in future activism: “Put your foot down. Don’t ask for permission, but put your foot down” (@uniofcolour, 16 April 2016). Similarly, another commentator writes: “Change will come quicker when we realize that we don’t need to accept the position of ‘underdog’ given to us” (@SimeonRGreene, 16 April 2016).

During the April 2016 conference, the Decolonize the Museum group placed six text panels next to older wall-text panels, offering

¹⁹<https://tropenmuseum.nl/nl/pers/gedeeldegiedenis-2017> (3 November 2017).

²⁰Website conference, <http://afromagazine.nl/agenda/decolonize-museum-conference-april-16th-2016> (25 July 2017).

criticism of the exhibition alongside alternative, more critical texts. These highlighted violence, exploitation, and the role of the museum itself in acquiring objects that were stolen or otherwise taken as trophies:

Museums like the Tropenmuseum, ethnographic museums, were meant to display the wealth of the colonies and they were also meant to show how strange, different and primitive colonized people were, justifying the hierarchy that placed the colonizer above the colonized. Thereby justifying the violence of colonialism. (Written by Hodan Warsame)

The group's texts were displayed in the museum for several months, after which they were removed by the museum. According to Zeefuik, the museum planned to take their comments into account in changes to be made to the permanent collection, and the group therefore agreed on removing them. A second conference was organized on 9 February 2017, this one specifically about the (Dutch) history of slavery. At this conference, Lonnie Bunch of the National Museum of African American History and Culture was guest of honour, showing that this museum was seen as offering good practices.

The already mentioned interventions were followed by an intensive cooperation between curators and the Decolonize the Museum group (especially Simone Zeefuik) in writing and editing museum texts. According to the curators, Decolonize the Museum had a significant impact on the way texts were formulated in editing sessions, as well as over email. The curators believe that this working process had a more direct impact on the museum than what was posted on social media, which they hardly followed. The output on Twitter did help the group develop their ideas, sift out what was important, and connect. To indirectly quote political scientist Olivia Rutazibwa, who spoke at the Decolonize the Museum conference: "Social media helps with structural organizing" (@simbuku quoting Rutazibwa, 16 April 2016) and provides "support and helps to structure the conversation" (@Ernesti98270332 quoting Rutazibwa, 16 April 2016). The conferences and working groups helped the Tropenmuseum develop general directions for change: according to the curators, they confirmed their ideas about the importance of being more explicit about power relations and how these are reproduced in the ways objects were displayed and described (interview Pim Westerkamp and Rik Herder, 7 December 2017; interview Richard Kofi, 7 December 2017).

OBSERVED CHANGES IN THE TROPENMUSEUM

In combination with the museum officials' growing interest in change since the 1990s (apparent in the hiring of more critical curators with postcolonial and more critical academic backgrounds),²¹ the interventions have resulted in crucial changes to the way the museum (re)presents cultural heritage. Based on the suggestions of the Decolonize the Museum group, and on their own changing ideas, the curators have added new texts to the older exhibits, while a new exhibition especially offers a more critical voice on Dutch colonial heritage.²²

I will discuss three sections of the first floor of the museum—where the permanent exhibitions are found—and show how recent interventions affected the issues highlighted above. I chose these three sections because they can be seen as representing different ways of displaying the past.²³

The first section concerns a display of objects from New Guinea (previously part of *Oostwaarts!*). The masks, statues, drums, shields, weaponry, and so on are still all in a large glass display, which has a somewhat homogenizing effect. Although the organization of the objects in the display has not changed here, texts have been added that show the objects from another perspective. A new introduction explains that New Guinea is a diverse island, and that its diversity of agricultural and naval

²¹In tweets posted during the conference, attendees noted the curators' critical involvement in the discussion, including self-criticism about the (historical) role of museums, for example quoting curator Wayne Modest: "We have a responsibility to undo some of the violence done by the institution." (@tevree, 16 April 2016). According to accounts on social media, he also said that it is not a "one-off fix", but something that needs to be done over and over, and that future generations need to keep it up (@nadine0tha, 16 April 2016). Additionally, three of the five curators have a post-colonial background, with roots in Jamaica, Indonesia, Ghana, and Europe.

