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Memory as resource and property

Tracking the intimacies between ways of remembering the past and governing the present

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This study examines how cultural memory can function as a tool to ground the identities of individuals and groups that are ‘embodied in difference’, in order to appear homogeneous enough to be deemed stable interlocutors within mainstream politics. Its expansive goal is to interrogate the politics behind the construction of a normative imaginary – and subject – of belonging as the standard against which to measure the potential for being folded into a promise of permanent inclusion. The emergence of this complex politics of recognition can be traced back to the advertised ‘failure’ of the multicultural project in the 2000s. However, it is the second half of the 2010s – the period going roughly from the ‘refugee crisis’ to the pandemic – to witness a growing intensity in how memory is staged as a resource and property. These years saw a hardening of Europe’s border regimes and the spreading of populist rallying cries against the influx of migrants. Concurrently, the heritagization of the ongoing ‘crisis’ moves in parallel with a new wave of knowledge production on the colonial past. What lies behind these synchronicities? Which are the intimacies between ways of governing the present and ways of commemorating the past? This dissertation tracks the evolution of this function of memory across different sites in Amsterdam that are engaging with the afterlives of colonialism and slavery but also with the entrenched histories of postcolonial and contemporary migrations. In these locations – physical but also epistemological – the ‘unsafe’ belonging of old and new Others is construed and contested.

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the present.

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INTRODUCTION

Intimate knowledge, inhabitable promises.	5
An evolving function of memory	10
Unsafe citizenship	13
Waiting to belong	15
Methods	19
Positioning	21
Chapter outline	23

CHAPTER 1 **27**

Memory as resource and property: the politics of belonging in a changing country

Introduction	28
From tolerance to ‘failed’ multiculturalism	29
Culturalized citizenship and recognition	34
Memory as resource and property	40
From liberation to citizenship rights	46
Conclusion	51

CHAPTER 2 **55**

Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum between colonial memory and post-colonial, migrant belonging

Introduction	56
A museum from ‘today and around the corner’	57
A new timeline of change	64
Good food, good neighbors and racial-colonial undertones	68
The ‘anti-squat’ museum: collecting rituals, exhibiting good citizenship	74
Conclusion	81

CHAPTER 3 **83**

‘... And that’s what stops me from feeling at home’: memorializing the ‘European migrant crisis’

Introduction	84
Aleppo: an exhibition for whom?	85
On not being a ‘refugee story’	92
Rederij Lampedusa: cruising the memory of migration	99
A boat tour and a multidirectional project?	104
Conclusion	110

CHAPTER 4	113
‘All the things happening outside the museum push me back in’: Exhibiting the After-lives of Slavery	
Introduction	114
Everybody wants to ‘do something with slavery’	115
Empathy, not guilt	120
The Zwarte Piet debate and everything ‘it glosses over it’	125
Doing decoloniality in the ‘happy talk’ of diversity	131
Conclusion	137
CHAPTER 5	141
Connecting the present and past of activism in The Black Archives	
Introduction	142
‘A space to feel safe . . . not only in our bodies but in our thoughts’	144
Meta-historicizing the Archives	148
‘We don’t talk about inclusion and diversity we breath it’	154
Heritagizing activism (as it happens)	162
Conclusion	168
CONCLUSION	171
Bibliography	184
Summary	202
Samenvatting	205
Acknowledgements	209

INTRODUCTION

**Intimate knowledge,
inhabitable promises.**

On June 1st, 2020 I found myself on Dam Square along with thousands for a protest in solidarity against anti-black violence in the US following the murder of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin. The date was chosen also to signal the beginning of Ketu Koti month – the annual celebration of the abolition of slavery during a year in which, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no public celebrations were allowed.¹ This was the first time that I left my apartment to knowingly go and be around a lot of people: in the months prior I, like many others, led a very insular life. At that point, so much of what we have come to define as the public sphere had been moved online whilst the tension inside the idea of ‘going back to normal’ continued to reach new heights. As I tried, working from home, to build up an acceptable writing rhythm I found myself at once too close and too far away from the subject of my analysis. Too close because as I spent more and more time indoors, often by myself, the protective barrier made of ‘real life’ stuff – like going out, planning travels, and seeing friends and family – became so thin. At the same time, I also started to feel more and more detached from keeping track of what was going on in the Netherlands, since the focus of my anxiety was pulsating miles away – where my family and friends were. Even though my ability to focus flickered and dimmed, I continued to push forward trying to connect my lines of thought to the here and now especially as it looked like in 2020. Because, if the roots of the topic of this thesis can be found in the advertised ‘failure’ of the multicultural project in the 2000s, it is the second half of the 2010s – the time period going roughly from the ‘refugee crisis’ to the pandemic – to have witnessed a growing intensity in how cultural memory is staged as a resource and property. This function of memory as a tool to ground identities and give substance to right claims has been evolving along with a ‘late liberal’ politics of recognition that makes use of different kinds of social difference to govern and manage populations (see for instance Povinelli 2002; and 2011). In this introduction, I first present some of the key concepts that have helped me give form to my research and the questions

1 Ketu Koti, which means ‘broken chains’ or ‘the chains have been broken’ in the lingua franca Sranan Tongo, has been celebrated in Suriname every year on July 1 following the abolition of slavery in 1863. Since the creation of the national slavery memorial in Amsterdam in 2002 the commemoration, which until then had a mostly private dimension, has been turned into a festival taking place in the city’s Oosterpark where the monument is located. The large event, which attracts several thousand visitors every year, begins with the Bigi Spikri (big mirror), a parade that see people dressed in traditional clothing marching for an hour from City Hall to Oosterpark. In recent years, cultural organizations have been developing a program devoted to the memory of abolition throughout the month.

at its center, then I explain my methodology and positioning, and finally, I outline the structure of the chapters.

Back on that day in June 2020, I stood on the side of the square surrounded by mostly young people from different ethnic backgrounds: I was uneasy because of the proximity to a crowd larger than I had anticipated and because I felt out of place. I suspected that many people *like me* – white, cisgender, able-bodied – felt compelled to attend because of the social media-augmented need to be seen protesting. I wanted to put a distance between me and them, between me and performative activism and virtue signaling. Yet there I was in that square, looking at the people around me but also, in a way, still seeing the images of the protests in American cities: burning buildings, water cannons, screams. From where I was standing I could not see who was giving speeches on the small stage in the center of the square – though I recognized some of their names. At one point, Mitchell Esajas from Amsterdam’s The Black Archives gave a speech in English. He showed a book from the Archives’ collection – Assata Shakur’s autobiography – and invited the bystanders to chant her words. He then raised several points: anti-black racism is also rife in the Netherlands and Europe and not a US phenomenon only; structural racism is not only present in the police force but also in many other institutions; for example, he highlighted how anti-blackness also surfaces in the European Union’s migration policy and in the way states implement it through the illegalization of, predominantly black, migrants who then are more vulnerable to economic exploitation (fieldnotes 2020).

Esajas’s speech helps me frame the fraught temporality that characterizes the ‘drowned memory space’ that silently shapes the narratives surrounding the contemporary migrant crisis by creating a wedge between contemporary migration flows and ‘the context of Europe’s constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and transatlantic slavery’ (Danewid 2017, 1679). Whilst this linkage remains at the border of dominant discourses about migration, identity, and Europeanness, both contemporary expressions of the memory of colonialism and slavery as well as first-hand accounts of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ are increasingly being heritagized. Ann Laura Stoler has asked whether the wave of ‘intellectual and political labor on the colonial past’ in recent years serves the purpose, not of historical reckoning, but as ‘an act of closure and of completion, as a new benchmark of virtue’, conferring ‘a new sense of moral and national conscience – precisely when the borders of Europe and who belongs in it are contested and racism across Europe is at once denied and celebrated...’ (Stoler 2016, 155–56). This dissertation

pushes this insight further by examining projects that center the memory of colonialism and slavery together with initiatives that make use of personal accounts of the experience of migration. The Netherlands, and the city of Amsterdam in particular, offer a rich terrain for this type of study. Different waves of migration have characterized the post-war history of the country, each bringing in new types of *migrants* – ‘postcolonial’, guestworker, asylum seeker. But these categories oversimplify the tangled histories behind the movement and resettlement of people in a country that did not happen to be their destination by chance. A precise ‘economy of affirmation and forgetting’ (Lowe 2015, 3) establishes the hierarchy between desirable and undesirable subjects as natural. How to question this naturalness? Which are the intimacies between ways of governing the present and ways of commemorating the past? This phenomenon can only be examined as multiscalar and multi-sited: it is not a product of the Dutch context, though it has been shaped by the country’s particular brand of colonial aphasia (Stoler 2011; Bijl 2012; Balkenhol 2014).

The interplay between past- and present-ness of colonial structures is a key concern of this dissertation but, by thinking through multiple time and space locations, I am not attempting to establish a ‘logical teleology in which one form of state morphs into the other’: colonial, then postcolonial, then neo-colonial (Alexander 2006, 211). Critics like Stoler and Derek Gregory have challenged with their work the notion of a postcolonial world and have argued against the spatial separation between colony and metropole (Gregory 2004; Stoler 2016). Following this line of thought, I want to draw attention to how colonialism’s ‘multiple projects’ cause to ‘rescramble[s] the “here and now” and the “then and there” to a “here and there” and a “then and now”’ (Alexander 2006, 211). This ‘rescrambling’ does not mean to collapse historical eras, but it does seek to make evident how notions of humanness always coexisted with definitions of non-human, and the expansion of citizenship rights always evolved together with the tools for withholding them. Lisa Lowe underlines how ‘the longevity of the colonial divisions of humanity’ is visible in how

in our contemporary moment . . . the human life of citizens protected by the state is bound to the denigration of populations cast in violation of human life, set outside of human society. Furthermore, while violence characterizes exclusion from the universality of the human, it also accompanies inclusion or assimilation into it. Such violence leaves a trace . . . (2015, 6)

In *The Intimacies of Four Continents* Lowe’s enacts a ‘project of tracking’ of the ways in which social differences – engendered through concepts like race, class, nationality, religion, gender, sexuality, and geography – become ‘elaborated as normative categories for governance under the rubrics of

liberty and sovereignty'(Lowe 2015, 7). Inspired by this and other works, I started to reflect on how coloniality resurfaces across locations and operates not just through division and exclusion but also through a particular way of absorbing, assimilating, and inviting in. The locations from which I start my analysis are therefore not that of exclusion and abandonment: the memory of colonialism and slavery is becoming a central aspect of the discursive space on heritage and belonging; the 'refugee crisis' has been memorialized across multiple projects and most of them have sought to include the voices of refugees themselves. These shifts are still unfolding and the progress they signal is unevenly distributed within the economy of attention in which memory works as resource and property.

My intention has been to track the different ways in which cultural difference becomes the cornerstone of policies that are exclusionary and, at the same time, the most valid mean to combat them: it is at once mobilized as a sign of the fundamental incompatibility of certain subjects, it determines why certain citizens are not proficient enough in the culture of their 'hosting country', and yet it is also depicted as an asset.² By reflecting on the politics motivating recent gestures of inclusion through interventions in the shared heritage of the nation, I developed a framework to help me bring into relief the tensions and disconnects behind the conditional welcome directed at old and new 'Others'. Whereas unassimilable *Difference* is determined through criteria that are racialized, classed, and gendered, the measurement of cultural *difference* is presented as merely a practical tool to assess the level of 'success' of minorities and the potential to integrate migrants according to a degree of cultural compatibility (see for example Lentin and Titley 2011; and for the Dutch context Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016; Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). By bringing together an interdisciplinary theoretical approach with an empirical focus on some of the locations in which the

2 In *Strange Encounters* (2000) Sara Ahmed employs Derrida's concept of conditional hospitality to address the politics of multiculturalism in which the nation is imagined as 'ours to give', which shifts the position of guests into that of 'hosts' as in those who can decide whether to be welcoming to strangers. (190). Further, in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) she argues that the multicultural nation offers 'hospitality and even love to would-be citizens as long as they return this hospitality by integrating, or by identifying with the nation'. In *On Being Included. Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) Ahmed returns to this concept to make visible how when diversity 'becomes a form of hospitality' organizations become 'hosts' who 'receive[s] as guests those who embody diversity' whereas to 'be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home. Conditional hospitality is when you are welcomed on condition that you give something back in return'. Therefore she posits that in 'white organizations' people of color are 'welcomed on condition they return that hospitality by integrating into a common organizational culture, or by "being" diverse, and allowing institutions to celebrate their diversity (43).

interplay between belonging and recognition takes place, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions: how do different memories can function as a *resource* and *property* for the groups whose belonging and citizenship rights are precarized and rendered unstable? Which politics does this function of memory serve? What are some of the locations in which current constellations of memory, belonging, and safety are formed? These broad interrogatives are connected to a set of sub-questions that directly relate to the case studies explored in each chapter, which are collected in the outline of the dissertation at the end of this introduction.

An evolving function of memory

During the 1980s and 1990s, the discipline of Critical Heritage Studies emerged as a growing body of scholarship that began to look at the social, political, and cultural dimension of heritage, gradually shifting focus from an idea of heritage as a collection of things to be preserved to that of something actively produced – and always undergoing negotiation. Understanding the processual dimension behind the designation of heritage means becoming aware of how manufacturing a shareable and recognizable version of the nation’s past runs parallel to producing subjects as either entitled to that past and belonging to that nation – or positioned outside of it. Stuart Hall observed that heritage is above all a ‘discursive practice’ that binds together a nation and only ‘through identifying with these representations that we come to be its “subjects” – by “subjecting” ourselves to its dominant meanings’ (Hall 2005, 5). Hall maintains that nations construct their identities by operating a selection of which ‘high points and memorable achievements’ coalesce ‘into an unfolding “national story”’ (Hall 2005, 5). The institutions in charge of producing and maintaining such a ‘selective tradition’ mature ‘a deep investment in their own “truth”’ (2005, 6). The reason why certain individuals belong while others do not is one of the ‘truths’, enacted by referencing a common heritage, through deep symbolic investments.

Rodney Harrison remarks how ‘nation-states have used heritage to produce and exclude subaltern minorities and to define what constitutes citizenship, allowing them to eliminate and persecute those who do not share the histories, values or ethnicities of majorities’ (Harrison 2012, 230). Within the European project, born out of post-Holocaust ethics and the human rights paradigm it originated, heritage and memory have been used for the upkeep of a common identity based on a common past; but also to influence access to EU membership. And, as Rob van der Laarse notes, ‘European [populist]

parties succeeded in winning the popular vote for a heritage crusade against multiculturalism, refugees, and Islamism on behalf of Europe's "original", white *Leitkultur*' (van der Laarse 2019, 106). Arjun Appadurai has argued that the past is a 'symbolic resource' that has 'cultural limits' structured on the need for credibility of history (Appadurai 1981, 281). The focus of this dissertation is not 'the past' or 'History' but an expanded notion of memory that moves between events from a long time ago and others that are still happening but that are already being made into objects of remembrance. The scale in which this process takes place does not coincide with the State, rather it moves between local, national, and transnational expressions of the same mode of governance. To order and manage subjects through differentiation contemporary forms of governmental rationality also need to narrate them: to connect each group to a story – and a particular memory space – that sets them apart from an Other. This Other is produced as failing to be fully knowable and thus must be kept under surveillance or kept outside of the nation/city/Europe. Recognizing yourself in the symbolic representations of the society you belong to – meaning also in its heritage – is granted, by design not chance, to some and not all. The designation of something as heritage of the nation, or of Europe, therefore runs parallel to the production of a shifting set of rules on what it truly means to be, for instance, an Amsterdammer, Dutch, or European. In fact, as De Cesari et al. point out that 'the progressive, inclusive, 'post-national' qualities of European memory and heritage' differ greatly from its "actually existing" constructions' (De Cesari, Bosilkov, and Piacentini 2020, 42): which are instead easily mobilized to produce 'the fiction of the closure of culture and heritage by territory and the naturalisation of a normative isomorphism nation/Europe-culture-territory' (2020, 42); at the same time, '[c]ontemporary dominant narratives of Europeanness tend to obscure the long, tentacular history of colonial domination and the ways in which these global entanglements have forged Europe's past and present' (2020,43).

Whereas several authors focus on the relationship between heritage sites and practices with the making and self-making of citizens what is yet not fully examined is the type of politics this relationship serves. Looking closely at these processes a specific *function* of memory comes into view: for individuals and groups who are 'embodied in difference' (Desai 2020) specific cultural memories can act as a tool to ground identities and make them cohesive enough to appear as stable enough interlocutors for the state, and state-like formations. This is necessary for a complex politics of recognition that allows for belonging to be unequally distributed among citizens and

prospective citizens and that pushes the question of structural change and redistribution of resources in a near future – while making it dependent on slow, trickle-down, and unevenly directed progress. In the push-pull between minoritized subjects and governing institutions that build the criteria of what is considered an acceptable bid to citizenship and belonging, memory acts as a resource: by claiming a connection to a specific past, these groups can both reinforce rights-based claims and prove to be ‘competent’ enough in the values and beliefs at the core of the nation. But it also functions as property: an endowment that needs to be curated, preserved and guarded from appropriation because its value lies in what it can be exchanged for. Using Gloria Anzaldúa’s poem *Borderlands/La Frontera* to punctuate her reflections, Trinh T. Min-Ha summarizes how difference and identity are articulated when occupying the particular position of being ‘*at home, a stranger*’ (Anzaldúa in Trinh 2010, 50 original emphasis).

You are wounded, lost in action/ dead, fighting back. The question as to when one should ‘mark’ oneself (in terms of ethnicity, age, class, gender, or sexuality for example) and when one should adamantly refuse such markings continues to be a challenge . . .

If you win, you lose. When multiculturalism and cultural diversity (as defined by the West’s liberal tradition) become sanctioned, the danger faced, expectedly enough, is that of control and containment. Authorized marginality means that the production of ‘difference’ can be supervised, hence recuperated, neutralized and depoliticized. Unless they ‘force’ their entry, therefore, marginalized ‘interpreters’ are allowed into the Establishment only so long as the difference they offer proves to be locatable and evaluable within the ruling norms (Trinh 2010, 51–52)

The largescale trade-off behind the evolution of this type of ‘authorized marginality’ is to enclose any type of struggle within discursive rules that establish preemptively what can be said and what can be gained: relevance for visibility, respectability through recognition, the love of the nation in exchange for another enemy to fear. While it remains important to highlight the agency of individuals and groups in producing counterdiscourses that question hegemonic versions of a nation’s heritage, we also need to draw attention to why, in the first place, heritage and memory are presented as effective resources for identity-based mobilization for recognition. Which politics are enacted through making culture – and heritage production – a privileged domain in which to articulate the demand to eventually belong?

Unsafe citizenship

By examining the evolution of elite discourses in the Netherlands after decolonization, Guno Jones notes how rarely the meaning of citizenship has been examined from the position of colonized citizens. Scholars have focused on the different ways subjects can access rights even without possessing national membership: cases in which ‘*non-nationals*... are partly treated as *nationals* by the polity’ (Jones 2014, 210). But to understand how unstable the status of a citizen can be, Jones suggests looking instead at the cases in which ‘states (begin to) treat *nationals* as *semi-* or *non-nationals*’: as the colonized in the overseas territories and their offspring in the European motherlands could experience’ (emphasis in the original 2014, 210). Contrary to dominant notions of status citizenship as granting a fixed modicum of rights and safety, Jones’ analysis focuses on its fissures along race but also gender and class lines. Political elites, first through appeals to biological differences and then by highlighting cultural incompatibility, create an ‘ever changing construction of “we” and “the others”’ that ‘makes the ideal of equal citizenship for all difficult to realize’ (2014, 332). Therefore

The possession of formal membership of a nation-state does not guarantee anything in itself. The political will of dominant groups in society, and the government, to include or exclude people, regardless of citizenship status, is much more important in determining social positions (Jones 2014, 332)

For this reason, I privilege a conceptualization of citizenship that does not focus only on rights and duties but that instead looks at the consequences of experiencing nationhood as not fixed, not always granted, whose fullness can be deferred to the future and that is predicated on knowing that others might fail to *achieve* it.

Becoming a subject is always defined through the exclusion of others. At the same time, being included always comes with a cost since subjection ‘applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him’ (Foucault 1982, 781). If we apply this insight to various configurations of citizenship we can see that the processes of ‘self-making and being made by power relations’ are constructed not only through biopolitical ‘schemes of surveillance, discipline, control, and administration’ (Ong 2013, 747) but also through affective tools. Proper citizenship is not only a matter of respecting a social contract but it also hinges on how this compliance is demonstrated and how appealing ‘real’ belonging is made to look: the only ticket into safety, into

entering a life free from the daily grind of worrying for survival. Although referring to national frames might appear as somewhat anachronistic, national membership appears still as the most straightforward path to security: whoever is positioned at its borders – the refugee, the homeless, the dissident – becomes an iconic figure warning citizens of what could happen to them. The expectation at the basis of contemporary citizenship, therefore, revolves around ideas of what constitutes a *good* Amsterdammer/Dutch/European, but also a *good* migrant with enough potential to integrate. Goodness as a vague but compulsory requisite is measured through parameters that are economic, and moral but also intimate: the request is not only to be productive, to obey laws, and fulfill civic duties, but to also be worthy of the unconditional love of the nation (Ahmed 2000; and 2013). This love, however, is reserved only for those deemed its legitimate children: those who look like the majority, who look like the protagonists of the nation's history and their effigies in museums and squares, and that can claim the past as theirs.

For instance, Michael Rothberg and Yasemin Yildiz employ the term 'memory citizenship' to describe the engagement of a group of migrant women in Germany with the cultural memory of the Holocaust (Rothberg and Yildiz 2011). The particular ways in which this memory has been operationalized to provide the European Union with its 'never again' telos has also resulted in how the adherence to a joint commemorative effort has become the entry ticket that determines whether a country can enter the Union (van der Laarse 2013). The post-Holocaust ethics that disproved the category of race as scientifically sound served also to affirm Europe's post-national but also post-racial essence. David Theo Goldberg calls this process one of 'racial Europeanisation' in which race disappears from public discourse whilst 'racist implications' become 'always lingering and diffuse, silenced but assumed, always already returned and haunting, buried but alive' (Goldberg 2006, 336). Rothberg and Yildiz then stress how full citizenship requires 'both memory work and affective labor across society' to eschew what Rothberg and Yildiz call the 'double bind' through which migrants are kept separated from the official commemoration of the Holocaust and then reprimanded as anti-Semitic for their supposed indifference to it (2011, 36). They recognize the bind as an example 'of the potential disciplining function that Holocaust discourse has come to take on in a unifying Europe, especially with respect to minorities considered "Muslim"' (2011,36).³ The authors link the women's

3 Nicholas de Genova examines how 'the European racial order produces and sustains a permanent suspicion and (at least) latent hostility towards 'Muslims' in a manner that nonetheless appears to uphold the official 'anti-racism' that has become an ideological fixture of post-Holocaust

efforts to the notion of ‘acts of citizenship’ meaning ‘collective or individual deeds that rupture socio-historical patterns’ and work to ‘create a sense of the possible and of a citizenship that is “yet to come”’ (Isin and Nielsen 2013, 2–4). Rothberg’s later work focuses on the concept of multidirectionality of memory that accounts for how the capacity to remember past tragedies does not operate as a ‘struggle over scarce resources’: instead, memory is always ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing’ (2009, 3); thereby collective memories of different violent histories ‘emerge in dialogue with each other’ (Rothberg 2019, 20) and can become a resource to activate against nationalism and populism with the potential of creating ‘new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice’ (2009, 5).). But scarcity is precisely the mean through which the capitalist systems of governance exert control by endlessly producing comparisons: some are entitled to the promises and affordances of safety while all others must wait for their turn. Ultimately, what this and other future-oriented analyses seem to overlook is that a citizenship ‘that is yet to come’ or ‘new visions of justice’ through memory, or similarly the potential to ‘create alternative future heritages’ (Harrison et al. 2020, 7), hinge on the suspended time of the wait. What are the consequences of entering the contest of who deserves to belong *more*?

Waiting to belong

Throughout this dissertation, I employ different terms to describe the groups of individuals that are stuck in the *waiting room*, to paraphrase Chakrabarty, of not knowing whether they will be considered good enough candidates for the type of full, unconditional belonging that would guarantee long-term safety from precarized versions of citizenship; this is the type of inclusion that also allows for joining in aspirations of what Lauren Berlant has called the ‘good life’, meaning the continued investment in promises of ‘upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy’ even ‘when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds’ (2011,

racial Europeanism. This ostensibly race-neutral ideological short-circuit is achieved through the hegemonic demand for ‘integration’ on the parts of migrants and their European-born ‘second-generation’ progeny, racially minoritized as being ‘of migrant background’. As in the larger metaphysics of antiterrorism, the dominant theme has consistently been not an indiscriminate ‘clash of civilizations’ against Islam as such, but rather a persistent and unrelenting impulse to sort and rank ‘Muslims’ as “good” ones or “bad”, “integrated” or “communitarian”, “friend” or “enemy”, “with us” or “against us” (De Genova 2018)

2-3).⁴ Under the constant pressure of recurring crises – financial, political, of public health but also the climate crisis engulfing all others – these fantasies have started to crumble and become untenable even for those individuals that because of their class, gender, race, and ability were able to expect at least a degree of security. In this heightened atmosphere, the stakes behind the possibility of inclusion into the polity of both potential and ‘unsafe’ citizens are higher and higher. Conversely, I often refer to a *we/us* to highlight a particular positioning: *we*, meaning people that because of our appearance, passport, and national identification number can expect a certain degree of safety. Examples of what happens when you have the wrong appearance and papers are all around us: cautionary tales in the form of people, strangers to fear, or maybe to help.

As citizens of the global North, we are able to enjoy a degree of protection but each of us is made aware of the limits to that protection: some are limited by their gender, some by their class, some by their ability, some by their ‘origins’ or their parents and grandparents’ origins – most by a combination of all these elements. These limits are there to exert control but also to subvert, bend, refuse. In this *we* I encompass processes of identification and disidentification in relation to a variety of ‘homes’: the city, the nation, Europe. Only a minority of individuals never need to question feeling at home in their personhood, nationhood, transnational affiliation and within the affordances gifted by these locations. Trinh T. Min-Ha has explored the opacities within the process through which someone is defined as a stranger: ‘[t]o be named and classified is to gain better acceptance, even when it is a question of fitting in a no-fit-in category’ (2010, 30). Since ‘[f]oreignness is acceptable once I no longer draw the line between the others and myself’ the road to follow is to ‘[f]irst assimilate, and then be different within permitted boundaries’; and yet this is not a linear progression: ‘[a]s you come to love your new home . . . you will immediately be sent back to your old home (the authorized and pre-marked ethnic, gender or sexual identity) where you are bound to undergo again another form of estrangement’ (2010, 30). Or a reading of this predicament that focuses instead on ‘its enabling potential’ would point at how ‘strangeness as confinement’ can be unlearned since ‘the home is here, there, wherever one is led to in one’s movement’ (2010, 30).

4 The fragmented temporality based on the wait has been analysed by different authors, among them, Dipesh Chakrabarty elaborates the idea of the ‘waiting room’ to describe how the idea of Europe as the original site of modernity has been used to justify both the denial of ‘self-government’ to the colonised countries ‘not yet’ ready for independence, and later, in the so-called ‘Third World’ as the period of time that is needed before transitioning to ‘capitalist modernity’ (Chakrabarty 2009).

But even from a position of relative safety we must contend still with the uncomfortable thought of knowing to be both injured parties and accomplices in the labor of ‘reproducing life in the contemporary world’ while ‘being worn out by it’ (Berlant 2011, 28). As Berlant explains this condition ‘has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the “technologies of patience” that enable a concept of the *now* to suspend questions about the cruelty of *later*’ (emphasis in the original 2011, 28). If the now hurts a little it does not matter because the later will be better: this is the foundational promise of the ‘good life’ under an ever-evolving capitalist rule that, by providing an infinite succession of ugly bargains masked as hopeful outcomes, keeps warding off the question of what the future is going to look like. With this I want to make visible how certain promises are produced and distributed across society: someone is entitled to the promise of permanent belonging, others are not; individuals and groups hinge their sense of self and their ‘good life’ prospects on a bundle of promises and expectations related to their feeling at home in society – even, as Berlant warns us, such promises might be ‘an obstacle to our flourishing’ (2011, 1) or ‘the problem in the first place’ (2011, 49); finally, these attachments – persistent, indispensable even when damaging – shape our ability to think about the future and participate in its creation.

There is one antecedent, which in the last twenty years has been increasingly coming into focus, that shows how a minoritized group can enter the mainstream by both surpassing and making use of their ‘difference’. Studies of the politics of gender and sexuality have examined this process from different angles: Lisa Duggan investigated the notion of ‘homonormativity’ as a form of neo-liberal sexual politics that ‘does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’ (Duggan 2003, 50). David Eng (2010) describes as ‘queer liberalism’ the desire for ‘liberal inclusion’ of gay and lesbian ‘citizen-subjects’ that is coeval and complicit with the rhetoric of color-blindness and that signals a move away from oppositional queer politics that questioned state-based legitimacy and recognition. Jasbir Puar has called ‘homonationalism’ the process through which gay rights have been reordered into an ‘optic, and an operative technology’ through which ‘acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’ of *some* gay and lesbian subjects function as ‘a barometer’ measuring whether the Muslim Other possesses ‘the right to and capacity for national sovereignty’ (Puar 2013). Jin Haritaworn et al. use the term ‘gay imperialism’ to describe another

facet of this phenomenon in which racism becomes a ‘vehicle’ for white gays and feminists to enter the political mainstream and gain recognition through ‘hyper-assimilationist arguments’: few ‘exceptional’ individuals are brought forth as examples of Muslims that have ‘emancipated or liberated themselves from their repressive culture, by embracing the gender-progressive culture of the “liberal West”’ (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008, 21). Sara Farris (2017) coined the term ‘femonationalism’ to describe the processes by which right-wing nationalist political parties but also neoliberals policy makers align with certain claims purported by feminist pundits, which argue that immigrants, and in particular Muslim men, are inherently sexist and thus a threat for women and LGBTQI+ subjects; this assumption is used to justify anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim policies and racist and xenophobic positions by reinforcing the notion that Western society is entirely egalitarian; Farris’ analysis also importantly emphasizes the economic function of these discursive strategies since neoliberal civic integration policies with the aid of some feminist groups direct Muslim and non-western migrant women into the segregating domestic and caregiving industries, under the guise of promoting their emancipation.

In the Dutch context, Gloria Wekker (2009b), drawing from Rosaldo’s understanding of imperial nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989), calls ‘homonostalgia’ the longing for a time – before multiculturalism – when gay liberation was not yet under threat by Islam. This mythological time is produced through political discourses that paint the acceptance of homosexuality as intrinsic to Dutch culture, and this way problematize the presence of Muslim populations within the Netherlands and Europe while justifying racist reactions triggered by it (see also the work of Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010; Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016; Mepschen 2017). In addition, Sarah Bracke (2012) dissects a variety of ‘rescue narratives’ typical of the 2000s ‘civilizational agenda’ that have been differently mobilized for Muslim women – who require saving from Muslim men; and for Muslim men – in the case of asylum seekers escaping from regimes in which homosexuality is criminalized; but also for ‘white’ Dutch gays – who need protection from Muslim men essentialized as violent extremists.

This phenomenon, which takes multiple shapes across different spatiotemporal locations and that is further compounded along not only race and gender but also class lines, has paved the way for a particular understanding of how belonging works: instead of a private feeling, it needs to become visible and measurable. The minoritized subject that can prove their feeling at home within liberalism, whiteness and Eurocentrism, patriarchal bonds and

capitalist extraction is one step closer to salvation. Subscribing to a fantasy of permanent inclusion entails, as Agathangelou et al. observe, a mechanism of ‘seduction toward something better’ that promises

an end to pain, marginalization, and violence in exchange for being recognized as legitimate subjects who can potentially participate in global capitalist relations and its futures – collusion becomes the cost of belonging.

Lest we slip (back) into the realm of the hated, the despised, the killable, and the disposable (that is, if we ever had a chance to leave), we must actively support and often embody the threat of force that lies on the other side of this tenuous promise, or so the logic goes (Agathangelou, Bassichis, and Spira 2008, 129; emphasis mine)

The promise behind this bargain – that things will be unquestionably better and you will be safe– is, purposefully, broken. And yet subscribing to this fantasy is not really a matter of choice: who can afford to choose to stay with the hated, despised, killable? This is perhaps where the spreading of ‘making safe’ strategies comes from: the necessity to creating of small bubbles in which to find a respite from the grind, from having to perform an identity good enough to avoid permanent violence. But what happens when safe spaces are offered by the institution and when power encroaches on the language of radical thought? The next section delves into the methods I have employed as well as why I chose them and from which epistemological positioning.

Methods

This dissertation is the final output of a Ph.D. training program called ‘CHEurope- Critical Heritage Studies and the Future of Europe’, funded through the EU scheme Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) – Innovative Training Networks (ITN), which run between 2017 and 2021. The training portion of the project consisted of a series of week-long seminars during which my fourteen colleagues and I would often discuss what does it mean to do critical theory today: interdisciplinarity was soon established as a key feature of the work we were embarking on. In the case of this thesis, I use the Critical Heritage Studies perspective as a starting point and expand it by drawing insights from memory studies, migration and citizenship studies, affect theory, critical race studies, and queer and decolonial thought. I envisioned my research project being case studies based and employing several data sources such as document analysis, observation, and interviews with informants. In particular, I relied on unstructured interviews along with direct observation but I did not seek to report in detail the lived experiences

of my respondents; rather – aware that interview data reflect ‘a reality constructed by the interviewee and interviewer (Rapley 2001, 4) – I employed our interactions as a starting point to examine how cultural memory, across different heritage settings, becomes the focal point of changing definitions of what belonging means and what citizenship looks like. In addition, I heavily utilized document analysis, which ranges from policy documents to newspaper features to YouTube videos, as my way of filling in the gaps between what institutions and organizations say they do and what they actually do. But as the outbreak of COVID-19 spread and we started living a more and more online-based existence, I had to switch gears and use a new slate of documents provided by recordings of talks, workshops, and interviews that could no longer take place in person.

While there isn’t a univocal definition of case study methodology (see for instance Yin 2003, Flyvbjerg 2011, Byrne and Callaghan 2014), I developed my approach starting with the need of keeping ‘abstract, decontextualized theorizing in check’ while interrogating ‘what passes as knowledge’ (Schatz 2013, 312) – and especially which theories of change are used to motivate the need for specific types of knowledge.⁵ I was made very conscious of the risk of losing myself in too abstract theorizing and therefore I sought to ground my project by selecting specific sites that would act as cases: the Tropenmuseum, Rederij Lampedusa, and The Black Archives. I picked these organizations not all at once but gradually as I began to explore the ties and blind spots between the commemoration of colonialism and different but connected memories of migration in the Netherlands and between postcolonial and (post)migrant forms of belonging. The Tropenmuseum – an institution in flux, everything but monolithic – provides the main setting of my investigation as an ethnographic museum at the forefront of rethinking its own role in relation to the legacies of colonialism and slavery; at the same time, the museum has been experimenting with different ways of communicating the fractures and negotiations behind a changing notion of national belonging through its programming and community outreach projects; Rederij Lampedusa – a very small but durable organization – has

5 Schatz argues that there are two ideal types of ethnographic case study work: an extrinsic-value form and an intrinsic-value form. In the first case, ethnography acts as a corrective on the process of theory building by keeping ‘abstract, decontextualized theorizing in check’ by continuously interrogating ‘assumed causal relationships, and raising the possibility that what passes for knowledge can be based on specious conclusions’ (2013, 312). In the case of intrinsic-form case studies, ethnography is used to capture insider meanings and complex contextuality so that the concerns of individuals that are being studied become central, in ‘an exercise that gives voice to the powerless, the subaltern, and the under studied’ (Schatz 2013, 315)

been offering to tourists and locals ‘alternative cruises’ over the Amsterdam’s canals featuring refugees and asylum seekers as tour guides in the attempt of questioning stereotypical representations of ‘newcomers’ and predetermined views of who should belong in the city; The Black Archives and their newest iteration, The Black Archives Bijlmer, is a grassroots organization located in the same neighborhood of the Tropenmuseum, which is establishing itself as an alternative center of knowledge production on the legacies of colonialism and on anti-racism activism in the Netherlands.

I selected these cases because of their heterogeneity in terms of size, structure, and missions since my goal was not to compare them but to underline how, as diverse as they are, they all operate and are enveloped within a precise configuration of memory, belonging and safety – that is constantly being renegotiated but that exists beyond individual organizations. Swanborn (2010) argues that cases can be located at the micro (persons and interpersonal relations), meso (organization, institution), or macro levels (communities, democracies, societies) and involve one actor or multiple actors. My way of examining organizations and their programming – zooming in between their position within larger power/knowledge configurations and a specific event or exhibition – travels between the levels: as organizations, the cases are located at the meso level; but through interviewing I gained access to the micro level of the personal relationships of the people working on a specific project; both individuals and organizations exist with larger structures such as the city of Amsterdam, but also Dutch society and even more broadly, the European Union; and across these macro levels the politics of heritage and belonging are played out through a variety of policies, stakeholders, publics, and counter-publics. My reasoning has been that a multilevel and multiscalar approach would allow me to place a practice – heritage and memory production – within specific sites – a museum, a grassroots archive, and a tour – into a wider context shaped not only by explicit policies but also by ways of envisioning the political.

Positioning

Increasingly case study research has been employed by action research and evaluation as a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics of certain groups, processes, or locations in order to instruct future action by governments, policymakers, and community organizers. But as I began to explore the ties between the commemoration of colonialism and different but connected memories of migration in the Netherlands, I knew I could not

apply an evaluative model to my case studies. I believe that ethnography can be a valuable tool for collaborative or co-generational action research aimed at social change. My intention, however, has been to intentionally take a step back from looking at solutions and alternatives to instead focus on reflecting on the nature of change and in particular, on what *we* accept as change. The first step for me was to become aware of and engage with the precise culture of scholarship that surrounds research done about the lives and cultures of racialized minorities in the Netherlands. Examining the closed circle connecting social research and public policy, Philomena Essed and Kwame Nimako observe that the data produced on ethnic minorities throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s focus largely on non-natives' 'migration and their degree (or lack) of economic, social and political integration in the Netherlands' (Essed and Nimako 2006, 286). The funding of this type of research depended largely on governmental schemes and was also heavily influenced by the notion of a '*grey middle ground* based on compromise, tolerance and majority consensus' (2006, 289) and the avoidance of 'radical' or polarizing – meaning critical – point of views. For this reason and until recently, critical race theory was displaced at the margins of mainstream academic discourse. In the years I have been based at the University of Amsterdam I could sense a change of direction: for instance, scholars that had been considered *too* radical started to receive invitations together with people and organizations that had been labeled *activists* – within Dutch academia a not-so-coded word to devalue their knowledge (Jones 2018). These signals should have convinced me that around me change was finally happening but what I could also sense was a familiar sense of worry creeping in: was this change an example of the non-performativity of institutional promises of diversity (Ahmed 2012)?

Therefore, as I progressed with my project, I constantly questioned my position within what Sarah Demart has called the 'extraction politics' of knowledge meaning an underexamined, 'double-process of appropriation and devaluation' (Demart 2020, 146). In approaching a subject matter that directly refers to the experiences of racialized individuals within Dutch society, my biggest fear was to become the one that 'fills in the blanks' (Trinh 1989, 80): to appropriate experiences not mine to share and substitute *their* voice with *my* words. Therefore, whenever my interviewee had a biography of migration I carefully structured my questions to be restricted to the experience of, for instance, working as a volunteer and as a storyteller, and, at the cost of clarity, I tried to avoid labeling respondents according to their *legal* status. At the same time, since their full names had been already made public across promotional material, news coverage, and internal reports – all widely available online – I

chose not to anonymize their names. Also, since the question I asked referred to their work for an organization I did not want to further the divide between migrant volunteers only identified with letters and Dutch employees of that organization identified instead with their full names. Yet I still worried that in the end, my work would end up being just another example of the ‘theorem of low-hanging fruit’ (Tuck and Yang 2014, 234):

‘[d]octoral programs, dissertations, and the master’s thesis process tacitly encourage novice researchers to reach for low-hanging fruit. These are stories and data that require little effort – and what we know from years and years of academic colonialism is that it is easy to do research on people in pain . . . (Tuck and Yang 2014, 234)

As I inhabited both blindingly institutional spaces and myself, my biography, I felt awkward in both. I labored to gain access to what for me represented a route into safety – a paid and prestigious Ph.D. position – only to find myself struggling to feel ‘at home’ in my own research-ness. And this work stems from this feeling, from having to come to terms with the fact that some of the knowledge I produce will be extractive – it will lead me to fill in the blanks and to reach for fruit that is low-hanging. But as alienating and anxiety-inducing as this thought is, holding onto it represents my attempt to refuse academia’s ‘irrepressible irresponsibility’ (Tuck and Yang 2014).

Chapter outline

The following chapters discuss how a specific function of memory is emerging across some of the sites where the sense of belonging of different types of both ‘postcolonial citizens’ and migrants that have arrived during the so-called European migrant crisis is produced and articulated. Chapter 1 expands the conceptual framework outlined in this introduction by looking at how the histories of migration toward the Netherlands are intertwined with competing memory regimes in the Dutch public sphere. The chapter surveys how in the Netherlands, the narrative of hospitality to *strangers* has evolved in relation to and/or in opposition to the country’s self-image of ‘tolerance’ and, later, of multicultural ‘success’. Then it examines how the memories of colonialism become a *resource* to articulate political claims (even as it constricts them within a symbolic terrain) and *property*, meaning a transactional object since, in order to gain political currency, private modes of remembrance need to become public. Through overlapping discourses, the promise of safety gets differentially distributed among the population according to a precise grammar carrying the traces of colonial genealogies. In this context, which

specific memories have or are emerging as catalysts of political claims? And how?