²²Wayne Modest, Richard Kofi, and Martin Berger were in charge of the *Afterlives of Slavery* exhibition. The curators in charge of the changes to the *Oostwaarts!* exhibition were Pim Westerkamp and Rik Herder. The opening of the *Afterlives of Slavery* exhibition (13 October 2013) also marked the changes to the permanent exhibitions. The temporary exhibition is meant as a prelude to major changes to the entire permanent exhibition planned for 2021.

²³Liliana Ellena and Leslie Hernandez, fellow members of the Bodies Across Borders in Europe research team, joined me on one of the visits for observations in October 2017 and had considerable input.

techniques developed over tens of thousands of years. While the old introduction made it seem like there was one essentialized culture, stating that “rituals and ceremonies” used to be important in everyday life, the new text highlights diversity, technology, and change. Another new text informs the visitor that ceremonies are important in New Guinea, but that they have gained a new role as they have become embedded within Protestant, Catholic, and, recently, increasingly into Islamic religious calendars. This shows how cultural practices change and objects are given new meanings over time, liberating the presented objects and “cultures” from their more essentialist presentation and revealing the hybridity of culture. An added text, entitled “Only for Men?”, discusses how men underwent initiation rites in the men’s houses where many of the presented objects would be located, thereby showing a gendered aspect of the collected objects and indicating how objects from women’s lives are absent from this collection. Another text mentions that some of the objects might have been stolen during the colonial period and that this issue is currently being considered, while the previous text said they had been “bought and given”.²⁴ A separate text now explains the shared history between the Netherlands and New Guinea, formulating the colonial past as the Dutch “occupation” (1884–1962, with the exception of the WWII years, when Japan occupied New Guinea). Unlike in the previous introductory text, colonial history is neither ignored nor presented as of primary importance to the presented objects. Also new and de-essentializing is the work of art by Dutch artist Roy Villevoe that has been added to this section. His work displays photographs of Asmat people from New Guinea wearing t-shirts that they customized with patterns made up of tears and holes. Some of the t-shirts are exhibited as well. This form of cultural reinterpretation of material culture by customizing “Western” t-shirts shows the creative agency of Asmat people and functions as a crossover of ethnographic artifacts and art within the museum.

In other words, the recontextualization with new texts and objects allow the objects to cross previously rigid categorizations and temporal

²⁴The Tropenmuseum moreover possesses a collection of human remains, mainly from the former Dutch colonies. These remains are currently not exhibited, and the museum wants to return them to their ancestors or country of origin. How this will happen and to whom they will return is still an ongoing struggle (Vrij Nederland, March 2018, <https://www.vn.nl/dekolonisatie-kasten-vol-schuldgevoel/>, consulted 14 May 2018).

borders and reveal their intersectional dimensions of inequality (gender and ethnicity/race). As this first section's changes mostly concern text and not in the objects' presentation—with the exception of the works by Villevoye and the Asmat—there is some friction between the text and the way objects are displayed. The experience of seeing objects displayed together, even if explained and contextualized separately, still has a somewhat homogenizing effect.

When moving to the second section, formerly also part of *Oostwaarts!* and now called “Indonesia”, the objects are displayed in more thematic and diversified ways. After the interventions by Decolonize the Museum and the curators, the title of the exhibition was removed, which addresses that title's suggested celebration of conquering “the East”²⁵ and its orientalist connotations. Though this exhibition still displays colonizers and what they collected rather than the colonized, extra texts put objects in a new, critical perspective by explicitly highlighting oppression: “Colonialism refers to the practice whereby one country conquers and occupies another, using force, deception and betrayal. The original inhabitants are politically, economically, culturally and socially dominated, exploited and oppressed”.

There have also been changes to the texts explaining specific objects. Next, to the craniometer, it now says: “Photographs, body measurements and parts of skeletons they had collected were used to develop a hierarchical classification of people's intelligence and character. [...] Research and science were clearly being used to justify colonialism”. This new text offers a more critical perspective than before, and is more in line with contemporary academic ways of understanding such practices (Adas 1989, 293; Pieterse 1990, 96; Gikandi 2011, 6).