Chapter 2 introduces Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum as one of the stages in which the 'unfolding "national story"', about who can and cannot belong, has been developing and taking a variety of shapes. It then charts its evolution from *Koloniaal Museum* to a 'museum about people' to now: a museum 'about world cultures'. As multiculturalism progressively lost its appeal as a buzzword and whilst populist movements gained terrain in the Netherlands and Europe, the museum began to look like a safer space in which to reflect and represent the lived experience of Dutch citizens from different diasporas. The chapter is divided into two parts that look at these issues from a dual-angle: first, how the museum positions itself within debates about postcolonial and migrant belonging by meta-historicizing its recent past and work; and then the second part analyzes two temporary projects set in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood where the museum is located and whose long-term residents embody the layered heritage of (post)colonialism. What are the implications for an institution such as this one to be 'conscripted' in engaging with current political issues? Does the museum's ongoing exploration of matters of belonging and citizenship find a correspondence in its own participatory projects?

Chapter 3 focuses on the museum's exhibit *Aleppo* and the canal tours of *Rederij Lampedusa*, two projects that heavily rely on the presence of 'real refugees' to expand the knowledge of the public on the issue of migration. This chapter will use two examples that, albeit different in scope and scale, represent how the memories of the journey to Europe are mobilized according to a script that mirrors the culturalized norms and values that determine what constitutes a 'good' citizen and a 'good' migrant/refugee. The chapter will connect the threads tying together the complex usages of personal memories of migration to a wider European (and EU) framework of conditional hospitality that hinges on unidirectional demands for authenticity and openness. Sharing stories that are both personal and painful represents a ticket into safety, but what does collecting and staging these memories ultimately achieve?

Chapter 4 contextualizes recent developments in how the memory of slavery is being mobilized in the Netherlands using as a backdrop the Tropenmuseum's exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery* and the institution's engagement with a wider decolonial framework. By emphasizing histories of survival and not of victimhood, and by focusing on the ambiguities of freedom, the exhibit works to eschew a feeling of hopelessness while also carefully avoiding provoking feelings of guilt. But what does engendering

empathy mean when taking into consideration the discursive space from which the exhibition has emerged? To answer this question the chapter zooms in on the issues raised by the inclusion in the display of items referring to the contemporary movement against Zwarte Piet, a blackface character in the annual Saint Nicholas festivities. Then, the chapter looks at recent examples of how the museum has been collaborating with activists as part of its commitment to a decolonial approach. The demand to decolonize museums has been, in recent years, gradually absorbed by institutions but not in the sense the activists had perhaps hoped for since it still privileges models of inclusion that are temporary. Can the Tropenmuseum, not only through its programming but also at a structural level, reflect on the ‘coloniality within’?

Chapter 5 focuses on The Black Archives in Amsterdam and how this relatively new organization in the city’s cultural ecosystem is attempting to historicize itself in a longer tradition of anti-racism activism in the Netherlands. What is the role played by this ‘alternative archive’ in producing and circulating notions of belonging, black subjectivity, and citizenship? The chapter further deepens this interrogative by looking at the temporary project The Black Archives Bijlmer, which run between 2020 and 2021, in Amsterdam South East. This district represents a location particularly important in the postcolonial history of the country where different diasporas and different configurations of blackness intersect. In the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the summer of 2020, which saw unprecedented participation of the Dutch public, the Archives have been highlighting the lineage connecting today’s generation of anti-racist activists to previous ones and also to a celebrated and international tradition of black radical intellectuals. At the same time, The Black Archives have been actively collecting and curating the history of contemporary expressions of anti-racism in the Netherlands to avoid that other parties appropriating its narrative. But what does memorializing activism as it happens achieve?

CHAPTER 1

**Memory as resource and
property: the politics of
belonging in a changing
country**

Introduction

As both contemporary expressions of the memory of colonialism and slavery and the first-hand testimonies of the ‘refugee crisis’ are being heritagized – collected, curated, and displayed – a specific function of cultural memory comes into view. For individuals and groups who are ‘embodied in difference’ (Desai 2020) memory can act as a tool to ground identities and make them cohesive enough to appear as stable interlocutors for the state, and state-like formations. This is necessary for a complex politics of recognition that allows for belonging to be unequally distributed among citizens and prospective citizens, but that pushes the question of structural change and redistribution of resources in a near future – while making it dependent on slow, trickle-down improvements. This phenomenon can only be examined as multiscalar and multi-sited: it is not a product of the Dutch context, though it has been shaped by the country’s particular brand of ‘colonial aphasia’ (Stoler 2011). The history of migration towards the Netherlands is tied to a complicated apparatus of remembering and forgetting, of staging Dutch identity and heritage against a particular interpretation of historical events.

This chapter investigates this process by charting how certain memories have been produced and mobilized to endow different groups of ‘conditional’ citizens (Jones 2016, 606) with an identity cohesive enough to allow for their cultural and political recognition. It primarily engages with the book *Postcolonial Netherlands: Sixty-five years of forgetting, commemorating, silencing* by Dutch historian Gert Oostindie. By reading this work against critical accounts I show how the parameters that establish which cultural memories and which particular groups will be recognized by the state are not the result of a mutual decision in which institutional actors and minoritized subjects have the same degree of agency. Correspondingly, the discursive space, in which full belonging is first withheld and then made to slow-drip through gestures of recognition, is not constructed between subjects on equal footing. The chapter is divided into two sections: the first one surveys how in the Netherlands, the narrative of hospitality to *strangers* has evolved in relation to and/or in opposition to the country’s self-image of ‘tolerance’ and, later, of multicultural ‘success’; the second one examines how different memories of colonialism become a resource to articulate political claims (even as it constricts them within a symbolic terrain); and a property, meaning a transactional object through which private modes of remembrance become

public in order to gain political currency. Which specific memories have been used or are emerging as catalysts of political claims?¹

From tolerance to ‘failed’ multiculturalism

The Kingdom of the Netherlands consists of four constituent countries: the Netherlands in Europe and the Caribbean islands of Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint Maarten. Three other islands – Bonaire, Saint Eustatius, and Saba – have the status of special municipalities within the country. Migration fluxes, which reached large numbers soon after the Second World War, are conventionally organized into distinct categories: from 1949 on as the Dutch colonial empire slowly dissolved, ‘post-colonial migrants’ started arriving first from Indonesia and New Guinea (the former Dutch East Indies), then from Suriname and the Dutch Antilles (known as the Dutch West Indies); between the 1960s and 1980s, guest-workers (*gastarbeiders*) from Southern Mediterranean regions, first Italy and Spain later Turkey and Morocco, were recruited to supply labor force; and, from the 1980s on, growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers reached the country after fleeing various disasters – from the war in former Yugoslavia to the current conflict in Syria. The steady influx of migrants in the post-war period is described as a period during which the tolerance for which the Netherlands had been famous was put to the test (for a critical account of the topic see Van der Veer 2006; Weiner 2015; Lucassen and Lucassen 2015).

The idea of a national ethos of tolerance founded on liberal values has come to refer to disparate things: from interfaith coexistence practiced in the 16th and 17th centuries; to the introduction in the late 1970s of lenient policies on the consumption of soft drugs; to an emphasis on sexual freedom that made the country the first in the world to legalize same-sex marriage. From a governance standpoint, the notion of tolerance is usually associated with the pillarized (*verzuiling*) model, which shaped Dutch society until the 1960s. Social life was organized around ‘pillars’, meaning tightly integrated communities that were established on the basis of religion or ideology: each pillar – Catholic and Protestant, but also socialist and liberal – had its own educational institutions, political parties, press, unions, and broadcasting corporations. Even leisure activities like sports clubs were subject to *verzuiling*. But the system came under pressure during the 1960s and 1970s when social movements started a wave of secularization and emancipation. It

1 All translations from Dutch unless otherwise stated are mine.

was during this transitional period that the Dutch government, decades after migration from former colonies had begun, started to enact policies explicitly directed at migrants. Scholarly accounts of this stage in Dutch migration and integration policy usually describe it as a moment in which tolerance was effectively translated into welcoming policies – or more welcoming than those of other immigration countries (Vink 2007 disputes this timeline).

This was aided also by the process of depillarization, which was gradual and at times contradictory: on one hand, the new secular ethos led politicians to believe that newcomers would, just like the Dutch, regard their religion as a private matter; on the other, the tradition of peaceful coexistence between pillars resulted in the notion of ‘integration with preservation of own identity’ (*integratie met behoud van eigen identiteit*). The 1983 White Paper on ethnic minorities policies (*Nota Minderhedenbeleid*) was the government’s first attempt at providing a framework for social provisions and against discrimination. But as Marteen Vink observes, this approach was conceived largely to facilitate the return of guest workers to their home countries by allowing them to preserve their *own culture*. Usually hailed as the beginning of the country’s effective brand of multiculturalism the paper still predicated integration upon a ‘majority culture’ firmly ‘anchored in Dutch society’ (Dutch government in Vink 2007, 345). Tolerance, which is considered the key feature of this phase, needs to be re-examined together with how citizenship rights and integration policies impacted the lives and prospects of ‘postcolonial’ citizens.

After the independence of Indonesia, between the 1950s and 1960s, over thirty thousand people migrated to the Netherlands. They belonged to three groups: Eurasian Dutch (also called Indo-Europeans), Moluccans, and ‘totoks’ meaning ‘white’ Dutch. In the East Indies, the population had been divided into three hierarchical categories: first ‘Europeans’, second the so-called ‘Foreign Orientals’ (Chinese and Arab), and third ‘Inlanders’ (natives, meaning Indonesians and Moluccans). A group of twelve thousand Moluccans arrived in 1951, comprised of soldiers who had served in the Royal Netherlands Indies Army (KNIL) and their families. Since they had fought against Indonesia during the independence war, their position within the newly founded Republic was precarious; but only after a prolonged legal battle, they were reluctantly granted entrance to the Netherlands where they were discharged from military service, housed in camps, and lived juridically and socially segregated from the rest of Dutch society for two decades (see for example Jones 2014). The *Indische Nederlanders* or *Indos* were people of ‘mixed race’ according to a specific ‘construction that originated in and was

defined by the colonial past' (Captain 2014, 55). Indos would be considered European if they had been formally recognized by a Dutch parent (in most cases a Dutch father who had a relationship in or outside marriage with an Indonesian woman). If the parent did not acknowledge the children, they would be regarded as 'Inlanders' and therefore a subject (*onderdaan*) of the Kingdom instead of a citizen (*burger*) (Captain 2014, 56). Ana Dragojlovic (2020) points out that Indo-Europeans experienced violence, both in the Indies and the Netherlands, to reconfirm claims to 'Europeanness' – which was racialized, classed, and gendered.

In the aftermath of the war for independence, both totoks and Eurasians were increasingly marginalized in the nascent Republic of Indonesia. Fearing a precarious future, the groups that under colonial rule had been labeled as Europeans decided to leave. But while the repatriation of totoks did not encounter much resistance, Eurasians and Moluccans, who had been previously represented as exemplary subjects – 'loyal and excellent Netherlanders' – suddenly became the targets of a discourse that sought to highlight instead 'innate differences between them and Dutch society' (Jones 2014, 321). They were described as being 'rooted in the East Indies' and 'oriented towards Indonesia' and therefore in need, once the Dutch government abandoned the 'discouragement policy' against immigration, of swift assimilation. This type of discourse was not limited to the period immediately after independence nor to Eurasians and Moluccans, as Guno Jones points out: the reception of all former colonial subjects was always characterized by racial subtext (2014). Political decolonization in fact did not result in the abandonment of the technologies developed by colonial regimes through which '[w]ays of living were congealed into "problems", subject persons were condensed into ontological categories, innocuous practices were made into subjects of analysis and rendered political things' (Stoler 2010, 30). Instead, these tools seeped into public discourse.

After what was called the 'traumatic loss' of the Dutch East Indies, in the 1950s politicians in the Netherlands worked towards strengthening the relationships with the remaining overseas territories, the West Indies. For a time, therefore, and in the context of the increased demand for labor, migration from Suriname was encouraged, but as it increased in volume and became more 'democratic' across class lines it started to be seen as an issue. In particular, political actors started to paint the 'workers' culture' of Surinamese black men as a threat as well as 'mixed' unions between Surinamese men

and Dutch women.² During the hectic times that preceded decolonization, the Dutch state wanted to prompt independence to halt migration toward the Netherlands, which had kept increasing exponentially in the 1970s. The political climate at the time was shaped by a growing anti-imperialist sentiment thus politicians started to represent the economic and social relationship with Suriname and the Dutch Antilles as a ‘neocolonial anachronism’ but also to ‘re-signify “self-determination,” meaning political independence, from a *right* into a duty’ (Jones 2014, 329). But rumors that independence was near actually increased the influx of Surinamese towards the Netherlands, since they feared political instability and losing their citizenship status. Despite strong internal opposition, in 1975 the Surinamese government declared independence at the request of the Dutch government. The social unrest in the wake of independence almost led to civil war and thus the Netherlands had to agree to suspend for the following five years the restrictive migration policy it had planned for Surinamese citizens.

If in the 1950s dominant state actors had referenced biological differences – *their tropical bodies* – as the reason why Surinamese would never find their place in the motherland; later, it was suggested that *their tropical culture* would render them fundamentally out of place (Jones 2014). These raced, classed, and gendered boundaries were drawn and redrawn over the course of the decades but ultimately served the purpose of problematizing the citizenship of colonial subjects. Even though the 1970s were a period of social ferment that led to numerous changes in society, in those same years political elites began to substitute biological with culturalist discourses that still retained their essentializing function. As Jones remarks, the concerns over the increase of migration went hand in hand with constructing the ‘Dutch citizenship of the population of Suriname and the Dutch Antilles as an improper status’ and ‘as in the case of the Eurasians, the identity Dutch politicians ascribed to Surinamese Dutch citizens (that they were not real Dutch citizens, did not belong in the Netherlands, and should give up Dutch citizenship) did not coincide with the self-definitions of many Surinamese Dutch citizens’ (Jones 2014, 330). Similarly, the increased presence of Antillean citizens led to a

2 Suriname is a multi-ethnic state comprised of five main ethnic groups: Afro-Surinamese, the largest group descending from African enslaved people; Hindostani, descendants of 19th-century indentured workers from India; Javanese, descendants from workers contracted from the island of Java in the former Dutch East Indies; Chinese, originating from 19th-century indentured workers and some recent migration; and Boeroe (derived from boer, the Dutch word for “farmer”), a small but influential group of descendants from Dutch 19th-century immigrant farmers. Afro-Surinamese and Hindostani are the two groups that make up the majority of Dutch Surinamese citizens (“Suriname” 2023)

change in discourses and policies aimed at this group that, since the 1990s, has been described as problematic, and whose right to free migration towards the Netherlands was routinely and publicly questioned.

Eurasian, Moluccan, and Surinamese Dutch are today considered examples of successful integration but this positioning is instrumental for making a specific type of comparison.³ That between the ‘harmless identities’ of postcolonial citizens and the potentially harmful identity of Dutch citizens and migrants of Muslim background – essentialized by the figure of the troublesome young Moroccan male (Captain 2014). Jones observes that such comparisons have a precise goal:

[t]he image of ‘being integrated’ creates the idea that those qualified as ‘less integrated’ should make more efforts to improve their position in society, that they – instead of the power structures and frames that try to freeze them – are in the end to blame (Jones 2016, 617)

Culturalist discourses create endless possibilities for comparisons between groups of postcolonial citizens, then between them and Dutch Turkish, and Moroccan citizens, and always between who can embody real ‘Dutchness’ and who cannot. What can be observed in the Dutch context is that, from the 2000s on, the demand for cultural loyalty from outsiders intensified, as well as the search for a definition not of what Dutchness is or isn’t but rather of what the political elite wishes it ‘not to become’ (De Leeuw and van Wichelen 2014, 341 see also Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016).). At the turn of the millennium, rhetoric against political correctness and in defense of the country’s identity and self-image became preeminent – in the Dutch context, Baukje Prins has called this ‘new realism’ (Prins 2004).

A series of events and political figures are usually indicated as responsible for losing a ‘modicum of tolerance’ to ‘monoculturalism’ (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016, 11). The first to question the effectiveness of the Netherlands’ migration and integration policies was Paul Scheffer, a university professor and member of the Dutch labour party, whose 2000’s essay *The Multicultural Drama* declared that Dutch multiculturalism had failed and that had led instead to the formation of an ‘ethnic underclass’

3 Eurasian is an umbrella term that does not find an exact correspondence in the Dutch language. The terms Indo-European or Indisch are preferred and used to describe different groups: if at first this term was employed to include all overseas nationals coming from the East Indies, it then became a designation for people of mixed descent although the Indisch communities also refer to religious and ethnic denominators (e.g. Javanese and Sumatrans, Christians and Muslims).

whose members did not feel attached to Dutch culture and society, and who were unwilling and unable to integrate (Scheffer 2000). In those same years, politician Pim Fortuyn quickly rose to fame by deploying a style that ‘combined a personal, almost erotic, political aesthetic and charisma with neonationalist and Islamophobic political ideas’, which greatly contributed to fulfilling ‘a deep desire for belonging, meaning, direction, a closed and clear identity, and an ever more strictly defined definition of ‘the other’”(Mepschen 2009, 5). Not long after 9/11 two events on the local scale further precipitated the situation: the killings of Fortuyn in 2002 and film-maker Theo van Gogh in 2003. Van Gogh had been murdered by a Dutch-Moroccan citizen shortly after the screening of *Submission*, a film he made with Somali refugee and right-wing politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali to prove that the Quran justifies the abuse of women. The killings turned van Gogh into ‘a martyr for the freedom of expression’ and Fortuyn into ‘a culturalist hero’ (Uitermark 2012). Scheffer, Fortuyn, Van Gogh, and Hirsi Ali, and later right-wing populists like former Minister Rita Verdonk and Geert Wilders are key figures – from disparate political backgrounds – in a *culturalist drama*: a performance centered on fear, pride, and energetic show-of-force. The rhetorical outbursts of the protagonists of the drama are instrumental for constructing a narrative of loss, of a national ethos that is deteriorating under the influx of other cultures and because of too much leniency and generosity towards an ungrateful Other.

Culturalized citizenship and recognition

Political theorists like Wendy Brown (2009) have described the culturalization of politics as the deployment of formal and informal policies of cultural recognition. As Elizabeth Povinelli observes this move happened as a result of the ‘crisis of legitimacy’ brought by anticolonial and social movements that critiqued ‘Western arts of caring for the colonized and subaltern’ as not being the remedy but the means through which inequality is entrenched and sustained (2011, 26). Through the emphasis on recognition of past harm ‘the crisis would no longer be a crisis of liberal legitimacy but a crisis of how to allow cultures a space within liberalism’ and to ‘assess care in late liberalism is to assess the capacity of culture as an agent of care’ (Povinelli 2011, 26). In the Dutch context, Jan Willem Duyvendak et al. have analyzed the ‘culturalization of citizenship’ as the process through which ‘what it is to be a citizen is less defined in terms of civic, political or social rights, and more in terms of adherence to norms, values and cultural practices’ (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016, 4). Some critics have argued

that this development is a result of the fallacies of Dutch multiculturalism (Joppke 2004; Koopmans 2005; Sniderman and Hagendoorn 2009). However, performative declarations of multiculturalism as failed were not unique to the Netherlands since they have been delivered by several European leaders from across the political spectrum. Therefore the authors see this phenomenon as a global trend with ‘local variations’: prospective citizens are required to prove their loyalty to the nation’s ‘feeling rules’ (Hochschild 2003 in Duyvendak et al. 2016) meaning the ensemble of emotions, norms, symbols, values and traditions that form the sense of belonging or ‘feeling at home’ of members of a society (Duyvendak 2011).