Although the added texts offer a more critical perspective and reveal the violence that came with colonialism, resistance against oppression still gets little space in this part of the exhibition; and neither do the positioning and narratives of people with mixed Indonesian-Dutch descent, although they formed the majority of people who migrated

²⁵ *Oostwaarts* (which translates to “eastward”) is the title of a book by Louis Couperus (1924) that collects 41 travel letters from the Dutch Indies. The book is an acclaimed work of literature, but he writes in denigrating terms about the indigenous population and he is uncritical of Dutch colonizers.

to the Netherlands after decolonization. (As noted earlier, these were points of criticism by the users of the #Decolonizethemuseum hashtag). Additionally, objects are still often explained from a European perspective. Despite breaking with the “innocence” (Wekker 2016) and silence around Dutch colonial heritage, the agency and voice of the colonized are still hardly represented, especially visually, because of the absence of objects or images that embody colonial violence and resistance against it.

The third section I want to discuss is a new exhibition called *Afterlives of Slavery*.²⁶ Compared to the previous two sections, this exhibition pays more attention to violence and resistance, thereby adding a critical voice to the Dutch/European memory complex. Entering this exhibition, the visitor is confronted by a screen showing either Onias Landveld or Dorothy Blokland, depending on from which side you enter, reciting a poem. Both poems are compelling, personal, and critical, remembering slavery and resistance from a personal as well as a collective perspective. Shot in stark and static black and white in the Tropenmuseum’s main hall, this lends the videos a (colonial) grandeur. At the same time, their fast editing resembles contemporary music videos, giving them a contemporary look, while also alternately bringing the viewer close up to the artist and farther away, offering a personal and a more distant view. Collective remembrance is represented by a button both poets wear that says “1873”. This openly criticizes the official narrative of remembrance: Though the official year of abolition is 1863, “freed” enslaved people in the Dutch Caribbean were forced to work for their former owners for ten more years, whereas the latter were granted financial compensation by the Dutch state for the loss of their workers.²⁷

Compared to the other sections of the museum, resistance and agency are more strongly embedded in this exhibition, presented in forms as far back as the time of transatlantic slave trade, including the Middle Passage, all the way to present-day protests. The museum walls bear accounts of revolts on board of slave ships, and there are short texts on rebels and abolitionists in the Dutch West Indies such as Tula, who led

²⁶The Dutch title is *Heden van het slavernijverleden*.

²⁷In the Dutch Indies, slavery was formally abolished in 1860 but continued until 1914 (Baay 2015).

a month-long revolt on Curacao in 1795, and Jan Houthakker, who was formerly enslaved and strived for abolition in Suriname and who bought the freedom of other enslaved people. There are accounts of communities of Maroons, escaped enslaved people who tried to free people who were still enslaved (but who, after signing a treaty, returned new escapees to their “owners” in exchange for being left alone themselves). Though there are few extant objects to visually support these histories, they help tell a strong narrative of resistance. Books and pamphlets on display by critical black writers and activists from the early twentieth century show that there was continuous criticism of colonialism and that black writers strived for workers’ rights (e.g. Anton de Kom). Objects used in more recent protests are also shown, including signs and T-shirts from recent protests against Black Pete (a Dutch holiday tradition that includes blackfacing that has been highly contested since 2011). A book by Gravenberch and Helder (1998) shows that there had been earlier protests against Black Pete, which actually dates back to the 1930s (see also Esajas 2014; Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2016). Furthermore, video interviews on large screens with famous members of the Dutch black community (e.g. cultural anthropologist Gloria Wekker and activist Marian Markelo) explain the relation between the precolonial/colonial past and current forms of inequality as well as resistances against these inequalities.

The exhibition also shows the same shackles and branding iron that were displayed in the previous exhibition on Suriname, but they are now recontextualized as part of a different narrative. The exhibition forms a context through which these objects are not just visuals in a tangent of the previous Suriname exhibition, but crucial physical pieces that connect the past to the present, embedded in narratives of protest. They function as reminders of the widespread physical oppression and dehumanization in the past. They are physical remnants that embody a link to the violence, suffering, and dehumanization that was integral to slavery and has implications for the present. Such physical connectivity to the past is also incited by the display of a photograph of Johannes Kodjo, a thirteen-year-old black boy playing on drums who was on display on Amsterdam’s Museumplein in 1883, surrounded by white people watching him behind a fence, as if he were in a zoo. It reminds us that even after abolition of slavery (in 1863/1873 in the Netherlands), acts of dehumanization continued. The same drums that are seen on the photograph (part of the museum’s collection) are now on display, for the first

time in this more critical context.²⁸ The drums offer us a physical connection with the boy who was forced to play them. These are forgotten histories that the objects and images help to collectively remember.

The exhibition also shows art and (other) cultural and religious forms of expression (mostly through video), and explains how these developed, tracing them back to places in West Africa, but also showing their influences from the United States and Latin America; this results in a display that depicts both a rich culture and the complex ways through which it develops. These cultural forms and their contextualizations through text also emphasize that the history of diverse black communities in Europe and the Americas did not start with encounters with Europeans and show that there is more to black history²⁹ than slavery. Furthermore, by showing various forms of art and culture, the exhibition crosses the border between arts and crafts that usually divides “art”, made by white Europeans, usually men with individual authorship, and “craft”, made by non-Europeans and/or women without any such authorship (Macdonald 2012, 30).

Altogether, the interventions have resulted in an exhibition that first of all represents a process. Moving through the three sections offers a mobility through time as well as space, through the history of ethnographic curation and related academic fields. Yet there are also overlaps, as new texts comment on objects that are still presented in “older” ways. The last and newest section I discussed showed ways in which heritage and memories have implications for the present and current decolonizing initiatives, which resonates with other interventions that might change

²⁸The photograph was also shown in the temporary *Black & White* exhibition curated by Van Stipriaan (1 November 2013–15 June 2014). According to Kofi, *Afterlives of Slavery* builds on *Black & White*, with the difference that the current exhibition has a stronger black-history narrative, paying more attention to the history of identity and “mental slavery”: “We wanted to show the unequal relationships that are hard to abolish” (interview, 7 December 2017).

²⁹I use the same terminology (terms like black history, black heritage, and black archives) as used on activist webpages and in interviews. Notably, these terms are used in English and not in Dutch, showing a strong connection with American black activism. I want to clarify that the people involved do not necessarily see that there is a single black identity or black history that is strictly separate from “white” history. It is a way of articulating a counter-narrative to dominant “white” ways of remembering, and a unifying language that incites belonging and potential for collective resistance.

the way the past is remembered. I will discuss my observations in the Tropenmuseum in the context of other local and international interventions, noting what this means for changes in Dutch/European heritage and its cultural archive and memory complex.

CONTEXTUALIZING CHANGES TO THE CULTURAL ARCHIVE AND MEMORY COMPLEX: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

The interventions by Decolonize the Museum and the curators resulted in an exhibition that offers a more critical view on Dutch and European heritage than the museum's previous exhibitions.³⁰ The exhibition now offers a more critical view in the sense that it enables reflection on history, including violent exploitation by the Dutch and Europeans and the way this has been opposed by colonized and enslaved people and their descendants.

The more critical view that the new exhibition offers is due to changes to visual representations and the positioning of objects in the museum space, but even more by verbally "unmasking" power relationships in heritage, including violence and resistance against colonial rule. The change agents present this display of resistance as an objectively more correct way of representing the past, one that makes it possible for people with postcolonial backgrounds to experience belonging (without having "pages ripped out of the family album", as Zeefuik pointed out).³¹ This way of seeing the way the past is remembered, is comparable to what Guno Jones (2012), in public discussions about a slavery documentary, indicated: a certain positivist epistemology prevails, in combination with a critical engagement with how memories of the past are selected and represented.

At the same time, the new exhibition uses cultural material and text to bring the past closer without inducing a strong sense of (collective) victimhood, instead producing strong empowered postcolonial identities that intersect with an awareness of other dimensions of identity

³⁰As said, there have been attempts to be critical, or to address racial and intersectional inequalities since the 1990s. The permanent exhibition, before the intervention, was however not perceived as such by the postcolonial visitors of the Decolonize the Museum group.