In the Netherlands, culturalized citizenship means that citizens are required to ‘embrace liberal democracy, secularism and progressive values regarding gender and sexuality’ (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016, 9).⁴ According to the authors, this particular constellation of norms is the result of the process of depillarization that demanded to leave in the past institutions like the church, which were associated with the old order and that appeared then as claustrophobic and paternalistic (Verkaaik 2009). It was at this point that ‘progressiveness’ became ‘part of national mythology’ and reinvented as intrinsic to the Dutch character and not as a recent and partial achievement. Whereas secularism and liberal values have been reinvented as ‘typically Dutch’, ‘cultural pluralism’ was never actually a priority for legislators who instead continued to enact ‘group policies’ (Duyvendak and Scholten 2012). At the policy level, the idea that migrants are to blame for their slow integration resulted in added difficulties and costs to the process of acquiring citizenship, causing a drop in naturalizations: as Bonjour and Lettinga report, in parliamentary discussions from 2004 onwards, the framed certain categories of family migrants as ‘unfit’ because possessing ‘characteristics that are adverse to a good integration into Dutch society’ (2012, 69). In addition, changes in the mandatory *civic integration exam* made proving an adequate level of knowledge of Dutch society, culture and language a pre-condition for admission into the country (De Leeuw and van Wichelen 2014).⁵ However,

4 Discourses using cultural difference as the basis to motivate this mechanism of differential inclusion are reproduced among members belonging to different diasporas. So for example, Judith de Jong and Jan Willem Duyvendak observe the ‘de-stigmatisation strategies’ of second-generation Turkish-Dutch students, who engage in multiple tactics to assert their belonging: they are in overall critical of the dominant nativist discourse and yet often fall back on ‘essentialised understandings of Dutch and Turkish norms and culture’. Regardless of which strategies these young people have been adopting, all shared an ‘emphasis on culture, mirroring notions dominant in the Netherlands’ (de Jong and Duyvendak 2021, 16)

5 The exam is administered in the country of origin and applicants are fully responsible

these requisites do not apply to individuals of ‘western migration background’ or migrants who are defined as ‘highly skilled.’⁶ In her examination of these procedures, Sara Farris comes to the conclusion that

access to Dutch citizenship is regulated through the application of national (racial), moral (sexual) and economic (class) criteria that strongly evoke the ‘colonial technology of race’ that was used in the Dutch colonies to distinguish colonizers from colonized, members of Dutch imagined community from aliens (Farris 2017, 109)

So if on one hand, political discourse reinvented the Netherlands as a post-racial nation, on the other policies made use of reified cultural differences to explain and intervene in the lagging behind of minorities. At the same time, the importance of respecting cultural diversity has been distributed as a buzzword across policies and institutions – a move that seemingly signaled how racism was a thing of the past. The result of this process and of the high-octane culturalist drama that supports it is that, on one hand, instances of ‘everyday racism’ (Essed 1991) have been framed as the result of the unpredictable behavior of individuals; and, on the other, anti-racism itself has been framed as somehow suspicious since ‘its particular mode of engagement in debate over nationhood’ is considered “‘counter-productive’” (Van Reekum 2016, 31): a naïve outlook that leads to dangerous consequences by further polarizing the conversation.

Besides differences in class membership, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic background, each group of ‘incomers’ and each individual within them are connected to a variety of histories and micro-histories and different ways to publicly and privately commemorate the past. But what different groups of postcolonial citizens have in common with each other and

for the fees (including a preparatory self-study kit that costs one hundred ten euros), those who pass the exam are allowed to move to Netherlands but, in order to obtain a permanent residence permit, they need to successfully pass test for a second time and within three-and-a-half years since their arrival.

6 Mezzadra and Neilson trace this process: ‘Across the world, there has been a turn away from traditional quota systems of migration regulation, which are increasingly recognized as inadequate to the new flexibility and interpenetration of labor markets and economic systems. The pursuit of a just-in-time and to-the-point migration now shapes migratory policies . . . One prevalent means of attempting to correlate migration flows with occupational gaps and “skills shortages” is point-system migration schemes . . . point systems . . . constantly redefine the borders between skilled and unskilled labor, establishing . . . many gray areas, and expand and gradate the various subjective legal and political statuses that range from the citizen to the deportee’ (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 138–39)

with the migrants that did not hail from former colonies is that, in the decades since their arrival, they have all been classified – from more to less assimilable – through ‘a political process whereby some others are designated as *stranger than other others*’ (Ahmed 2000, 6). The presence, symbolic and physical, of such *strangers* enables discourses that are not simply exclusionary but also productive: it is through them and the terminology used to ‘distinguish between “the real Dutch” and “the unreal Dutch” or “not quite Dutch”, that the Dutch nation and its foundational ethos is constructed (Jones 2014, 313). As Sara Ahmed explains, strangers are recognized as such insofar as they are perceived as ‘coming *too close to home*’: the invention of this figure and the threat intrinsic to their presence/proximity allows for defining both ‘the subject-at-home’ as a body ‘unmarked’ by difference and the ‘home as inhabitable space, as inherently safe and valuable’ (Ahmed 2000, 32). Those who are recognizable as ‘different from the familiar space of home and homeland’ represent a potential danger and as such can become targets of violence, which is sanctioned by the rationale of enforcing the ‘boundary lines’ required to protect the ‘home-nation’ (Ahmed 2000, 36). From border patrolling to police stops, the arsenal deployed to protect ‘good citizens’ from real or imagined fears is limitless while the racial contours of this apparatus are only evident to those subjected to it.

Gert Oostindie often references in his book *Postcolonial Netherlands: Sixty-five years of forgetting, commemorating, silencing* the concept of ‘coming home’ to describe how in present times over a million Dutch people have roots in the former colonies. Published in 2011, this text is one of the most comprehensive publications in English on the topic of memory and processes of identity formation in the Netherlands post-decolonization. I selected this source because of Oostindie’s standing as a publicly recognizable voice on postcolonial history, who is often present in Dutch media, and because it provides a snapshot of how an exponent of institutional knowledge perceived and assessed ‘bottom up’ memory work. In his analysis, the unexpected mass arrivals that characterized the first three decades after the second World resulted in the country, somewhat begrudgingly, becoming ‘postcolonial’: the presence of minorities, who ‘embody a history that has come home’, pushed the Dutch public to ‘find a way to accommodate this past’ (Oostindie 2011, 21). Oostindie argues that this process, spearheaded by minorities organizations, has resulted in a variety of ‘remorseful gestures of recognition’ that have characterized Dutch politics since the 1970s: ‘[r]ecognition of past suffering, recognition of society’s shortcomings, recognition of the right to symbolic and perhaps financial gestures; this was to become a model for

postcolonial identity politics'(Oostindie 2011, 216). However, by Oostindie's own admission, "[r]ace" has played almost no part in this book, neither has racism' (2011, 221). He writes in broad terms of 'contemporary legacies and obligations stemming from the colonial period, which somehow affect all Dutch citizens'(2011, 221). And acknowledges the fact that all postcolonial citizens were 'confronted with racism and xenophobia, in all cases this led to frustration and anger, which ultimately stimulated the articulation of identity claims'; but concludes that 'racism in the past did not determine how postcolonial migrants were treated' since, despite the fact that their admission 'served no economic purpose', they were still allowed to remain (2011, 221-222). For the same reason – 'centuries of historical bonds' – they had 'some leeway'(2011, 101) and the government supported several organizations for the preservation of the history and culture of postcolonial minorities.

In his and similar reconstructions of how the country has come to memorialize the colonial past, race and racism will not figure as the 'organizing principles' that shaped not only the initial reception of formerly colonized people but their continued existence within the nation. Instead, the author underlines that class actually constituted the biggest obstacle for postcolonial minorities: despite the praise for 'mixed cultures' brought by multiculturalism, a 'European pole' that 'corresponded to respectability and progress' still orders the hierarchy of integration (Oostindie 2011,105). And there is an 'unmistakable continuity' between the colonial context that created this European norm and the 'progress of integration' (2011, 106). The integration of certain groups was hindered by the fact that they did not master the Dutch language and had 'low levels of education and employment qualifications, often combined with strongly authoritarian or unstable family relations': these features are 'part of the colonial heritage that postcolonial migrants from the lower classes brought with them' and '[s]uch dysfunctional characteristics also belong to cultural heritage'(2011, 106). By privileging a focus on class instead of race Oostindie's work helps to construct a narrative: although Dutch citizens from Indonesia, Suriname, and later the Antilles did encounter difficulties as they moved to the motherland, the political climate of the time was much more favorable than 'now'. And if they happened to be the targets of racism, they experienced it on a personal level: an offense that leads to anger or sadness, even trauma, but that is not the expression of a precise mode of governing. In the author's view racism seems to exist as cultural trauma that the formerly colonized can leverage to obtain recognition and affordances from the state and as individual feelings of pain as a result of racist occurrences. But what does describing the effects of race and racism

in terms of hurt feelings achieve? Besides reading as quite paternalistic, these remarks point at the existence of racism but limit it as something bad but not necessarily structural and that does not produce ongoing material consequences. In addition, we can identify an enduring trait of the Dutch discursive space on the issue of identity in Oostindie's argument: by referring to the futility and danger of a 'black versus white' dichotomy on multiple occasions, the author seems to be agreeing with the problematization of anti-racist critique that painted it as 'regressive, re-calling problems and categories—slavery, colonialism, race, white supremacy' (Van Reekum 2016, 31) that instead were being transcended by serious academic analysis – opposed to 'activist' knowledge – and by maintaining an open dialogue on identity and culture.⁷ When Oostindie invites us to explore the 'shades of grey' within the commemoration of slavery and colonialism and to seek a 'middle ground' between a 'radical black perspective' and a 'positivist view' (Oostindie 2011, 158) he reinforces the idea of an acceptable middle-ground between equal parts. Patricia Schor pointedly notes, however, that a 'notion of parity between the hegemonic establishment and the subaltern subject, between the dominant majority and a marginalized minority is myopic and ideological' because it hides how it is always 'the hegemonic part that defines the terms of the conversation, how, when and who enters it and what is open for negotiation' (in Schor and Martina 2017, 86). These dominant narratives establish as equal expressions of pain the suffering of the descendants of the enslaved for their 'cultural trauma' and the grief over the loss of national identity and heritage of a majority depicted as having been suddenly exposed to too much *Otherness*. Both figures – the grieving 'ethnic' Dutch and the traumatized descendant – have been mobilized by actors across the political spectrum as the figureheads of a conflict over which memories count, which

7 Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg describe 'cultural cloning' as a Europe-wide phenomenon that goes beyond the reproduction of privilege across race and gender lines. They notice how a 'growing sense of "we-Europeans"' has been accompanied by the reappearance of Neo-Nazi groups, the growing respectability of ultra-nationalist parties, and 'the more and more openly expressed assertion that immigrants are a threat to the cultural heritage of established residents'. Cultural cloning then hinges on 'the taken-for-granted desirability of certain types, the often-unconscious tendency to comply with normative standards, the easiness with the familiar and the subsequent rejection of those who are perceived as deviant'. This is a universal tendency, not confined to Western countries nor dominant group, but '[w]hereas 'choice against' – choice to exclude – has been problematized as everyday discrimination, "preference for" – choice for one's own, those like one, the similar and the same – is taken for granted as an affirmative value in dominant (and non-dominant) cultures. Cases in point are the unnamed preference for the comfort, safety, familiarity, and privilege associated with whiteness'. But this preference for sameness gets routinely denied through the reassertion of racial and gender equality as the formal ideology guiding governments and institutions (Essed and Goldberg 2002)

feelings should be taken into account, and which parts of the national heritage should be shared by these opposing factions.

The interplay between representation and recognition that has increasingly characterized the political landscape of the last thirty years cements the role of memory as a resource, and heritage as the portion of the public sphere more readily available for staking the claim to belong. This shift did not occur as the consequence of a natural inclination of postcolonial citizens but as a result of the gradual contraction of the spaces in which fight political battles and their substitution with cultural avenues. Across the political spectrum, ‘migrants’ and ‘non-privileged citizens’ (Jones 2016) are often condescendingly depicted as being engaged in a permanent competition over which identities are more valid, which histories more tragic, which memories more compelling. Just as the ‘epistemology of European coloniality’ when ‘confronted by the unfixed, protean, changeable nature of race, forgets race is its own invention...’ (Hesse 2007, 654), much of the knowledge produced on the politics of citizenship and belonging takes a starting point the idea that ‘migrants’ identities are self-styled. The second part of this chapter will survey how different groups enter ‘the conversation’ over who can belong and who can be a citizen and navigate its terms by grounding a specific identity over a shared painful memory: how has this approach come to be and which politics does it serve?

Memory as resource and property

In opposition to the idea that the histories of colonialism had been forgotten through a form of societal amnesia, Ann Laura Stoler has coined the term ‘colonial aphasia’ to describe not a situation in which memory is lost but rather how ‘an occlusion of knowledge’ produces ‘a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts to appropriate things’ (Stoler 2011, 125). Building on this concept, Paul Bijl observes that, in the Netherlands, ‘aphasia’ actively produces the ‘inability to see the nation as the former metropolis of a colonial empire and to acknowledge the lasting racial hierarchies stemming from this past’ (Bijl 2012, 451). Until very recently, mainstream narratives of the era in which the Netherlands became an imperial power have focused on the happy consequences brought by the newly acquired wealth and status – and this has been the primary focus of representations of the so-called Dutch Golden Age. Colonial nostalgia for an era of power and international influence is ingrained in aphasic reconstructions that highlight certain aspects of the past and silence

others. But nostalgia is not the only aspect of this, as Bijl shows in his study titled *Emerging Memory: Photographs of Colonial Atrocity in Dutch Cultural Remembrance* (2016). The violence perpetrated by the Dutch was never in fact shrouded in silence, rather it would recursively emerge in several instances and long before postcolonial migrants 'brought this history home'. Whenever evidence of acts of genocidal violence did emerge, a particular 'figure' has been 'rehearsed again and again', which staged the unveiling of records of colonial atrocities as 'secretive' only made possible through a series of journalistic and scholarly 'break-throughs' (Bijl 2012, 445).

This performance rewarded both 'the critic who can position him- or herself as a moral guide with an unclouded vision' and 'everybody in the Netherlands for it positions the Dutch population as having lived in blissful ignorance of the awful deeds committed by others' (Bijl 2012, 447). When Indonesia declared its independency in 1945, a four-year war ensued during which the Dutch army committed atrocities against the Indonesian population in what were euphemistically referred to as 'police actions'. Only recently the case has been made that these were not isolated instances but part of systemic violence (Limpach 2014). The voice of Indonesian people and the memory of their suffering has been largely absent in the Netherlands: the reason for this silence is to be found, according to Bijl, in the fact that Indonesians, 'natives' under colonial rule, are not 'present' in Dutch society while totoks, Indisch Dutch and Moluccans campaigned to have a voice (Bijl 2016, 19). In fact, the violence that has most widely been discussed and studied in the Netherlands is that which occurred during the last years of colonial rule: there is a wealth of studies on the memory of the years between 1945 and 1949 and of the Japanese occupation, during which the totoks, 'white' Dutch were interned in camps while Eurasians, as *buitenkampers* (outside the camp), also had to survive brutal conditions.

As we have seen, in the colonial taxonomic state 'Indos' were legally categorized as 'Europeans' but only if formally recognized as the offspring of a Dutch person, otherwise they would also be considered 'natives'. Race was thus inscribed in their juridical status but while they did experience discrimination under colonial rule, the Indische community in the Netherlands did not publicly identify as victims of colonialism and instead attempted to suppress the issues of colorism and racism. To maintain this colorblindness they largely preferred to identify as victims of the Second World War during which all Dutch had been 'equally' victimized (Van Leeuwen 2008). After an initial period in which the experiences of totoks and Eurasians during the war, decolonization, and the years that followed their arrival were not widely

featured in public debates, these groups started a campaign to receive ‘back payments’: during the Japanese occupation, in fact, the Dutch government had not paid any salaries or pensions to civil servants and soldiers. Another theme that started to emerge was the ‘cold reception’ that ‘repatriates’ experienced as they arrived in the Netherlands. Eurasian families were targeted with assimilation policies that sought to discipline those that were too ‘Eastern oriented’ through programs that operated ‘according to the same principles as the Dutch historical re-education centers for those considered to be asocial, those constructed as persons “outside society”’ (Captain 2014, 62).

Esther Captain also remarks how the ‘first generation of Indo-European migrants had to emphasize their Dutch descent and to forget about their Indonesian heritage’ (2014, 57) which had consequences also for the second generation that, born in the Netherlands, often could not access their families’ past. Oostindie notes that the struggle for recognition and for establishing a memory culture was initially dominated by the concerns of the ethnically Dutch repatriates ‘in post-war debates, the *totoks* frequently drowned out the *Indos*’ (2011, 77) he writes. But this situation changed along with the socio-political context: for instance, in 1969 Dutch colonial army soldier Joop Huetting appeared in a television program where he recalled the violence committed by the KNIL during the Indonesian revolution.⁸ This public ‘breakthrough’ sparked a debate that continued in the political climate of the 1970s characterized by a growing conviction that war victims needed to be attended to in the context of the welfare state (Locher-Scholten 1999, 62–63). In addition, between 1975 and 1977, groups of young Moluccan people resorted to violent actions like the hijacking of trains and occupying government buildings to reinforce their claim for the creation of a Republic of the South Moluccas (Republik Maluku Selatan RMS). Both the Dutch and Indonesian governments rejected the idea of the RMS but after these episodes, in which several civilians and the hijackers were killed, policymakers started to reflect on the consequences of having excluded the Moluccan population from Dutch social life.

This series of events gave more relevance than ever to the issue of the treatment of the colonial past: as Oostindie comments ‘[i]gnoring old colonial rage, read the lesson, not only translated into psychic suffering, but also gave rise to violence’ (2011, 80). He also sees the development of an *Indisch* memorial culture as in line with the emerging of critical perspectives

8 War veterans were the other group involved in the commemoration of the last years of colonial rule see Oostindie 2011, chapter 3.

on the history of the Second World War and of the role that the Netherlands played in it. Oostindie posits that the way the Holocaust and the histories of Jewish Dutch were incorporated into Dutch heritage might have provided an example for postcolonial migrants in search of recognition.⁹ In the 1990s, after many partial and unfulfilling attempts to receive compensation for the harm that Dutch citizens had endured in the East Indies, several organizations joined together as the Indisch Platform with the aim of keep lobbying for the cause. But it wasn't until 2000 that Prime Minister Wim Kok apologized for the 'identified shortcomings of the rehabilitation process' and launched the *Het Gebaar* (The Gesture), a compensation scheme that awarded three thousand guilders to all Dutch citizens who had been through the war in the East Indies while thirty-five million guilders were made available for cultural, social and academic projects (Oostindie 2011, 81). The memories mobilized by these groups – the war, the camps, the indifference 'back home' – began to be included in the heritage of the nation, and the launch of memorial days and institutions like the *Indisch Herinneringscentrum* (the Indo memorial center) or the Museum Maluku were to signal a shift in the approach of the state – from indifference to care.

Oostindie's survey of how postcolonial 'migrants' mobilized the memories of their journey and arrival in the Netherlands is valuable as it provides a historical overview of how this particular use of heritage has evolved through the years. It also offers insight into a way of seeing that at the time when he wrote his book and until very recently was predominant in the Netherlands, which places the state and the nation as actors merely reacting to an emerging culture of political claim-making that used the past to gain recognition in the present. For instance, he highlights how financial aspects played a central role in how the 'Indisch lobby' claimed its place: from the end of the 1970s, governmental funds were channeled towards minorities but since the 'Indisch community was recorded as being outstandingly integrated' it was not eligible 'for any of this money'; in addition, sums were destined for development aid to Indonesia and also directed 'to the Caribbean territories ... expenditures that would far exceed all the compensation that was ever paid to repatriates' (Oostindie 2011, 96–97). Pointing at how Eurasian organizations

9 These developments were not limited to the Netherlands but part of a broader phenomenon that Jeffrey Olick calls 'politics of regret'. This framework stemmed from the 'never again' ethos at the core of the commemoration of the Holocaust and through the notion of 'transitional justice' as a range of practical solutions – such as 'compensation, truth and reconciliation commissions, general amnesties, memorialization, and organized amnesia' – to redress the violence of the past (Olick 2013).

would have been aware of the financial rewards that could be available for them if they grouped around a specific identity is the first of two comparisons that need to be carefully unpacked.

The author states that although a ‘cynical view’ would posit that Eurasians’ lobbying ‘revolved around self-interest’, they ‘saw the Netherlands as always holding the purse strings, as highly cautious about stripping colonial citizenship of its predicate “colonial”, which would lead to it being confronted with financial consequences’(Oostindie 2011, 96). Presenting these two viewpoints might have its merits, though it is not clear to whom the cynical view belongs. But the problem with this reasoning is that it overvalorizes the agency of ‘postcolonial migrants’ as equal players with the state ‘in the game of identity politics’ (Oostindie 2011, 104). It is true that the agency of ‘postcolonial citizens’ does emerge in how they resisted ‘being “othered”’ but, as Jones points out, this and other Dutch studies take as their premise that the identity, citizenship, and national belonging of people from the former colonies are ‘are primarily analyzed as “self-achieved”’ and as a reflection of ‘their own orientations, choices, and identifications’; and thus as matters that ““postcolonial minorities”...have in their own hands’ whereas ‘the role of dominant actors within the state apparatus is seen as secondary and “reactive”’(Jones 2014, 316).