³¹@SYFUCollective, 16 April 2016.

and inequality (such as gender, sexuality, and disability). Especially in the third section, *Afterlives of Slavery*, this is achieved through showing examples of agency and resistance. According to curators Martin Berger and Richard Kofi, this was done consciously, following the example of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, which they visited before changing the exhibition.³² The curators have chosen to not create a strong “dramatization” of history, but mainly “to inform” (conversation with Berger, 2 November 2017; interview with Kofi, 7 December 2017). By not choosing dramatization and depicting victimhood, the exhibition also arguably does not induce a strong sense of guilt in visitors who are white Europeans and descendants of colonizers. From a critical perspective, not wanting to induce such guilt can be seen as a compromise born of a fear of backlash, or of “uneasiness”,³³ or of losing paying visitors. This issue has been discussed within the Tropenmuseum (for example on 2 November 2017) and outside the museum (Young 2011; Balkenhol 2014). Balkenhol points out that guilt and victimhood can induce “disavowal”, while a sense of responsibility for “never forgetting” can create a common ground, a sense of solidarity (2014, 43; conversation with Balkenhol, 6 November). In the case above, this sense of responsibility is taken up by the museum, which embodies the wrong/violence done in the past and now encourages change (a rethinking of history) inside and beyond its walls. However, one has to be cautious of “successful” changes. One of the curators of the new exhibition, the head of the research institute of the Tropenmuseum (and postcolonial scholar) Wayne Modest stated that: “On the day of the opening the exhibition has already failed”, as it is impossible to aim for a perfect solution. He said this to make clear that there is a need to continuously reflect on the exhibition and to plan new changes through communication with diverse audiences. As it concerns heritage that is itself always a process, exhibitions will always

³²The curators took other museums into consideration as well, for example the Red Star Line museum in Antwerp and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven (interview Kofi, 7 December 2017), but these did not have the same influence.

³³In a presentation in October 2016, Zeefuik stated that the Dutch concern with maintaining a sense of “gezelligheid” (coziness or comfort) is standing in the way of change: “[White visitors] want to do something ‘cultural’ with the children, but don’t want to feel uncomfortable. (...) So [they] go to the Tropenmuseum, where nobody is held responsible”.

have dissonances which require regular adjustments (discussion after presentation by Simon Gikandi at the Tropenmuseum, 2 November 2017). Modest's view on the need for regular adjustments actually aligns with that of Susan Legêne, who was involved in curating *Oostwaarts!* in 2003. Regarding the recent changes, she states that it is up to new curators to make adjustments and create new exhibitions, which according to her takes place in the context of "changed institutional and societal contexts" (email exchange, 15 February 2018).

Nevertheless, there are some "successes" (though, admittedly, distinguishing between failure and success somewhat oversimplifies matters). The interventions, especially the new exhibition on the afterlives of slavery, form a postcolonial counter-narrative to an ethno-nationalist discourse, thus helping visitors understand their/our cultural archive (Wekker 2016)—the way conscious and subconscious thoughts, images, feelings, and actions are formed collectively by colonial history and the way this is remembered—while this archive is at the same time opposed and broadened by the intervention. Radical changes to a cultural archive are of course neither simple nor self-evident, as this archive has been constituted over the course of 400 years and is embedded in everyday experiences. Moreover, visitors might oppose changing their mind about anything at all. Reflecting on the role of the museum in a meeting at the Tropenmuseum, Simon Gikandi stated: "You don't have racists entering the museum who leave baptized" (2 November 2017). Only certain people will visit the museum in the first place, plus there are limitations to what museums can do. Gikandi sees possibilities for change in the reasons why people visit the museum: "Rather than a radical intervention it can be seen as a pedagogical project. People expect to be educated. They come out of curiosity". Though the changes at the Tropenmuseum cannot decolonize the Dutch cultural archive overnight, they present an important counter-narrative that actively opposes ethno-nationalist discourse.

Except for the interventions' (limited) individual impact on museum visitors, there is potential for further changes within the memory complex because there are now changes planned in other major (Dutch) museums. In 2014, the Tropenmuseum merged with two other ethnographic museums, the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal and the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. Through this fusion (a state austerity measure), the two other museums can learn from the interventions in the Tropenmuseum: Decolonize the Museum has already presented in