This means forgetting that the transferring of political demands and citizenship rights onto the symbolic terrain of cultural recognition was not the result of individual instinct or choice. At the same time, the reason why memory becomes a resource for articulating claims tied to citizenship is not because it provides automatically stronger arguments than campaigning for better housing, education and work opportunities, and proper healthcare. In the push-pull between minoritized subjects and governing institutions that build the criteria of what is considered an acceptable bid to citizenship and belonging, memory is presented to these groups as property: an endowment that needs to be curated, preserved and guarded from appropriation because its value lies in what it can be exchanged for. The largescale trade-off is to enclose any type of struggle within discursive rules that establish preemptively what can be said and what can be gained: relevance for visibility, respectability through recognition, the love of the nation in exchange for another enemy to fear. This way what is supposed to be the beginning – intervening in the nation’s heritage – becomes the ultimate goal, and inclusionary gestures on the part of dominant state actors– and transnational entities like the European Union – are presented as the benevolent reaction to self-directed initiatives. What disappears in this performance is that the hegemonic parties determine

which avenues and actors can be deemed legitimate interlocutors and which others – too naïve or destructive – must be ridiculed or condemned. This function of memory then is instrumental for a sophisticated politics of recognition, which redistributes belonging among those that can prove to be ‘whole’ – to have a fully legible identity – whilst postponing indefinitely any long-term, sustainable, structural change. The politics enabled through this move allow the perpetuation of ‘capitalism disguised as democracy’ that ‘enables “belonging” but not a material redistribution of belongings’ (Myambo 2011, 65).¹⁰

If we examine the process of grounding an identity through memory not from the standpoint of communities but from that of dominant political actors, we can see that bottom-up requests for acknowledgment of past suffering are molded to fit the requisites of a specific mode of governing. This development has been described by George Yúdice with the notion of *culture-as-resource*: in his analysis, culture has been turned into a multipurpose tool in a field of force that is constituted by differently assembled relations between various political and civic actors. The scholar traces this evolution back to the operation of a governmental rationale based on performativity. Performing one’s identity, especially when it is framed as culturally different, becomes mandatory to articulate subjectivities and to campaign for rights, recognition, and redistribution. Yúdice concisely explains this process as such: ‘so long as you can assert that you have a culture (a distinctive set of beliefs and practices), you have legitimate grounds for enfranchisement’ (2003, 56). And performing these ‘alternative identities’ as the only effective route towards inclusion becomes compulsory not only ‘from above (the state, corporations, philanthropic associations) but also from groups who do advocacy work on behalf of people *construed as minorities*, and even from group members themselves’ (2003, 48 emphasis mine).

Oostindie notes that whereas in the beginning the voices of totoks had counted more, throughout the decades the ‘scope of the attention paid to victims’ was extended to include also ‘Indisch Dutch *and* Moluccans’ (2011, 93), and in fact, citing Esther Captain, totoks ‘became *more Indisch* through the process of remembering’ (Captain in Oostindie 2011, 93 emphasis mine). He also notices that ‘remarkably’ the Indisch Platform came to be at the

10 Several theorists have examined how a politics of recognition leaves underlying structural conditions of inequality unchallenged, see for instance Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism* (Duke University Press, 2002).

request of the government and, later in the text, how today ‘Indisch heritage has become a leading cultural brand’ (2011, 110-111). These examples indicate that indeed performing a cohesive identity is not an instinctive move or the result of an accurate choice between equally effective strategies. Performing one’s memories as structured enough to need an appropriate heritage site or public commemoration is offered – through the discourse of elite actors – as a valid and legitimate mean towards becoming an interlocutor credible and visible enough to be taken seriously by institutions and the state. Becoming ‘Indisch’, performing this identity, and articulating claims in terms of cultural recognition becomes the only mode through which ‘minorities’ can join in the ‘competition over territory, resources, or jobs’ (Young 2002, 91).

From liberation to citizenship rights

After examining the route taken by Indisch cultural memory of migration, Oostindie turns to the ‘West Indian explanation’, which ‘revolves around rights linked to citizenship: the right to unhindered access; the right to work and enjoy the collective rights awarded every Dutch citizen; and the right, in all respects, to belong’ (2011, 98). And yet, in a second comparison, he argues that ‘in stark contrast to the Indisch narrative’ the memory of the ‘exodus’ is not a ‘popular theme’ since it is ‘painful, not because things were so bad for the Caribbean community, but because the migration is marked by choice, not the absence of the alternative: to remain at “home”’ (2011, 98). In his framing, whereas Indisch Dutch could not have stayed in the Republic of Indonesia, Surinamese and Antilleans were not forced to leave but chose to in order to seek better opportunities. Since choice was behind the move, the Caribbean communities could not refer to the memory of this journey – his argument continues – instead the history of slavery became central to ground their identity. The reason being that ‘[n]o other theme in the shared history [between Suriname and the Antilles] lends itself better to an appeal for Dutch gestures of reparation and no other theme is linked to such powerful ideas of contemporary legacies for which one or another should pay’ (Oostindie 2011, 147).

Again, in Oostindie’s analysis financial gains and gestures of recognition are at the core of a ‘self-achieved’ politics of identity, which would take place after seeing how Eurasians had dealt with their colonial past. And the comparison between different groups of ‘postcolonial citizens’ frames the state as almost a spectator, merely reacting to the strive of its ‘new’ constituents. This assessment is in line with a specific dominant discourse

within the Dutch public sphere that portrays overseas nationals as migrants ‘often without understanding their presence in the Netherlands in terms of historical continuity’ as Balkenhol observes: ‘[a]ccording to that image, they had come of their own free will, to a country that had always extended a helping hand to those in need, and now they exploited the compassion of this nation’ (Balkenhol 2014, 106). Oostindie does not openly subscribe to this explanation but, by framing his comparison in terms of advantages, financial or otherwise, he suggests that the discursive space, in which full belonging is first withheld and then made to trickle down through ‘gestures’, is constructed between subjects on equal footing. While lobbies and community organizations advocating for recognition do have agency and can effect change they still must move within a framework that is given to them – and straying from this path has consequences. Balkenhol and Coenders indeed remark that although the history of slavery and colonialism has been memorialized by people of African descent in the Netherlands throughout the twentieth century, over the last three decades the scale of remembrance has grown (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020). The authors in fact highlight how, starting from the 1990s, black grassroots organizations in the Netherlands have begun to use this history to ‘articulate claims to citizenship and memory’ and to ‘demand recognition as full citizens with unrestricted access to all areas of social life including employment, housing and education’ (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 1). Two examples of this commemorative space are the *Keti Koti* and *Dag van Beseft* (day of awareness) held annually on July 1st, which marks the date on which slavery was formally abolished in Suriname and that, since 1863, has been celebrated in the country as Emancipation Day.¹¹ The ceremony is called *Keti Koti*, which means ‘broken chains’ or ‘the chains have been broken’ in Sranan Tongo, the lingua franca that developed in Suriname parallel to Dutch.¹²

In the Netherlands until the 1990s, the remembrance of this day had been occurring privately at the initiative of families and small community organizations. In 1993, the *Comité 30 juni/1 Juli* started a public commemoration in Amsterdam’s Surinameplein – an open area on the verge

11 But from that date the formerly enslaved were forced to complete a ten-year apprenticeship (Willemsen and Nimako 2011).

12 Guno Jones notes that ‘Surinamese culturalist nationalists propagated an equal status for Sranan Tongo, which was repressed by the colonial authorities. The cultural nationalists, who were deeply proficient in both Dutch and Sranan Tongo, started to demonstrate the value of Sranan Tongo in literary publications. They pleaded for equal status of both languages’ (pers. comm. 2020).

of the city center surrounded by a busy intersection with one of the main roads into the city. The name of this organization and the way the ceremony unfolds is a mirror image of the national *Dodenherdenking* (the commemoration of the dead) organized by the *Nationaal Comité 4 en 5 mei*. The 4th and 5th of May, respectively Remembrance Day and Liberation Day are two central dates in Dutch commemorative culture, and Balkenhol highlights how this analogy is ‘away for black Dutch citizens to articulate black subjectivity as a political claim on the nation’(Balkenhol 2014, 54).¹³ In 1998 the Afro-European women’s organization Sophiedela, chaired by the Afro-Surinamese politician Barryl Biekman, petitioned for building a monument to commemorate the victims of the slave trade and for slavery to be recognized as part of Dutch history. The petition was met favorably but the government’s involvement in the project came with conditions to fulfill. In fact, as it happened with the Indisch Platform, policymakers required Sophiedela to bring together all the organizations and individuals supporting the appeal under one umbrella organization. Thus, the Landelijk Platform Slavernijverleden (National Platform Slavery Past) was formed to be the government’s only interlocutor: several organizations, among whom the *Comité 30 juni/1 Juli*, refused to join because ‘they feared the government would hijack the memorial project and dilute its political claim’ (Balkenhol 2014, 129)

The result of the negotiations between the Platform and the government was the decision to create a memorial that would comprise a ‘static’ and a ‘dynamic’ part: the first in the form of a physical monument and the second in the form of an institute devoted to researching slavery, the *NiNsee Nationaal Instituut Nederlands Slavernijverleden en Erfenis* (National Institute for Dutch Slavery and its Legacy). On the first of July 2002, the monument was unveiled in the presence of Queen Beatrix, the Prime Minister, and a small number of invited guests: the inauguration took place behind fences, which kept from participating the many Dutch people of African descent who had traveled to participate to the ceremony from all over the country. The unveiling of the monument was also presented as a crucial moment in breaking the silence that had surrounded slavery until that point. However, as

13 Balkenhol writes that the ‘commemoration of slavery in the Netherlands begins long before the memorial project on Surinameplein in the early 1990s. It had picked up momentum already in the 1950s (Bosma 2009, 88). On July 1, 1962, a public commemoration of abolition attracted some 1000 visitors across the country (2009 *ibid.*). A year later, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of abolition, the commemoration was even larger. Wi Eegie Sanie (lit. our own thing) organized a considerable manifestation in the center of Amsterdam (2009, 89). About 500 Surinamese Dutch marched one kilometer from Weteringschans to Muntplein, carrying banners saying “Fri moe de” (There must be freedom/freedom must come)’(Balkenhol 2014, 214).

Balkenhol points out that slavery ‘was not *absent*, but *incorporated into* the imaginary of the nation’ (2014, 110; emphasis in the original). The story of the painful reaction of the descendants excluded from the ceremony emerges ‘less like the dawn of a new beginning and more like a social drama with a well-rehearsed set of roles and a common plot’ and ‘a moral play’. In it, ‘the position of blackness alternates between anger, danger, and violence’ and ‘victimhood on the other’ in contrast ‘with the calmness of the crowd of invited guests’. In the end, ‘whiteness’ emerges ‘as a position of restraint, rationality, and somewhat naïve good intentions’ (Balkenhol 2014, 111).

This ‘social drama’ that highlights violence connected to blackness aligns with what Balkenhol identifies as the ‘politics of compassion’: ‘a particular discursive formation that makes colonial projects acceptable within a self-image of the caring nation by redefining atrocities as care in the name of compassion’ (Balkenhol 2014, 120). Depictions of suffering have been a crucial part of scholarly and media reports on slavery and have also been featured in attempts at memorialization in the form of books, exhibitions, and talks. Today a discourse on emotional pain and trauma is deployed whenever Afro-descendant Dutch people protest against inequalities and racism. If right-wing parties and populist pundits openly disparage any memorial project on the history of slavery and accuse Surinamese Dutch to exploit their ‘victim-status’ to obtain advantages, the mainstream reaction of compassionate understanding still ‘serve[s] in the iconography of a caring nation’ (Balkenhol 2014, 121). And whenever political demands defy the image of black suffering, they are met with consternation and as isolated instances of hotheaded characters, as they do ‘not fit into a politics of compassion that perceives the placing of a monument as an act of generosity’ (2014, 130).

Criticism never quite abandoned the monument nor the operate of the NiNsee, which was inaugurated one year later. For his study, Balkenhol spoke to several people whose stance on the memorial remains critical: ‘they saw the monument, as well as the research institute for nothing more than an alibi, a symbolic gesture that avoided real, honest engagement’ (2014, 109). When, in 2012, the government decided to withdraw its annual funding, the Institute’s public-facing headquarters had to close down (Captain 2016). As Esther Captain points out one of the criteria by which the government came to this decision was the so-called ‘support of the community’: meaning that a ‘community’ had to be interested enough in the activities of the NiNsee to rally and gather the financial resources necessary for its continuation. Captain notes that invoking this principle signaled that ‘the “community” referred to here was reduced to Dutch people of Surinamese and Antillean descent

and that therefore the government itself confirmed the differentiation between citizens (2016). At that point, the *categoraal beleid* (policy targeting specific groups of people, ‘categories’) had not been in use since the 1980s and the neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state. So it definitely seems bizarre the recourse to the ‘community’ principle’ by the government at a moment in time in which the ‘idea of policy tailored for the specific needs of different social groups made room for a generic policy model not targeting specific groups’ (Balkenhol 2014, 126).

Oostindie argues that the reason why NiNsee was not successful in securing enough support was that the Institute was ‘caught in an uncomfortable dilemma between demands from a radical grassroots and the task of connecting with society at large and building up respectability’ (2011, 153); the wider population opposed the ‘politicization of the past’ that was ‘expressed in a radical discourse (‘Black Holocaust’, slavery trauma) and in demands (reparations)’ (2011, 153). Framing the demand for reparations as ‘radical’ aligns with the mainstream discourse in which, as Balkenhol incisively remarks, ‘a black political subjectivity that goes beyond the image of suffering and miserable victims continues to be hard to accept for many in the Netherlands’ (Balkenhol 2014, 129). But what I want to draw attention to is how the abandonment of minority policies in favor of a neoliberal framework of ‘own responsibility’ from the late 1980s on, resulted in how ‘the culture of political claim-making also changed’ (Balkenhol 2014, 126). Until that point, Afro-Surinamese articulated political demands through their welfare organizations, and the commemoration of slavery was tied to the anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggle. In particular, Surinamese student associations such as LOSON and later SAWO referenced slavery in the context of the workers’ liberation and anti-capitalist struggle ‘explicitly included workers of all races and ethnicities’ (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 7).¹⁴ But in the early 1990s, black grassroots organizations began to mobilize the memory of slavery by ‘focusing not on Dutch colonialism or the proletarian revolution, but on citizenship’ (2020, 7).

Balkenhol observes that the claim to ‘centuries-old citizenship rights’ whilst still addressing racism it ‘narrows the scope of antiracist struggle to a new category: that of the “descendants of the enslaved”’ (2020, 8). The author, however, also reminds us that when the project for a slavery memorial was

14 Established in 1973 as a nation-wide fusion of all local Surinamese student associations, the National Organisation of Surinamese in the Netherlands (LOSON) was active in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s where it pushed forward an anti-imperialist agenda and a commitment to broader class struggle

being discussed, it was the government that demanded to negotiate with a unitary subject instead of the diverse group of claimants. Again, in this case, looking at this evolution from the perspective of community organizations and depicting the government and institutions as merely reacting to the demands of these groups, glosses over the fact that reifying multiple identities into one and shifting political demands into the symbolic terrain of recognition does not serve people or communities. The same can be said for fragmenting memories into clear-cut components and political subjects into characters within a precise social drama: the descendant of the enslaved as victim and the descendant of the enslavers as contrived spectators or vehement deniers.

As we will see in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5, although these characters are fictive, their mobilization in the public sphere, in the end, helps to reassert the authority of the institution/nation that is posited as guarantor among two parties on substantially equal ground. The question of what to remember, how, and in which spaces has become entrenched with the struggle of strengthening the position of a number of 'strangers' within a country that distributed hopes and warnings, gave something, and withheld much more. Oostindie frames 'recognition' as ultimately a successful strategy and if we embrace this view, then memory appears as a resource: a tool through which to campaign for rights, a way to apply more and more pressure until a breach opens in the discursive spaces through which not only the heritage of the country is built but also the hierarchies among its inhabitants. But certain memories are also made into a property: a thing that certain groups possess exclusively and must therefore guard. And, in contrast with Oostindie's analysis that frames this move as self-directed, I see it as an aftereffect of contemporary liberal governmentality that requires for its functioning homogeneous and reifiable identities. In fact, to be considered interlocutors stable and legitimate enough to be taken seriously by state and state-like institutions, minoritized subjects do not simply choose to ground their identity through mobilizing memory because of the effectiveness of structuring political claims in this manner. Restricting the scope of demands as vital as the right to feel at home to an identity-based struggle is a tool for demonstrating proficiency in the 'feeling rules' of the country.

Conclusion

The first part of the chapter has given an overview of how discourses and policies that produce different categories of strangers have evolved: from the first postwar decades, through the 1970s and up until the 2000s, elite political

actors have construed time after time an ideal subject to oppose to ‘migrants’ that would not be able to integrate because of their difference – biological and/or cultural; against a rapidly changing sociopolitical backdrop, race disappears from public discourse and racism become a matter of individual behaviors and reactions whilst the Netherlands gets reinvented as a beacon of liberal and secular values that all citizens, but especially *newcomers*, must embrace. And heritage provides the discursive space in which to solidify the ‘unfolding “national story”’ that justifies why certain groups and individuals can and others cannot belong. The second part of the chapter examines the context in which a particular usage of memory has emerged: by tying groups to a specific identity, the cultural memory of different diasporas – of coming from an ‘elsewhere’ – becomes an instrument to campaign for rights connected to citizenship.

Whether and how certain moments in this ‘national story’ are commemorated becomes the contested territory in which ‘migrants’ and ‘unsafe’ citizens are required to negotiate their place within the city and the nation. At the same time, by including these memories in national canons, school curricula, monuments, and museums, the city/nation/Europe can signal its willingness to include. These overtures remain firmly anchored in a symbolic ground and yet they are put forward as steps in the right direction: the promise of safety entailed in the ‘good life’ that, at some point in the future, will be accessible *to you too*. As we will see in Chapter 3 the normative underpinnings of the trade-off are even more recognizable in the wide range of projects that sought to memorialize the ‘migration crisis’. But first Chapter 2 will introduce Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum as one of the preeminent sites in which the processes that this chapter has examined have been taking place.

CHAPTER 2

**Amsterdam's
Tropenmuseum between
colonial memory and post-
colonial, migrant belonging**

Introduction

This chapter introduces the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam as one of the stages in which the Netherlands ‘unfolding “national story”’(Hall 2005) about who can and cannot belong, has been developing and taking a variety of shapes. The role of museums in ‘making-citizens’ is no longer the product of the nation-state’s cohesive disciplinary program (Bennett 2005; 2013). Sharon Macdonald notes that, even before the ripple effect of postcolonial theory and globalization, this function of the museum should be seen ‘as more or less calculated and more or less effective attempts or bids rather than determinacies’(Macdonald 2016, 4). Today, after decades of thorough criticism, ‘their historical role in citizenship formation’ is being reprised ‘to help with the enfranchisement and recognition of “new citizens”’(2016, 4). As we have seen in Chapter 1, the cultural difference of these new citizens positions them as strangers whose belonging to the nation is rendered unstable and conditional. In the muddled context of shifting politics of belonging and recognition, museums appear as (more) stable interlocutors in providing a stage, or a safer space, in which minoritized groups can perform their identities while challenging too constrictive or Eurocentric ways of telling their stories. But this positioning is not unproblematic as the next pages will show.

This chapter is based on two years of fieldwork, between 2017 and 2019, and uses a variety of sources to examine the role of the Tropenmuseum in relation to its complex positioning within the discursive space of Dutch identity and belonging. These years were a moment of transition for the museum: as the biggest institution within the newly founded National Museum of World Cultures (NMWC henceforth), the Tropenmuseum had been consolidating its identity around a new mission that emphasized, on one hand, its societal role and, on the other, the notions of colonial afterlife and implication. The first section of the chapter traces how the new course inaugurated after the creation of the NMWC entity finds its roots in previous attempts at rethinking the museum’s relationship with the colonial in the 1990s and 2000s; the second section offers a reflection on the notions of ‘safe space’ and ‘implication’ and the consequences of being deployed in/through an institutional actor like the museum; the third and fourth sections analyze two temporary projects – set in the rapidly gentrifying neighborhood where the museum is located – and provide a counterpart to how the museum, by meta-historicizing its recent past and work, positions itself within debates about postcolonial and migrant belonging. Does the museum’s ongoing exploration of matters of belonging and citizenship find a correspondence in its own participatory projects?