the other museums, and there is a great deal of knowledge and opinion exchange between the curators. There are also plans to make changes within the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, starting with a temporary exhibition on slavery in 2020. Wayne Modest, head of the Research Centre for Material Culture of the Tropenmuseum and curator of the *Afterlives of Slavery* exhibition, will be involved in creating that exhibition,³⁴ which shows that recent changes within the Tropenmuseum are seen as a way forward. Such major museums with many local and international visitors (especially the Rijksmuseum) are important in building the imaginary of the national and European past (not to mention world history), therefore affecting how power structures are imagined at national and international levels. Interestingly, the Dutch government (at the time of writing a coalition of right-wing, conservative, and centrist parties) plans to make visits to the Rijksmuseum mandatory for children in an embrace of nationalist discourse that leans towards ethno-nationalism. The government's coalition agreement states that: "It is of great importance that we actively foster [our] history and [our] values. They are anchors of Dutch identity in times of globalization and insecurity" (Coalition Agreement, 10 October 2017).³⁵ In an effort to strengthen national citizenship, the Dutch government wants to oblige Dutch schoolchildren to visit the Rijksmuseum at least once in their school career (Coalition Agreement, 10 October 2017). As part of this (ethno-)nationalist intervention, schoolchildren might thus encounter postcolonial narratives and imagery in the museum. Countering this observation is that the shift towards stronger ethno-nationalism might also mean that the critical postcolonial rethinking of the past is in danger. Currently, however, there are many plans to change and decolonize museums, and a "slavery museum" is being planned in Amsterdam. According to curator Richard Kofi, there is still a risk of not following through or doing only "cosmetic" projects, however (interview, 7 December 2017).

³⁴ <https://museumactueel.nl/2020-expositie-slavernijverleden-rijks/>, consulted 7 December 2017.

³⁵ The shared histories and values that the government sees as crucial were canonized in a 2006 document in the form of 50 themes, including: "The Dutch East-India Company", "Slavery", "Indonesia", and "Suriname and the Dutch Antilles". The National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (NiNsee) has advocated for taking up specific topics concerning slavery (van Oostindie 2012), but the canon has also been criticized for its lack of attention to the implications of slavery in the present and for reproducing colonial imagery (Weiner 2014a; van Oostrom 2007).

The changes at the Tropenmuseum also have a larger impact on the memory complex and cultural archive because they coincide and strongly resonate with other recent (and older) protests and changes. The interventions should thus be seen in the context of, and as a contribution to, many forms of activism and resistance, not necessarily carried out by the same change agents but with a great deal of overlap in their networks and discourse. A group of Afro-Surinamese Dutch activists, for instance, successfully pleaded for a National Slavery monument in Amsterdam, unveiled in 2002. According to Kofi, there are many young curators and activists who inspired his work in the Tropenmuseum. He lists fourteen names, twelve of whom, he says, have postcolonial backgrounds. According to him, they are creating exhibitions and art that “change the cultural landscape”, noting that without them the recent changes in the Tropenmuseum would not have occurred: “they are my backup and give me confidence”. He specifically singles out Imara Limon of the Amsterdam Museum, Amal Alhaag, an independent curator and researcher, and Dyonna Bennett for her research on inclusivity in museums. The movement, however, is broader than just the fields of curation and art in which these fourteen people work. Since 2013, there are protest groups in the Netherlands that aim to decolonize the university (e.g. a group called University of Colour, also a participant in the Twitter conversations), which has impacted the curricula of some educational programs, as well as codes of conduct, and instigated the a monitoring committee for diversity at the University of Amsterdam (Wekker et al. 2016). There have regularly been protests against Black Pete that are highly visible nationwide (and abroad), slowly resulting in changes to the celebration in schools, especially in the more densely populated areas of the Netherlands, but also leading to a very strong backlash (Esajas 2014; Rodenberg and Wagenaar 2016). Additionally, tourists can now go on a Black Heritage Tour through the canals of Amsterdam; there is a growing archive on (Dutch) black history (The Black Archives³⁶); books on racism are being written and debated in Dutch media by black (women) writers, specifically addressing colonial memory and the responsibility of white Dutch people (Wekker 2016; Nzume 2017;

³⁶The Black Archives is a publicly accessible archive that shows “black and other perspectives that are under-exposed in other places” (my translation, www.theblackarchives.nl, consulted 31 May 2018).