A museum from ‘today and around the corner’

The Tropenmuseum – literally Museum of the Tropics but also sometimes translated as Tropical Museum – occupies an imposing neo-renaissance building in the East Amsterdam neighborhood called Oost. The building itself has been designated a national monument and, as then director Stijn Schoonderwoerd calls it, can be considered the ‘number one object in the collection’ (Schoonderwoerd 2019). He uses this expression to highlight how the museum’s relationship with the colonial is being examined in a different light, which does not shy away from confronting the past. The creation of the National Museum of World Cultures was overseen by Schoonderwoerd, who was at the helm of NMWC until 2021 when he stepped down from the position and was replaced by Wayne Modest in the role of Content Director and Marieke van Bommel as General Director.¹ When in 2014 the Tropenmuseum merged with the Volkenkunde Museum in Leiden and the Afrika Museum in Berg en Dal, later incorporating also the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam, Schoonderwoerd describes it as a ‘wake-up call’ and a ‘life-threatening crisis’ (Schoonderwoerd 2019). The launch of the NMWC came in fact after a turbulent period started in 2011 when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the major funder of the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) since the 1970s, announced the intention to cut all its funding by the beginning of 2013. Since the Tropenmuseum was part of the Institute this news was met with concern about the future of the museum and its staff. After a long period of negotiations, the Dutch government agreed to continue to fund the museum if a number of conditions were met: a structural reorganization that had to culminate with the merger with the other two museums; the passage under the aegis of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science instead that of Foreign Affairs; and finally the museum’s collection, which until that point was property of the Royal Tropical Institute, had to be nationalized (Iervolino and Sandell 2016).² Although accounts of this particular moment

1 Sharon Macdonald observes how the adoption of the “world” label by several ethnographic museums in Europe was regarded as ‘more likely to be resonant with a public already attuned to terms such as “world music” and “world art”’. The author posits that ‘[i]n a climate in which museums increasingly have to show their public worth either to gain city or state funding or paying visitors, replacing the more academic terms “ethnographic” and “ethnological” seems to make sense. Harris and O’Hanlon warn, however, that “world” in these cases “actually refers to those ‘cultures’ that can be most readily accommodated into the long established paradigms of the West”’(Macdonald 2016, 11)

2 Currently the museum is funded through the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (the structural fund that in 2020 amounted to 17.465.209 Euros) and other entities that sponsor

in the history of the museum might differ, the immediate result was to rethink the mission of the newly formed NMWC according to its societal value, and toward becoming

a museum that inspires world citizenship . . . we wanted to change from being a museum ‘from a long time ago and far away’ to being a museum ‘from today and around the corner’. It all came together in the slogan: to be a museum about people . . . (Schoonderwoerd 2019)³

As part of this new course, in 2015 the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC going forward) was launched as NMWC’s flagship research institute providing a platform across all four museums for studying how objects in the collection are connected to issues of heritage, cultural identity, and belonging.

The museum ‘from a long time ago and far away’ was the inheritor of a complex history that started when in 1864 the Koloniaal Museum was founded in the neighboring city of Haarlem, and then opened to the public in 1871, to make the Dutch public and potential investors aware of the many commercial opportunities that the colonies offered. Later it took the shape of a more centralized institution named Koloniaal Instituut in Amsterdam – comprising an exhibition space, a library, laboratories, a theatre, and reception halls. The venue opened its doors to the public in 1926, inaugurated in the presence of Queen Wilhelmina, who in her speech underlined how the Institute would be a symbol of unity between the motherland and the colonies.⁴ During World War 2 the building was used by German police while the country was under

individual projects or departments (for example the TEFAF Museum Restoration Fund for the upkeep of items of the collection; the Tropenmuseum Junior received a grant from the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts of 212.185 Euros to enlarge the offer for schoolchildren). Another source of revenue comes from selling tickets for exhibitions and events, from commercial partners and donations (National Museum of World Cultures 2021)

3 Being a museum ‘about and for people’ was then one of the official taglines and the core notion behind the museum’s vision until the fall of 2019, when it changed to ‘about world cultures’.

4 At that point, however, the relationship between the Netherlands and its overseas territories looked very different from the serene scenes portrayed in the friezes that decorate the building. Whereas a concern for the welfare of the colonized was the official rhetoric behind the so-called Ethische Politiek (ethical policy) of the Kingdom, in practice this resulted in capillary control over the local population, a ‘biopolitical program’ analogous to the French ‘mission civilisatrice’ and the British ‘white man’s burden’ (Bijl 2012, 445). The Dutch East Indies were, according to historian Henk Schulte Nordholt, a ‘state of violence’ (in Bijl 2012) characterized by ‘many wars, repressive labor regimes, excessively violent state responses to local resistance, and the close ties between the colonial administration and local criminals who in exchange for their services were given free rein’ (Bijl 2012, 445).

Nazi occupation, then fell into disrepair during the post-war years. From the time Indonesia declared its sovereignty in 1945 de facto starting the process of political decolonization that, after a four-year, ended with the Netherlands finally recognizing the country's independence, the museum mostly served as a propaganda tool;⁵ after being renamed Tropenmuseum in 1949, it was incorporated into the *Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen* (Royal Institute of the Tropics) specializing now in socio-economic development.⁶ In the 1970s the focus of the museum shifted and diorama-like displays portraying life in the 'Third World' were used to provide the backdrop to learn more about Dutch policies in the field of international cooperation.⁷ It was during these years that objects connected to the former colony that belonged to the permanent collection of the museum were put into storage. Gradually, and as the memory of colonial times started to re-emerge in the public sphere from the 1980s on, a more ethnographic approach was reintroduced in the curatorial department with exhibitions being able to showcase not just developmental aid projects but also to engage 'with both the aesthetics and politics of culture as well as broader interest in seeing collections long hidden in the museum's depot' (Hilderling, Modest, and Aztouti, 2014, 327). In the 1990s, the museum started to develop a program that privileged a 'cultural diversity' approach, highlighting a narrative that connected different cultures through their differences and similarities.⁸ Between 1994 and 2008, under the leadership of the head of the curatorial department Susan Legêne, the museum underwent

5 The same year in which the Netherlands launched the euphemistically called 'police actions', the museum, which had reopened with the name Indisch Museum, received increased subsidies from the government in the East Indies and the Dutch Ministry of Education, Art, and Science as a mean to increase the interest in the colonies and the support for the military intervention.

6 Although the name of Museum of the Tropics was adopted to signal separation from the recent past, this denomination is not neutral: as David Arnold points out, the 'conceptual space' of the tropics has been deployed to indicate 'something culturally alien to, as well as environmentally distinct from, Europe' (Arnold 1997, 306).

7 This shift had also consequences for the museum's exhibitions policy, which could not focus on aesthetic or cultural value and instead needed to provide a representation of "'everyday life" of Third World countries' (Hilderling, Modest, and Aztouti 2014, 316)

8 This followed the trajectory introduced in the 1990s, with the New Museology (Vergo 1997), which focused on critique and concepts like governmentality, the public sphere, human rights, and identity politics; and which continued in the 2000s with a renewed focus on the societal function of the museum, centered on ideas like inclusivity, participation, community co-production, and the expanded contact zone (Brown and Peers 2005).

an extensive process of refurbishment. The exhibition resulting from this was called *Eastward Bound! Art, Culture and Colonialism* and described as ‘re-activation’: the items that had been in the museum’s depots were placed back ‘in the spotlight as universal heritage’ (Van Dijk and Legêne 2011, 15). The curatorial team had aimed to make visible how ‘the Colonial Museum created visible and invisible borders related to Dutch citizenship’ (2009, 230) since its displays until then had focused ‘on the presentation of those who did *not* belong to the nation’ (2009, 238 emphasis in the original).⁹

9 The Tropenmuseum attempted with the temporary exhibition *White on Black*, which ran from December 1989 until August 1990, to reflect on the stereotypical representations of black people in popular European culture. However the critique of the images exhibited was not explicit enough (Pieterse 1990).



Fig. 1 'The Seamstress'. Photograph of one of the old mannequins from the museum's permanent collection restaged in Eastward Bounds!. Photographer: Valerio Cerasani. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum



Fig. 2 'The Explorer'. Photograph of one of the life-sized mannequins in the Colonial Theater. The transparent limbs are supposed to make them less 'realistic'. Photographer: Valerio Cerasani. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.

When I visited the museum in June 2017 for the first time, *Eastward Bound!* was still on display. I could not find an accompanying text that made explicit the rationale behind it and, therefore, I was able to gain an understanding of it only a posteriori by searching for the curators' account of the process that led to the exhibition. Legêne observes that after the dissolution of the Netherlands East Indies, coming to the motherland meant for repatriates to discover that 'they had not belonged to the nation of which they thought they were part' (2009, 238). Until 1949 in fact, the museum had been celebrating the colonial enterprise by displaying the art and culture of Others 'disconnected from "real" people and attributed to imagined ethnic types' (2009, 238).¹⁰ To reflect on this element of the history of collecting, the team devised the new exhibition around the creation of the *Colonial Theatre* located between the two aisles that comprise the first floor of the museum. An archival photograph was selected as starting point: part of the Colonial Museum's 1938 Jubilee exhibition, it showed Queen Wilhelmina's empty throne surrounded by wax figures representing colonial subjects as anonymous, essentialized characters. Three of these mannequins belonged to the museum's permanent collection and were restaged in the new display: portraying instead of generic 'natives' Indonesian people who played a role in colonial society – a teacher, a seamstress, a clerk. The central section of the display featured an installation in which seven mannequins portraying 'historical archetypes' were displayed in a semi-cylinder recreating a jungle-like environment even featuring bird sounds.¹¹ Through headphones, Dutch-speaking visitors could listen to their stories about 'how these characters were 'simultaneously part of both colonial and Dutch societies, and thus recognize that colonialism is much more than a political and economic history belonging to the past' (Legêne 2009, 240). This way I learned that the goal of the display was to make visible how identity and difference had been staged through the technology of the museum so that visitors could be aware of how 'colonial identity, with all its implicit and

10 The existence of an "Indo" population, meaning individuals of mixed descent, and their biographies in the difficult years post-independence did not feature in the museum, whose 'main function had been to confirm the Dutch elite's family tradition of living in two worlds, a tradition that in its Euro-centeredness as such did not allow for many shades of "white"' (Legêne 2009, 239).

11 The seven other life-sized mannequins at the center of the installation were supposed to represent archetypes who had previously been invisible within the museum's collection: a governor general, a tobacco planter who also became one of the founders of the Colonial Institute, a missionary woman and an explorer; two other figures represented instead an Indonesian man and woman who worked for the Dutch colonial regime.

explicit mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, resonates in current debates on Dutch transnational identity'(Legêne 2009, 241).

At least until later in the fall of 2017 when the exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery* opened, explicit references to colonial violence and race were not present in any of the wall texts across the displays making up the permanent collection. During that first visit, I felt that subtler technologies like the 'distribution of sentiment' (Stoler 2010a, 58) and 'choreography of the everyday' (Stoler 2010b, 17) that regulated the intimate sphere of colonial subjects were only hinted at. There was also no mention of how people resisted, of the war of independence, of 'police actions'. Only later the photographs of massacres conducted by the Dutch Army during the Atjeh war, on which Paul Bijl based his research, were added to the Colonial Theater with an accompanying text filling this particular gap. Thus, the role that ethnographic museums played in construing the 'conceptual heritage' (Hesse 2007) of race through collecting and exhibiting the 'Other' is implied but never fully explored. Instead, a new narrative is produced in which the formerly Othered are brought back from storage and dressed over in a new costume: from unnamed Javanese woman to school teacher, from racial stereotype to 'historical archetype'. As we will see in Chapter 4, in 2015 Hodan Warsame, Simone Zeefuik, and Tirza Balk from the group Decolonize the Museum extensively critiqued these omissions pointing at how the museum had been 'speaking from and for the white gaze' by 'privileging the perspective and stories of (white) colonizers' but also 'assuming that visitors are white Dutch' (Warsame 2015). Without the possibility of reading and reflecting on Legêne's reconstruction beforehand, only certain visitors with a much broader and deeper system of references would be able to perhaps access the meaning of the colonial theater. The issue with this is, as Mieke Bal observes, that if the interpretative materials accompanying exhibitions do not change to include the museum's 'critical consciousness' then they fail in pointing 'at their own discourse as not natural, as a sign system' (1992, 562). In this case, the 'critical consciousness' was only retrievable through research while the discourse of the museum not only continued to appear 'natural' but also gave way to a new timeline: the refurbishment had been necessary to upend the essentialized representation of the formerly colonized as an active effort to reinscribe them as subjects and not objects of a shared heritage; reflecting on the omissions and silences in the museum's past, however, still does not account for the continuities between colonial taxonomies and the racial undertones of the Dutch citizenship regime; ultimately, the refurbishment stopped at the threshold and failed to interrogate, in a way

intelligible for a public of non-experts, how colonial articulations of race re-emerge in elite discourses on identity, belonging, and citizenship. As the next pages will show, because of the history of its collections and role as a national institution the museum feels ‘conscripted . . . as potential agents of change’ (Balkenhol and Modest 2019, 188) but the timeframe in which this change has happened needs to be thoroughly questioned.

A new timeline of change

Whereas the curatorial approach behind the reactivation was quite sophisticated, it remained largely invisible in the outcome of the process. At the same time, through the refurbishment the museum is still not renouncing its authority in producing a timeline of progress in which ‘postcolonial’ citizens, who were excluded from the Colonial Museum, are reinstated as full citizens in this new, self-reflexive iteration of the museum. But the series of inclusionary gestures directed at different postcolonial groups have always been subjected to gradualism and conditionality expressed through comparisons with changing definitions of who represents the Other. The limitations in what the museum was willing to say through *Eastward Bound!* are a product of the time in which the 1994-2008 renovation was being developed: the central themes of the refurbishment in fact mirrored the discourses on citizenship and belonging that were being produced and circulated outside of the museum. The late 1990s and 2000s are depicted as a turbulent time in the Dutch political landscape in which a shift took place from a Dutch way that envisioned ‘practical’ multiculturalism as a tool for social cohesion, to a post-9/11 culturalist turn that saw increasing demands for cultural loyalty to an ideal notion of ‘Dutchness’. In this context, *Eastwards Bound!* represented an attempt through which the museum began to situate itself as a trustworthy interlocutor in the discourse on how to expand the borders of belonging. This type of positioning started in the 1980s when the Tropenmuseum began to include through its public programming not only ‘postcolonial’ citizens coming from Indonesia, Suriname, and the Antilles but also, after the arrival and settlement of guest workers mainly from Morocco and Turkey, ‘new’ Dutch citizens predominantly of Muslim background. As the politics of recognition grew more and more complex ethnographic museums in particular, because of their ‘world heritage’ collections, have been engaged in rethinking their representational strategies to highlight the importance of the cultural diversity of their newer constituencies. Further, they ‘have been imagined, indeed mobilized, as institutions with a central role to play in

connecting with diverse postcolonial and post-migrant communities within European changing polities, as spaces of recognition or sites for *belonging work*' (Modest 2019, 13).

The Tropenmuseum that I encountered as I approached it as a case study was not simply the result of the caesura brought about by the merger and the creation of the NMWC. Throughout the period during which I conducted fieldwork, the museum had been communicating the intention to reflect on its 'implicatedness in the Dutch colonial project' as part of a process of critical engagement with the colonial past (Balkenhol and Modest 2019, 186). This self-reflexive move found a theoretical companion in Michael Rothberg's concept of 'implicated subject' prefigured as a collective *we* that could be able to acknowledge a degree of complicity in the legacies of past violence, like colonialism. However, implication does not coincide with perpetration or with juridical definitions of guilt. The value of recognizing our implication lies in the fact that '[c]ultural memory and discourses on the past do not themselves constitute institutionalized agencies capable of redressing injustices' (Rothberg 2019, 137). Nonetheless, they allow for the possibility of creating 'arenas where injustices are recognized and new frameworks are imagined', which are 'necessary if not sufficient' for reparation (Rothberg 2019, 138). The prospect of redress that Rothberg proposes is largely based on 'cultural and symbolic politics', which are able of going 'beyond the material realm' and towards a 'more capacious notion of implication' (2019, 142). And yet the scholar acknowledges that becoming aware of 'one's position as an unwilling perpetrator of injustice does not necessarily result in a radical critique of that injustice' (2019, 145).¹² The limitations of Rothberg's argument are built precisely in how it lends itself to be employed by institutions and not just subjects. Especially in how, through it, institutional actors can rewrite their recent past according to a timeline of progress rendered more believable by publicly recognizing their past mistakes while stopping at the threshold of radically evaluating how, if not actively perpetrating injustices, they can still uphold an unjust status-quo.

12 The final goal would be, the author posits, to 'transfigure' implication, which could make us able to enact 'long-distance solidarity', which is 'premised on difference rather than logics of sameness and identification' (Rothberg 2019, 13). Therefore, through this 'differentiated' solidarity, subjects that are implicated in structures of domination and oppression can take responsibility for dismantling them by 'acting in concert with others' (2019, 200). And while the 'self-reflexivity of implicated subjects is not sufficient for the construction of durable solidarities' it 'remains a necessary component of coalition building' (Rothberg 2019, 203)

In a 2019 text, Markus Balkenhol and then- RCMC director Wayne Modest use a series of rhetorical attacks against the Tropenmuseum from the right-wing party PPV (Party for Freedom) as a starting point for their analysis. They argue that the narratives built through right-wing populist discourses make a case for a ‘differential economy of care’ based on the ‘presumed right to citizenship’ under which ‘racialized and culturalized others’ are framed as ‘deserving of a different kind of care, based on benevolence, tolerance, and compassion’ while simultaneously ‘postcolonial and (post)migrant citizens are either regarded as not caring enough about the nation or even a threat to the nation’s future, its values, and its culture’ (Balkenhol and Modest 2019, 175). Like other heritage institutions, the museum finds itself being ‘conscripted’ by right-wing commentators ‘into these narratives about love for the nation and for “its’ people”’ in which museums ‘occupy an ambivalent position of being both conscripts in the populist project and potential agents of change’ (Balkenhol and Modest 2019, 188). My analysis departs from Balkenhol and Modest’s from this last point, since I do not see museums and other cultural institutions necessarily as ‘conscripts’ but rather as one of the stages in which to act out the issues connected to belonging and care. In the years that preceded and followed the merger, the Tropenmuseum and the public discussion on its function in society replicated the notion of what Ruth Philips has called the ‘museum-as-theatre’: meaning that the institution offers a microcosm in which to play out ‘real political dynamics’ and where to gain new insight into ‘these performative and public dimensions of professional practice’ (2005, 88). Writing from the context of Canada as a settler-colonial state, Philips argues that this function of the museum could hopefully inspire activism capable of shifting ‘public opinion and changes in institutions, laws, and professional practices’ (2005, 88). Indeed, the Tropenmuseum is among the organizations more actively involved in creating a space in which to stage dialogues about difficult topics, like the legacies of colonialism; whilst also both inviting and responding to critique and contestation about the museum’s implication with the histories and epistemologies that have contributed to present inequalities and exclusions. This is a decisive shift: from the institution as exhibitionary complex, governmental assemblage, and ‘differencing machine’(Bennett 2013), to uncritical contact zones of neocolonial collaboration (Boast 2011), to a new *new* museum that is emerging from decades of academic criticism and activist work.

Whereas political arenas are dominated by the high-octane and volatile ‘culturalist drama’, the cultural sector and heritage institutions in particular offer a safer space in which to allow multiple voices to make the case for

softer, less constrictive notions of citizenship and belonging. This safe space, however, even if opposes nuance to the excesses of populist right-wing discourse, nevertheless reinforces a model of institutionally-sanctioned redress and reform that ultimately stalls action by devaluing any political claim or gesture that is not articulated through proper means and in proper avenues. Should museums then be one of these avenues? Johanna Zetterstrom-Sharp and Chris Wingfield offer a reflection on the consequences of positioning the museum as a 'safe space' by analyzing the debate surrounding the restitution of a Benin bronze owned by one of the University of Cambridge's colleges. Their analysis concludes that in this and other cases in which 'making-safe' to resolve tensions was deemed necessary, the 'real assumption of "safe space" in the ethnographic museum' is 'a safety that emerges from saying the right things while being able to do very little' (2019, 26). Further, in a 'context where action, instead of words, is demanded by contemporary political realities' (2019, 26) the institutional safe space stalls concrete measures by acknowledging the need for radical action while also postponing it indefinitely. This sobering conclusion alludes to a decoupling between what the museum knows and what it does not know about its own functioning: the fact that taking action to provide a safer platform in which to discuss thorny issues results in institutional paralysis is seen as a paradox, an unwanted and unexpected result.

If this insight is applied to the Tropenmuseum's work around the notion of implication, we can see how it acquires a new dimension. During an online talk in the summer of 2020 titled *Thinking With Michael Rothberg: The Implicated Subject* and hosted by RCMC, first a member of the audience then Wayne Modest asked the author what role the category of implication can have within museums. Rothberg first emphasized that his 'approach tends to be human-focused and subject-focused' but then expanded on his view acknowledging that institutions are sites of implication since 'subjects are entangled with structures through the mediating form of institutions' (Rothberg 2020). Ultimately, however, he believes that educational organizations like universities and museums 'are also spaces for counter-hegemonic projects . . . and for hopefully producing different kinds of subjects and, through them, different types of institutions' (Rothberg 2020). Whilst it is important to acknowledge that institutions are made of people, on whom depends the support and deployment of progressive ideas, they are not people. The idea of a museum, and not a being, as implicated in harmful structures – but not *intentionally* being a perpetrator – enacts a double-register in which an organization and its reach are shrunk to possess individual-like attributes.

Like a person, the implicated museum can know and not know, it can decide to act on previous ignorance by recognizing its degree of complicity and thus ‘hopefully’ produce subjects who in turn will be able to make the institution anew.¹³ This results in a disorienting suspension between what the museum wants to achieve and the reason why it might fail, which creates a new timeline of change: the institution openly recognizes its role in the violence of the past and in failing to properly address inequality in the present over and over again; each time, the declaration of implication is more sophisticated as its output is in terms of exhibitions and public programming. What is erased through the resonance given to criticism coming both from within the museum and through welcoming outside voices (instead of attempting to suppress them), is how these moments of reckoning are recurring and built within a precise economy – in competition but also in accord with other museums and cultural organizations. They have been happening on the occasion of each refurbishment, in parallel with a range of societal shifts, yet somehow each breakthrough has not been accompanied by the structural overhaul it had advertised. Whereas some of the exhibitions and public talks within the Tropenmuseum attest to the willingness to ask difficult questions, the different parts of which the NMWC is made are not all moving at the same speed. The next pages will explore whether the museum’s ongoing exploration of matters of belonging and citizenship finds a correspondence in participatory projects in the Indische Buurt, the district in which the museum is located. Here a history of multiple displacements highlights the presence of another worrisome degree of implication: with a current vision of the neighborhood that mobilizes cultural memory to produce the borough as a destination within Amsterdam; and that homogenizes the hyphenated identities of the borough’s residents to support a cosmopolitan vision of the borough in which diversity is merely a happy byproduct of migration.

Good food, good neighbors and racial-colonial undertones

Due to the global provenance of its collection and the ambition of being a museum ‘from today and around the corner’, the NMWC has seen its audiences multiply exponentially: from ‘postcolonial’ citizens to newer migrants to

13 In the context of analyzing the non-performativity of diversity and anti-racism work in institutional settings, Sara Ahmed uses the concept of an institution ‘being posited as like an individual, as someone who suffers from prejudice and who can be treated, so that he or she can act better toward racial others’ (Ahmed 2012, 45 italics in the original).

neighbors – all are connected in the museum’s vision of world citizenship.¹⁴ Exhibitions and other forms of public programming often feature personal memories of arriving and settling as starting points to prompt a conversation on identity, culture, and what forms the shared heritage of the Dutch nation. But whilst the lived reality of what constitutes Dutchness continues to change along with the lived multicultural, a classed, gendered, and racialized notion of an ideal ‘good citizen’ continues to be opposed to Other identities. Heritage becomes the tool through which to shorten the distance from this ideal subject: it can be used for claiming the experience of migration as universal and thus enjoining ‘new’ and ‘old’ Dutch citizens in a cosmopolitan polity; and/or it can be employed to reclaim cultural difference as enriching for the nation, which is rendered more ‘flavorful’ through the influx of different cultures. The question of how to engage different publics – and publics that are embodied in difference – is further complicated by the physical and symbolical location that the Tropenmuseum occupies within the public imaginary of Amsterdam as the most diverse city in the Netherlands.¹⁵ But also with the position that the museum occupies within the city, away from the Museumplein pole where the flagship Rijksmuseum, Stedelijk, and Van Gogh museums are situated. The Tropenmuseum is in fact located in a formerly working-class and immigrant neighborhood within the Amsterdam East district. This area is comprised of smaller boroughs and among them, the most widely known is the Indische Buurt (the Indies borough). At the borders of the district lies the museum and the beautiful Oosterpark, where the National Slavery Monument is also located. Incidentally, the street separating the museum and the park from the rest of the area is the same where the murder of Theo van Gogh took place. For the first two years of my PhD (2017-2019), during which I conducted the majority of my fieldwork in the Tropenmuseum, I lived less than five hundred meters from it: in a shared house located in the Dapperbuurt, which is the portion of the neighborhood separated by train tracks from the Indische

14 World citizenship, however, is a contested concept based on cosmopolitan ethics that needs to be analyzed as a ‘historically produced discourse – anchored in particular material interests and relations of power’ (Danewid 2018, 17).

15 Some critics have argued that the type of participatory approach developed under the influence of New Museology or, in general, with a focus on source communities and the engagement of local groups has been inconsistent at best; and, at worst, that it has reinforced reductive understandings of ‘community’ and re-inscribed fixed and static ideas of culture and difference (see Crooke 2006; Watson and Watson 2007; Golding and Modest 2013). The commitment to inclusion has also often been characterized by a focus on individual projects rather than on structural issues within the institution, whereas the focus on multiculturalism and migration has not been immune from culturalist assumptions that further reify cultural difference.

Buurt. At that time, I was often traveling to attend the seminars organized by CHEurope project's partners and would rarely spend more than three or four weeks in a row in Amsterdam. Whereas my attachment to the city felt tenuous, the neighborhood became crucial: the only way I could feel at least partially tethered to my new home was tied to knowing where to shop, work and relax in my immediate surroundings. When I had to look for another apartment I felt anxious at the thought that I probably could not find an affordable one in that same area, since the Indische Buurt has been one of Amsterdam's most rapidly gentrifying areas. It was at this point that I noticed that several of the listings targeting young professionals – showing renovated and light-filled flats –often included a photo of the Tropenmuseum to underline this way the prestige position within an up-and-coming area (see for instance on the topic of heritage and urban movements De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015).

Originally built for the lower-middle class, the Indische Buurt – whose name and streets refer to the Dutch East Indies and specific locations across the Indonesian archipelago –started to decline in the 1960s. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s cheap housing attracted guest workers from Morocco and Turkey, whose relocation to the area was also a consequence of unofficial *spreidingsbeleid* (spreading policies) that closed-off central areas of the city to non-white residents (Ernst and Doucet 2014; Hagemans et al. 2015). At this time, the Indische Buurt began to be portrayed by Dutch media and political discourse as a dangerous ghetto (Akkermans et al. 2013). This narrative remained predominant until the 2000s and worsened further in the aftermath of van Gogh's assassination, but then, in 2009 and 2016, two waves of state-led regeneration projects began to radically change the area causing the displacement of several of its original inhabitants. Because of the overlapping between my experience of the neighborhood and the themes I was exploring in my research, I could not limit my analysis to the museum's approach to exhibition-making and curatorship. I also sought to understand which shapes would 'belonging work' take in the district in which the Tropenmuseum is situated. In the fall of 2018, I was able to attend one of *Food-Verhalentours Javakwartier* (Java quartier's food and stories tours) that resulted from a collaboration between the Tropenmuseum and the entity called Javakwartier, a placemaking and branding project instrumental in the 2016 urban regeneration strategy.¹⁶ The two editions of the project, in the fall

16 Elisa Fiore reconstructs how The Javakwartier initiative came to be: it started in 2016 and funded within the framework of the municipality's program Experiments City in Balance (Gemeente Amsterdam 2015) and after, within the 2018–2022 City in Balance policy (Gemeente Amsterdam 2018), which 'meant to tackle the mounting touristification of the inner city of Amsterdam'. The-

of 2018 and the spring of 2019, were advertised as born out of the ‘idea of celebrating history, migration and entrepreneurial stories through delicious food’ (Tropenmuseum 2019). The tours took place on Sundays and were led by freelance guides for a maximum of ten people and lasted, depending on weather conditions, between three and four hours; the €35 participation fee included admission to the museum. After numerous attempts, I was finally able to book a spot in the often sold-out tours in October 2018. I arrived at the meeting point in front of the fountain on Javaplein where I was greeted by a group of participants consisting of seven adults (all white Dutch), two preteens (accompanying their parents), and an Afro-Dutch woman, who identified herself as our guide for the day. At the time, my knowledge of the Dutch language was quite limited so I could not follow the bits of casual conversations taking place around me. Instead, I concentrated on the stories told with each accompanying dish: from Surinamese’s pom in Ricardo’s restaurant, the creolized rendition of a Portuguese oven dish first introduced in Suriname by Portuguese-Jewish plantation owners; to the baklava in the Divan patisserie, which I normally frequented, where the success of the dessert across the Middle East was explained as stemming from the belief in the aphrodisiac powers of the spices used in its preparation; to assisting to how the traditional lavas bread is prepared in the Nour kebab restaurant, also a place that I had often visited. From what I could gather the stories being told were mostly referring to the origin of ingredients and cooking techniques while also centering on celebrating the owners of the establishments for bridging the gap between their cultures and the Netherlands. The tours could have been a chance for the Tropenmuseum to insert an element of doubt into the experience by, for instance, allowing participants to reflect on how the activity of consuming ‘unfamiliar’ cuisines in gentrified districts is tied to the commodification of food cultures; and by taking apart the marketing devices aiming to seduce a public of urban ‘explorers’ that still rely on colonial tropes related to discovery and authenticity.

Whereas in the 2009 urban regeneration phase the primary focus was to create a ‘mixed neighborhood’ by favoring homeowners over renters, from 2016 on the policy goal has become to establish the Indische Buurt

refore, the goal of Javakwartier was ‘a substantial branding operation that would market the Javastraat and surroundings as “just another piece of authentic, cosmopolitan Amsterdam” (Gemeente Amsterdam 2018, 3; author’s translation)’ (Fiore 2021, 184). Ultimately, the project was meant ‘to strengthen and retain the multicultural character of the Javastraat’ while using it ‘as a unique selling point to promote the area to visitors and tourists and thus contribute to the distribution of tourism [across the city]’ (2021, 184).

as an attractive destination for both dwellers and tourists by highlighting its multicultural offer. As shown by Elisa Fiore and Liedeke Plate, a key element of this process has been the valorization of ethnic food (2021). In particular, in her analysis of the tours, Fiore (2021) points out that the stories told, which followed a script written on cards, did not mention the historical and geopolitical causes that made the Indische Buurt an immigrant district. In her critique of the Javakwartier initiatives she concludes that

[a]lthough appearing as a process fostering ethnic life and ethnic value through the creation of a space for diversity consumption, Javakwartier has in fact contributed to further the institutional vision for the Indische Buurt based on ‘an ‘economy of otherness’ (Hage 2000, 128) whereby racialized groups feature either as excessive bodies to be administered or – once regulated – as exotic exhibits for the use and consumption of white middle-class tourists and consumers (Fiore 2021, 194)

While the involvement of the Tropenmuseum had been limited to contributing to the texts describing the food items and their colonial connection, the fact that it followed the celebratory script of the Javakwartier initiative needs to be problematized. Despite the commitment to avoid an essentializing style of representation, the model of memory as resource: in this occurrence, stories regarding food and migration aid to construct a simplified version of the identity of the Indische Buurt and making it readable for a public. A migrant neighborhood becomes this way almost incidentally connected to the phenomenon of migration and the causes behind it: without historicizing it, it appears as more connected to how ingredients and recipes travel than to why the people carrying this knowledge have moved from their countries to the Netherlands. And yet the memory of migration is also a property, meaning an attribute that characterizes the entirety of someone’s identity and confirms what we, as the audience, have come to expect: the food is different because the people and their culture are different. As Fiore remarks ‘making the “other” — and the Javastraat as itself a place of “otherness” — feel as though spatiotemporally dislocated from Western modernity’ (Fiore 2021, 194). As a result, difference is connected to the authenticity of the culinary experience despite the ordinariness that the actual food presented during the tours has come to occupy in Western food culture. This inconsistency is superseded by the format of the tour, which aims to attract urban explorers that are still not familiar with what the Javakwartier has on offer: to ‘taste the world’ by savoring *their* food and *their* stories.¹⁷ Stories that cannot be easily incorporated within

17 There are multiple layers behind this notion, which bell hooks has unpacked in her article

the image of the ‘good’ migrant becoming successful through their resilience, inventiveness, and entrepreneurship cannot enter the space of consumption and pleasure, as they would spoil the taste for difference.

When I asked then-director Schoonderwoerd whether he had the impression the museums are called to contribute to quick-fix solutions for issues perceived as affecting local neighborhoods, he explained the relationship between cultural institutions and policymakers as not one in which one party forces the other to act. In particular, when cultural organizations plan to engage with local communities, he suggests a cautious approach but ultimately sees these projects as a sign of progress in line with the Dutch tradition of working together to solve common problems. However, he also stresses that museums and cultural organizations are not directly controlled by the state, which has a limited say in their work:

The other side of it is that in the Netherlands politicians don’t have a direct influence on our policies, or me for instance. The city alderman for the arts cannot call me and say ‘you should be doing this or that’, which is different in many if not most other European countries . . . where the involvement of state and local politicians is much higher.

We don’t work like that here. It’s more like no one forces you to collaborate it’s like how can we seek together to make our city better. We think that’s one of the responsibilities that we have ourselves (Schoonderwoerd 2019)

Thus in Schoonderwoerd’s statements, the museum oscillates between self-reflexivity on the purpose and range of its work with local neighborhoods and proactiveness in collaborating with politicians and policy-makers to ‘make our city better’ (2019). But the contours of what ‘better’ means in a place like the Indische Buurt are shaped by a history characterized by displacement: first as a consequence of migration and then of gentrification. The Java Quartier food tours have not been successful only in terms of audience but also in how many restaurant owners have decided to adhere to the project. This type of cultural participation – time-limited and surface-level – appears to have a transactional character: being featured in a museum’s project is accompanied

Eating the Other: ‘[w]ithin commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’ (1992, 21). Sara Ahmed points out that ‘exotic and strange foods’ have been employed to symbolize difference that can be ‘consumed’ and therefore ‘valued’: ‘difference is valued insofar as it can be incorporated into, not only the nation space, but also the individual body, the body-at-home (this body does not have to leave home to ‘eat’ difference). By implication differences that cannot be assimilated into the nation or body through the process of consumption have no value, (Ahmed 2013, 117–18 emphasis in the original)

by an inherent value coming from the prestige of the institution. It is a way to increase the visibility and appeal of a street filled with businesses. But the reason behind being selected for such projects still lies in a particular element of the identity of the participants: in the fact that they are not from 'here'. Even if the museum endeavors to not replicate essentializing ways of representing the 'neighbors', these initiatives cannot be separated by how the cultural memory of being from 'elsewhere' is mobilized to build homogenous identities that must fulfill the range of possibilities established by state and state-like institutions.

When the Indische Buurt was still being described as a ghetto, these identities and their charged past were employed to portray 'bad' citizens to juxtapose with 'good' ones. Now, as urban renewal transforms the district, participation in this type of project – even when critical – offers an avenue through which to be represented and recognized. But from the standpoint of policymakers and funders, it also helps to provide an image once again of 'good' engaged neighbors to oppose 'bad' and problematic subjects keeping other neighborhoods from fulfilling their potential. More than a collaboration established with residents, the tours appear as an exercise in place-branding glossing over the longevity of a colonial grammar to produce racialized notions of what constitutes a 'good citizen'. Colonial echoes are present in the rhetoric used first, to pathologize the neighborhood as a ghetto in need of intervention; and then, by exoticizing its inhabitants and their culinary cultures, to create an image of the borough as a multicultural destination to explore. The popularity of the tours then should be dissected against these understandings and perhaps used not to produce similar successful events but to reconsider how the museum has been engaging with the neighborhood and whose interest these projects serve. The next section will make emerge more of the tensions related to these issues by focusing on another temporary project: a pop-up museum about the rituals of 'neighbors'.

The 'anti-squat' museum: collecting rituals, exhibiting good citizenship

The *Buurtsalon Mijn Ritueel* (neighborhood's living room: my ritual) was included in a program under the aegis of the RCMC called *HABITAT Practicing Neighborhood Rituals* to establish 'a long-term liaison with different stakeholders in the neighborhood by connecting the minor histories and narratives of the neighbors to the collection of the museums' (Research Center for Material Culture 2019). The project occupied a

formerly empty lot located on Eerste van Swindenstraat, a busy street filled with supermarkets, bars, and restaurants intersecting with the street where the popular Dappermarkt takes place. I visited this pop-up museum shortly after it launched in March 2019 when I met with community programmer Liza Swaving who, together with RCMC's senior research and cultural programmer Amal Alhaag, had been in charge of developing the Buurtsalon. I recall visiting the space in the previous year when it was open a few days a week as a DIY shop selling inexpensive bikes. Swaving confirms that before the museum took over, the shop was the result of an *anti-kraak* (literally anti-squat) arrangement, meaning a type of property guardianship increasingly common in Amsterdam. In a city more and more unaffordable, mostly young people or people with low income are offered to lease accommodations at a reduced price and on a month-to-month basis to impede their squatting. Swaving reflects that the fact that the museum has been given the space is also part of the gentrification process of the neighborhood: on one hand, the municipality made the space available for the Tropenmuseum because a 'cultural goal' was prioritized over a bike shop; on the other, this 'adds to their goal of selling this space for a lot of money' (Swaving 2019). The project in fact was supported by the East Amsterdam municipality; by the VSB Fonds, a funding body specializing in social impact projects improving the *samenleven* (living together, coexistence) of local communities; and by Eigen Haard, one of the city's biggest housing corporations, and player in various projects of urban renewal. At the time of my visit, the floor deliberately presented some remnants of the previous incarnations of the space whilst newly painted white walls showcased photographs featuring the 'protagonists' of their rituals. On the right side of the room, a vitrine displayed objects related to the rituals gathered from residents such as an embroidered dowry and a collection of bibles; in the back, a pink neon light framed a space in which the public could write their stories about rituals on postcards and then hang them on the wall.

As we sat down on a wooden bench in the center of the room, Swaving explained to me the framework they worked on is based on the notion of rituals as the 'heritage people carry within themselves' (Swaving, 2019). In her view, heritage thus has an important function in relation to place-making since it contributes to creating 'a sense of "I belong here: this is how I appropriate this neighborhood and this is how we live together"' (2019). The questions guiding this approach sought to investigate the role that the museum could have for its 'neighbors': 'do they feel welcome in the museum? Do they feel that they co-own the museum?' (Swaving 2019). I interjected by pointing out the optical distance between the neighborhood, with its typical concrete social

housing edifices, and the neo-renaissance building of the Tropenmuseum. The edifice is perched on the district's borders: physically and aesthetically separated from the area through the park on one side and busy thoroughfares on the other. Swaving connects my words to the fact that museums are still not accessible to a variety of publics: 'going in, paying at the desk, leaving your coat somewhere – that's almost a ritual that includes some audiences and excludes others. You create also a barrier with the entrance fee'(2019). In contrast, the free pop-up museum is at street level and close to the market thus, by being close to the dynamics of the borough, heritage can be communicated in a different way. Swaving observes that since the local residents have a strong sense of attachment to the district, symbolized for instance by how densely frequented the market is, the dynamics between them and the institution are somehow reversed: 'we as a museum need to prove that we are part of it, so it works actually the other way around'(2019). As in the case of the food tours, the Tropenmuseum describes its involvement with the neighborhood as stemming from its ongoing exploration of the issues that connect heritage to belonging and citizenship. But even if a project like the Buurtsalon can be successful in building substantial links with local stakeholders, this could be jeopardized exactly by the temporary nature of these ventures: how to keep these relationships alive when it depends on something variables like the availability of funding or the continuity of employment of staff members? Swaving agrees that this represents a risk, in her case she reflects 'I'm a freelancer so when I leave what will be left of those relationships? Can I give them to the institution and will someone else be responsible?'(2019). As we will see in chapter 4, this is an ongoing concern within the museum but also within an entire cultural sector that is globally shaped by the precarious nature of most of its employment configurations: from volunteer work to zero-hours contracts, to reliance on freelance work or temporary appointments. This speaks volumes on how actually time-restricted these projects are, despite being advertised as tools to establish long-term, sustainable liaisons.

For Swaving what motivated the first nine individuals that have agreed to participate in Mijn Ritueel is their ongoing involvement in local community organizations and social work. This network of people was put together with the help of Zeraja Terluin, who worked on a variety of projects in the Indische Buurt with her organization Musea Zonder Muren (museums without walls). Swaving recognizes that the publics of these organizations 'aren't necessarily groups that we don't get in the museum'(2019). And yet she reiterates that the Buurtsalon is a pilot project, which will be used as a starting point to evaluate whether 'it becomes visible that neighbors are interested in heritage and that

they want to get access to the museum’(2019).¹⁸ Through our conversation and the booklet published on the occasion of the launch of Mijn Ritueel, I learn more about the nine ‘neighbors’ that have shared their stories so far, and about their work with the local community.¹⁹ Mercedes organizes Ketikoti tables, a new ‘ritual’ to bring together Dutch people ‘from all colors’ to discuss the legacy of slavery by sharing food and memories (Research Center for Material Culture 2019). Jaika celebrates every year with her family the anniversary of her coming to the Netherlands as a young adoptee and serves as an ambassador for Alle Kleuren Oost, an association that organizes neighborhood gatherings on the occasion of yearly commemorations like Ketikoti of festivities like Iftar. Nooshi, whose ritual consists in listening to music from various countries and thus connecting to her composite heritage, is a manager at de Meevaart foundation, a local *broedplaats* (breeding ground): namely an association funded by the municipality to provide the borough with a variety of services in the framework of creating self-reliant citizens.²⁰ Victor is an actor, writer, and storyteller who is engaged in making visible the history and culture of the indigenous populations of Suriname, and who has a personal connection to an item in the collection of the Tropenmuseum, a wooden sculpture that was made by his grandfather. Jonathan, who teaches dance to local young people, finds confidence in the different braided hairstyles that his sister Samantha does for him: this time spent together reconnects them to their Afro-Surinamese heritage. Afifa is fond of her memories of working on embroidering her dowry with her mother in Morocco and has started the De Bloem foundation, which offers a variety of activities to women who are at risk of social isolation. The three remaining ‘rituals’ are the only cases in which migration is not explicitly linked to the biography of the protagonists: Eva is a therapist with a passion for traveling and her ritual consists in keeping a dream journal, and meditating and doing yoga in the morning; Greteke is the minister of the local church, the Muiderkerk, who welcomes her international congregation by reciting the Our Father prayer in different languages like

18 Since there is an assumption that people from this neighborhood do not have a relationship with the Tropenmuseum, I ask whether this is measured in any way. The reply is in fact that at that point no data was being collected about whether residents do access the museum and that this is why this project is important – because it allows to ask the question directly (Swaving 2019).