Sherif and Rouw 2018). Furthermore, two political parties have recently formed that address racism as a main societal issue, of which one also addresses intersecting dimensions of inequality. One party won three seats in Dutch Parliament in the 2017 election, and both are very vocal in Dutch media. Together, all these efforts (and many more) form a strong counter-narrative against an even stronger dominant ethno-nationalist discourse that aims to keep the way the past is remembered the same. The ethno-nationalist discourse, however, is more strongly represented in politics. The political parties that most strongly articulate this discourse, the Freedom Party (PVV) and Forum for Democracy (FVD) earned 15% of the votes in the 2017 elections; while, with 38% of the votes, the conservative coalition parties—People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD), Christian Democrats (CDA), and Christian Union (CU)—also strongly lean towards such an ethno-nationalist discourse.³⁷

The changes at the Tropenmuseum can have a larger impact on the (Dutch) memory complex as they testify to a change in the way change agents intervene in less compartmentalized ways. Although Oostindie (2012) has argued that there is no such thing as a postcolonial community in the Netherlands, and that organizing happens mostly along pluralist lines by which certain communities have stronger voices than others, the interventions in the Tropenmuseum were carried out by a diverse group of postcolonial migrants and people of colour who present themselves as such, crossing borders of ethnic “compartments”. Not only does this group cross borders of ethnic and racial communities, it is also involved in anti-neoliberal, feminist, LGBTQ, and disability activism. It does so, additionally, in predominantly white and elitist spaces. By crossing borders between minority categorizations and moving beyond their compartmentalized spaces, there is more potential for change within the memory complex, including the cultural archive of the majority population, especially because the white population is explicitly addressed (Wekker 2016; Nzume 2017).

Lastly, the changes in the Tropenmuseum are part of an international movement³⁸ that is learning from experiences beyond the Dutch borders and possibly serving as an example for other museums internationally,

³⁷The more progressive liberal party Democrats ’66 completed the coalition.

³⁸There is a sense of alliance with the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, as could be witnessed by the protests held in solidarity in Amsterdam, consulted 10 July 2016.

changing the memory complex even further. Opened in 2012, the Memorial to the Abolition of Slavery in Nantes, France, is known for its critical exhibition on slavery and resistance against it in a public space. France is also planning a slavery museum. Belgium, meanwhile, has a large ethnographic museum (KMMA) in Tervuren that famously did not change its main exhibition for 50 years. It closed its doors in 2013 to open again in 2018 after thorough adjustments, because “the setup was often not much critical about the dominant 20th century colonial imagery”.³⁹ Altogether, decolonization is becoming a way forward for ethnographic museums, slavery museums, and other institutions.

The interventions and changes in the museum thus do not stand on their own but are part of a larger international postcolonial movement or project that is grounded in international (black) activism aiming to rethink the way the past is remembered, while taking intersectional dimensions of inequality into account. Because of the resonance with other interventions, both nationally and internationally, structural changes in the memory complex and cultural archive are more likely to take place, while opposition against these changes might grow as well. Both discourses are part of a globalized and highly connected world in which political issues and perspectives travel easily through (social) media, albeit with nationally and locally specific articulations.

CONCLUSION AND THEORETICAL REFLECTION

In recent years, the way the past is remembered in the Netherlands has seen some interesting changes that were initiated by change agents actively trying to create a more inclusive and critical way of remembering an often troubled past. In their efforts to create a more inclusive and critical (Dutch/European) heritage, they exposed (embodied) experiences of dissonant heritage.

Though the changes in the Tropenmuseum have been local and limited, they resonate with a wider movement and therefore have the potential for further change, serving as an example and motivation for changes elsewhere. At the same time, they take place in a strong ethno-nationalist context, which makes intervening in heritage a very fragile endeavour (Jones 2012).

³⁹http://www.africamuseum.be/renovation/renovate/index_html?set_language=nl&cl=nl, consulted 17 November 2017.

The Tropenmuseum, and therefore on the (Dutch/European) cultural archive and memory complex, has been impacted by showing dissonance on social media through images and texts, writing open letters, communicating with the museum directly, recontextualizing objects and images through alternative texts, and organizing conferences. The dissonances mainly concerned an experienced lack of visibility of the oppression and violence of colonialism and slavery in public spaces, an absence of articulated thoughts on the implications of colonialism for the present, and a lack of visibility of the agency and resistance among the colonized, perpetuating colonial notions and images of global and racial inequality. In this case, curators, researchers, and exhibition makers welcomed the input from Decolonize the Museum and were open to discussing these dissonances and making changes. The case study has shown how a museum—here personified by their curators and other staff in charge of exhibitions—changed the way the past is remembered, not only by what it chooses to display, but also by deciding on who chooses what is being displayed and how this is contextualized in text. The current exhibition shows agency and resistance throughout history, including the intervention itself, and thereby posits a way of remembering in which stereotypical images of Europe’s conquests as active and the colonized as passive are debunked, without forgetting the injustices and violence in history.

The interventions, as well as the curators’ actions in response, furthermore started taking “cultures” and their objects out of their essentialized boxes. Objects and artworks are now (re)contextualized in different times and places, showing how culture develops over time, never being fixed. It is not only geographical and temporal borders that are crossed, but also those between ethnic/racial categories, creating “de-compartmentalized” spaces. More fluid understandings of culture also arise from crossing the borders between what is considered art and what craft. Interventions and changes in the exhibition not only evince racial/post-colonial inclusiveness in the act of remembering, but they also engage with (intersecting) gender justice and the experiences of disabled persons, crossing borders between categorizations or inequality dimensions that are often viewed separately. Change agents thereby enacted an intersectional perspective that built on African American feminist activism dating back as far as the nineteenth century. Though this intersectional perspective was certainly grounded in diasporic connections, the change agents also actively represented these memories, embodying and

materializing them through their activism in order to ensure a strong, resistant identity now and in the future, while at the same time opposing essentialism and fixed categories.

It is still unsure whether the recent changes at the Tropenmuseum and other (ethnographic) museums will prove to be exceptional and temporary, ultimately being crushed by the prevailing cultural archive of innocence (described by Wekker 2016) and the raging ethno-national discourse, or whether they actually form an example and point the way for changes at more museums in the Netherlands and beyond, altering the cultural archive profoundly; it will all depend on whether forms of resistance continue and whether people who get to make decisions over what is remembered continue to make more inclusive and critical choices. The dominant ethno-nationalist discourse currently shows no signs of abating. At the same time, change agents are still pushing for more inclusive ways of remembering, which has shown to have an impact, though it remains an ongoing struggle.

I would like to leave you with one last theoretical reflection. I have studied these interventions with the aim of understanding how changes take place within the cultural archive and memory complex. I have intentionally combined many key concepts in remembering the past—cultural archive, memory complex, dominant discourse, and (dissonant) heritage—in order to best understand the changes I studied, but I have also explored how these concepts relate to each other. After concluding my analysis, I can see that both cultural archive and memory complex are useful as overarching concepts in that they indicate the similarity in the way the past is remembered within and between countries with similar pasts, in this case a colonial past which is still relevant for the present. These concepts can also help reveal the complex connections between memories, physical objects, images, and emotions, and situate other key concepts in more helpful constellations. As part of the overarching memory complex, these other concepts—memory, identity, (dissonant) heritage, counter-narrative, dominant discourse—and what they refer to can all question or confirm the cultural archive. I furthermore noticed that the cultural archive has a strong relation to dominant discourses. The former is more historically and emotionally grounded, whereas discourse has a strong basis in language production, values, and norms, but also in the actions and policies that are perpetuated through them, mostly in ways that reproduce the status quo. In that sense, the cultural archive actually consists of strongly historicized and (also) embodied dominant

discourse. Since memory complex is such an overarching term, it sometimes has little meaning; as it can contain discourses and collectivities that oppose each other, it can be hard to point out where exactly the power relations are. Therefore it is only useful as a concept in combination with (some of) the other concepts, especially dissonant heritage and dominant discourse, as they unearth and reveal conflict and dissonance, identifying a *dissonant* memory complex. What speaks in its favour is that it is relatively new and free from strong connotations. What speaks against it is the risk of drawing borders around “a complex” within societies that are mostly imagined as nationally bordered, while these borders actually are porous (as also shown in my discussion). The concept of dissonant heritage, lastly, exposes the fact that the way the past is collectively remembered involves power relations which can be exposed through social interventions by change agents who can question/oppose the cultural archive and dominant discourse, and thereby change “the” memory complex.

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