19 These stories were recorded by Nina van Hattum, a screenwriter and podcast producer, while photographer Nadine Stijns took portraits of the protagonists.

20 For a critical discussion of the function of the *broedplaats* in the context of Amsterdam’s creative economy see Peck 2012 and Uitermark 2004.

Farsi or Sranan Tongo; Jechiam is the owner of Baking Lab, a local bakery with a social mission who employs mostly university students that want to learn how to bake while also studying a model of circular economy; one of them sees a similarity in the process of bread-making composed of different elements and ingredients – a ‘high diversity just like Amsterdam East. A multicultural community where many nice things emerge: different tastes, different people’ (Research Center for Material Culture 2019).

Towards the end of our conversation, Swaving opens up about some of the internal criticism the Buurtsalon received during the preparatory stages of the project. For instance, RCMC’s director Wayne Modest expressed how the theme of rituals in itself could be problematic because of its link to how historically anthropologists have used it to exoticize the Other. He suggested that before continuing with the project the team should build a framework able to address the meanings and power relations behind the notion. Modest also argued against employing in the promotional material the image and story of Jonathan about the connection he feels with his ancestry through styling his hair in braids: publicizing the project through this particular story could risk reducing an entire cultural identity as this particular gesture. The director also wondered whether there was a similar representation with white participants as protagonists. Swaving counters that the hair story was not prompted by her or the team but came as the response to a general question about personal connections with a ritual:

what I find difficult about the critique is that if you were to think about what kind of cultural stereotypes there are and which ones to avoid then you’re curating stories in the direction that you want to tell them, so stories that defy cultural stereotypes (Swaving 2019)

This, according to her, goes against the goal of the project: the ‘cultural representation’ of the different groups of residents without curating the direction in which the stories they share are told. Swaving argues that

I can’t tell if this way you’re pushing them to tell a particular story but what I do know is that when he came [up] with this ritual I wouldn’t have told him ‘I’m sorry that’s a cultural stereotype, can you tell another ritual? Is there something else that doesn’t fit being a black young man?’(Swaving 2019)

As Modest suggests, the issue of how to de-essentialize the representation of individuals who are embodied in difference must be properly addressed. However, we need to also question the discursive space in which the ‘neighbors’ personal connection of coming from an ‘elsewhere’ is formalized as a ritual: whilst this notion and the idea behind the project entail a more or less private,



Fig. 3 Promotional photograph of the Food and Verhalen Tours published on the Tropenmuseum's Facebook page. Photographer: Marvin Duiker. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.



Fig. 4 View from the Buurtsalon installation used on the Tropenmuseum's Facebook page. Photographer: Kirsten van Santen. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.

intimate dimension, these moments of reconnecting with their heritage are collected and exhibited for a public. Some of the participants have already been using a particular aspect of their memories as a resource: like in the case of Mercedes and Victor. For the others, participating in *Mijn Ritueel* is a step forward in grounding their identity as an essential part of the life of the district. But whereas neighbors that belong to a diaspora need to represent and codify their difference through their rituals, thus mobilizing their memories of not being ‘from the Netherlands’, others do not have to refer to their origins because they are a given, a non-factor in how they present themselves and their ritual to the public. The pop-up museum is not, however, the first or only instance in which this differential mode of representation occurs. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in the context of increasingly sophisticated politics of recognition cultural memory functions as resource and property. It allows citizens with an unsafe, unstable position in the recent past of the country to strengthen their bid to be formally recognized as belonging fully to the present and future of the Dutch polity. But to achieve this, their identity must look cohesive and their heritage readable enough to forgive its mixedness.

The public narrative surrounding the *Indische Buurt* celebrates how the neighborhood has left behind the past to become a successful example of multicultural *samenleven* (living together). The successfulness of this operation is measured through the participation of citizens in local organizations and participatory projects, which are supported through municipal funds according to a neoliberal model of active, responsible citizenship (see for example De Koning 2015; and De Koning, Jaffe, and Koster 2015). Whereas museums cannot produce citizens they can contribute to curating a notion of good, active citizenship that works along with the desires of policy-makers and urban managers: as Swaving stated the reason why the empty lot was given to the museum is to reinforce the appearance of the area as up and coming for new, wealthier residents and investors alike (on the instrumentalization of cultural and heritage projects to service state-led gentrification see for instance De Cesari and Dimova 2019). At the same time, even though the pop-up museum seeks to avoid essentialized or stereotypical representations, ends up reinforcing the distance between residents that can celebrate and enjoy the diversity of their neighborhood, and residents that need to embody that diversity for a public. As the *Tropenmuseum* continues to endeavor for improving the way it represents and includes its constituencies, internal friction on how to best do this is to be expected. Projects like those I have examined, which only allow for a cursory engagement with the

neighborhood, end up playing into modes of governance that make use of cultural participation to distinguish between good, active citizens and an unreachable Other. This modality of limited and uncritical involvement implicates the museum in something deeper than the typical ways in which heritage organizations and cultural projects are instrumentalized by public policy for window-dressing operations. It implicates it in the production of the Indische Buurt as a reconquered space, safe enough to enjoy for visitors and dwellers and yet increasingly inhabitable for its original residents.

Conclusion

This perspective of this chapter has moved between inside and outside, long-term visions and temporary projects, museum management, and fixed-term employees. The first section has examined how the post-merger Tropenmuseum originated from a longer history of engagement with the colonial roots of the institution and its history of collecting and exhibiting. Whereas the second section examines the issues related to the museum's attempts to evolve along notions like implication and making-safe, the third and fourth sections offer a counterpoint through the example of two participatory projects that took place in the Indische Buurt, the neighborhood where the museum is located. It is not surprising or paradoxical that these projects happened in the context of a museum that has been refocusing its mission to carefully reflect on its implication with the ongoing legacies of colonialism. However, I do think it is important to recognize that this process of reckoning might be more uneven, and perhaps easier to detour than it appears – but not simply on account of individual members of staff or individual projects, or due to the leadership of then-director Schoonderwoerd.

As is the case for most institutions making the transition towards becoming more diverse, inclusive, and socially relevant, if we look closely at what museums say they do and what they actually do we are bound to find discrepancies. The problem, however, does not lay in what publics and counter-publics expect of museums or cultural organizations – or at least not only; but in how despite decades of reform, the notion of belonging that emerges from big and small projects can ultimately not exceed the range of possibilities envisioned by state and state-like formations: 'good' citizens, 'good' migrant, 'good' life. Exploring what this means is the thread connecting the following chapters: in particular, Chapter 3 will focus on the museum's exhibit Aleppo and the canal tours of Rederij Lampedusa, two projects that rely on the presence of 'real refugees' to expand the knowledge of the public on the issue of migration.

CHAPTER 3

‘... And that’s what stops me from feeling at home’: memorializing the ‘European migrant crisis’

Introduction

The previous chapters have shown how the cultural identity and memory of ‘postcolonial’ citizens are not at all homogenous, and it is still subjected to negotiation and contestation. But it has been produced as more stable and more worthy of recognition due to the historical and cultural closeness with the Netherlands and in comparison with more recent ‘newcomers’ – namely Dutch citizens of Muslim faith, whose numbers increased after the arrival of guest workers from Turkey and Morocco as a result of post-war workforce recruiting programs. In the case of recent ‘refugees’ who arrived in the country during the so-called ‘European migrant crisis’, cultural heritage and memory are also used to negotiate their belonging and to shorten the distance with the figure of an ideal liberal Dutch subject. But the crisis and its narratives need to be read against how the distinction between citizen and migrant/refugee originated. These legal formulations were created at a time when many European states were empires and they were ‘established not simply in terms of issues of *mobility*’ but rather according to ‘the *colour* of those who moved’ (emphasis in the original Bhambra 2017, 401).

The first half of this chapter focuses on the exhibition *Aleppo* at the Tropenmuseum during which Syrian ‘refugees’ were recruited for guiding visitors through the display whilst sharing their experiences of the city. The second half introduces *Rederij Lampedusa* (Lampedusa cruise), an artist-led project offering tours of Amsterdam’s canals featuring refugees and asylum seekers as storytelling guides.¹ My analysis is based on direct observation during tours, interviews with the project’s coordinators and tour guides, and the analysis of a range of documents and media: from newspaper articles about the projects to promotional videos featuring the tour guides, social media channels, and annual reports. The insistence on sourcing stories from real-life refugees and the usage of caption-like names like Aleppo and Lampedusa points in the direction of a function of memory that is evolving and yet replicating problematic models of inclusion. This chapter seeks to explore the following questions: what type of world citizens is the Tropenmuseum envisioning through its exhibitions? What does connecting past and present

1 A version of my text on Rederij Lampedusa will appear with the title Lampedusa here and there: activating memories of migration in Amsterdam’s historic city – a resource for whom? in the upcoming publication Critical Heritage Studies and the Futures of Europe (Dias, Harrison, and Kristiansen forthcoming)

memories of migration achieve during the boat tours? And who benefits from the experience of being in the presence of ‘real refugees’?

Aleppo: an exhibition for whom?

Across European museums, ‘migration’ has become a major focal point, first in response to the rise (and advertised failure) of the multicultural society and, in more recent times, as an after-effect of the so-called ‘European migrant crisis’. In these charged contexts heritage institutions present themselves as a safer space where attempting to mitigate culturalist assumptions and pervasive ethno-nationalist discourse. In particular, Rhiannon Mason posits that, because of their ‘heterogeneity’, national museums have ‘the potential to demonstrate the contingent and constructed nature of contemporary nations’ but only ‘*if* they are reframed and reinterpreted through a reflexive and cosmopolitan perspective and *if* the visitor is inclined, enabled and encouraged to ‘read for’ such an account’ (2013 emphasis in the original). The post-merger National Museum of World Cultures is moving in this direction, as testified by its renewed mission of contributing to the development of world citizens (Golding and Modest 2018, 100). World citizenship, however, is a contested concept based on cosmopolitan ethics that needs to be analyzed as a ‘historically produced discourse – anchored in particular material interests and relations of power’ (Danewid 2018, 17).

From the 1980s onwards, the Tropenmuseum’s public programming sought to include its newer constituencies: not only ‘postcolonial’ citizens coming from Indonesia, Suriname, and the Antilles but also, after the arrival and settlement of guest workers mainly from Morocco and Turkey, ‘new’ Dutch citizens predominantly of Muslim background. Therefore, exhibitions needed to reflect the cultural heritage of groups and communities with an increasingly composite background even though they still relied on the institution as the focus of authority and expertise (Shatanawi 2009, 66–67). Mirjam Shatanawi, formerly the Tropenmuseum’s curator of Middle East and North Africa, has examined the challenges of representing Islamic faith and culture in the museum during a time in which the figure of ‘the Muslim’ became a stand-in for unassimilable difference. And, from the mid-1990s on, the focus of vehement attacks from right-wing parties.² It is illuminating to

2 Shatanawi explains how ‘in Dutch government policies and population statistics, Muslims were set apart as a distinct group. Until 2005, the Statistics Authority counted the number of Muslims in the Netherlands by counting citizens whose countries of origin held a majority Muslim population. This definition became widely accepted when Islam came to dominate the public

read her reflections on the preparatory work for the 2003 exhibition *Urban Islam* because they show how, at the time, the institution was undergoing another sort of ‘identity crisis’ (along with other European ethnographic museums). She writes:

In the case of the Tropenmuseum, its identity is firmly based on being a museum for liberal-minded indigenous Dutch people who want to learn about cultures far removed from their own. The institutional structure of the ethnographic museum involves looking at the world through the lens of ethnicity and religious identity.

Classifying migrants as part of religious and ethnic communities follows this fixation on “other” identities. To cope with the realities of the present, the museum has to break with a history of 150 years of making exhibitions.

To make this transition requires going deeper than merely having the museum’s authority questioned by the specific knowledge and emotional attachments of new stakeholders. Addressing cultural diversity as something that concerns all individual members of the public will mean that a single perspective on the collections will give way to an unlimited number of perspectives (Shatanawi 2012, 77)

In the almost twenty years that have passed since Shatanawi’s analysis, the Tropenmuseum has indeed been seeking to transition away from a constrictive or essentialized definition of communities and to highlight instead cultural difference as a quality/condition shared by all individuals independently from their nationhood. But this attempt, and the responsibility of pushing it forward, is unevenly distributed in the institution and, similarly to what Shatanawi observed at the beginning of the 2000s, the most sophisticated approaches are project-based rather than an indication of structural change. As we will see in the following pages, the representation of refugees from Syria in the Tropenmuseum’s 2017 exhibition *Aleppo* is not necessarily tied to their Muslim identity; but foregrounding the memories of their journey to Europe ends up unwittingly replicating some of the tropes of what Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak have called the Dutch ‘nativist triangle’ (2016): a precise type of discourse that connects sexuality, race and religion to construct the Muslim Other.

The exhibition opened on April 20th, 2017, and run, longer than originally planned, until March 4th, 2018 because of its popularity among visitors. The concept originated from the museum’s head of exhibitions Anne

debate on multiculturalism. As a result, the term “Muslim” applied to a diverse group, including Iranian and Afghan refugees who had escaped from religious extremism, self-declared atheists, and even Christians of Middle Eastern origin’(Shatanawi 2012, 68)

Marie Worlee who, troubled by the reporting on the refugee crisis and the war in Syria, asked freelance curator Marc Prüst to put together the display.³ This was one of several projects dedicated to the ‘refugee crisis’ that took place across major Amsterdam museums and cultural organizations between 2016 and 2018. And timeliness is what, according to Prüst, made the exhibit so successful: ‘it was the right project for the right time. If we had done it now, it wouldn’t have had such an impact’ he adds (Prüst 2019). The months preceding the opening in fact coincided with the final phases of the battle of Aleppo, whose siege began in 2012 and lasted four years. During the battle, the city was split into two areas: the western side controlled by President Bashar al-Assad’s regime which was largely left untouched; and the eastern side which remained under the control of the rebel forces until the last months of 2016 when, amidst an escalation of air strikes, the remaining population and the fighters were forced to leave. Images of destruction and death were widely circulated by Western media throughout the siege, contributing to the sense of urgency that motivated the team planning the exhibition, which according to Prüst, ‘grew organically, without a plan’ but from a ‘sense of commitment’ towards what was happening in one of the oldest cities in the world (2019).

Prüst underlines how during the preparatory phase ‘it was important to realize that we were creating an exhibition not for the Syrian community but for the Dutch community’ and therefore, the display had to provide some context but also pay attention to the brutal reality on the ground (2019). This goal is in line with the pedagogical function of museums but it also reveals that, as Shatanawi underlines above, the public of the museum is still imagined

3 For an overview of the recent modalities in which European museums have been engaging with the topic of migration see (Gourievidis 2014; Lanz 2016; Levin 2016; Whitehead et al. 2016) In their blog *Museums and Migration* Anna Chiara Cimoli and Maria Vlachou have reviewed the wealth of initiatives taking place around the topic. If we only look at the city of Amsterdam there have been several projects during this time: in 2017, the Stedelijk Museum of Contemporary Art inaugurated the exhibition *Solution or Utopia? Design for refugees* focusing on projects through which designers envisioned practical solutions to the needs of asylum seekers and refugees; then *I Am a Native Foreigner* utilized the museum’s collection to reflect on the effects of migration on artists whose work stems with their experience with different histories of displacement. The museum of photography FOAM exhibited in 2016 Ai Weiwei’s *#SafePassage* that connected the personal experience of the artist to those of contemporary refugees and migrants attempting to find a safe passage into Europe; in 2018, it was the turn of Samuel Gratacap’s *Les Invisibles* containing photographs and testimonies he collected from migrants in Tunisia, Libya and Italy in detention camps, border crossing points, prisons, waiting rooms. In 2017, a temporary exhibition called the *Tijdelijk Museum* (temporary museum) opened, featuring works by and about refugees and located in an asylum seekers center that, for a time, occupied the high-rise towers of a former prison in the Southeast area of the city.

as ‘liberal-minded indigenous Dutch people’ (2012, 77). This time, however, the audience needs to learn more not simply about Syrian cultural heritage but also about how it is imperiled and destroyed by the war. And not only see, but also hear: shortly after it had opened, a group of refugees was recruited to give tours of the exhibition every Sunday, which were almost invariably sold-out. The guides would draw inspiration for their presentations from their personal stories or interests: for example, Professor Mohammed Nour Al-Naimi, who used to teach English literature at the University of Aleppo, would focus the tour on the stories of the city’s historic center; Mohannad Sharrouf, who used to work as a tour guide in the city, reprised his role for the exhibition, while Shahed Alramadan, the youngest of the group, talked about Syrian cuisine and her favorite dishes. The tours would end with a musical performance by bouzouki player Jawdat Jassem.

The recruitment of the guides happened through the Facebook page of Refugee Start Force, a Dutch platform that connects refugees to companies offering job opportunities. Forty-five people manifested their interest and came to a first introductory meeting at the museum, and twelve of them were selected according to their skills and availability and with the intention of creating a group as diverse as possible, as reported by Lisa Kleeven, the NMWC’s Education Coordinator (2019). Syrian urban designer Bengin Dawod, initiator of the *Living Aleppo* art project, explains that the high numbers of participation are to be expected since the majority of asylum seekers and refugees

want any chance to get out of the AZC [asylum seekers centers] and to get a start in life: what they do is use that chance and agree to participate in whichever project...but when the project stops then they feel it. Because they didn’t follow their ambitions (Dawod 2018)

Potential issues with the temporariness of these projects emerged during my conversation with Kleeven both in terms of the time she personally spent building and maintaining a relationship with the group and about whether there could be opportunities in the future to continue the collaboration with at least some of the guides. She also recalls that the first time that the prospective guides visited the exhibition, some of them were not pleased to see images portraying the destruction and wanted instead to present their city in a more positive light, highlighting its beauty and history. This is why she and her team decided to try to create what she terms ‘loopholes’ training the volunteer tour guides to take breaks or how to respond in case ‘someone asks something too personal or talks about politics...if you don’t feel comfortable you don’t

have to talk about it. So we practiced saying “sorry this is not really what I talk about here” (Kleeven 2019). Additionally, a member of staff would be present at all times during the tours to ensure that everything would run as smoothly as possible. One example motivating this decision occurred during a tour led by guide Mostafa Betaree: his story revolved around two sets of keys displayed in the exhibition, which his family has preserved – the first from their home in Palestine, the second one from their Syrian house.⁴ He reports the staff had to intervene because he was repeatedly confronted by two Israeli women that, upon learning about Betaree’s Palestinian heritage, started to loudly disparage Palestine (Betaree 2019). In that instance, he had to take a moment to collect himself but decided to remain professional ‘also to fight the stereotype’ (2019). During our conversation, he reiterated how for him professionalism and high-quality art are the most effective weapons for fighting stereotypes attached to the figure of the refugee.

As we will see also in the case of Rederij Lampedusa, projects that seek to defy stereotypes and reinstate a three-dimensional portrayal of refugees as people center their agency, skills, and resilience. These attempts to showcase diversity while at the same time highlighting cosmopolitan ties of belonging between *us* and *them* need to be closely examined. The anti-essentializing representations in the exhibition fit into the renewed mission of the Tropenmuseum and NMWC to ‘emphasize notions of empathy for others while also suggesting the need to live responsibly in the world we share’ (Golding and Modest 2018, 100). And yet introducing these cosmopolitan ethics in an institutional framework risks eliding the geopolitical and economic dimension of the conflict, its roots in the imperialist rule of the area, and the transnational actors backing one army against the other. This is particularly problematic for an ethnographic museum trying to come to terms with its colonial roots: is this history only limited to Dutch colonialism? Or is it part of global structures of domination and oppression? And although the exhibition is focused on the significance of Aleppo as a pole of cultural and built heritage, can referencing the ‘refugee crisis’ be divorced from the fact

4 Keys and keyhole are an important symbol in the Palestinian diaspora since they represent the memory of the Nakba and of the ‘right to return’. Betaree’s story and a picture of him holding the keys is also prominently featured in the permanent exhibition *Things that Matter*: however, when he was contacted by the museum, he did not expect that his story would be included in such a big display (2019). Despite the interest attracted by the keys and their significance, both the audio he provided for *Things that Matter* and the wall text that accompany the photo do not contain any reference to the Palestinian side of the story, focusing instead on the destruction of Aleppo

that it is also an ongoing ‘racial crisis’ (De Genova 2018)? These tensions were already present during the exhibition’s opening, when then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Bert Koenders gave a speech in which he highlighted the role of the Netherlands in the Syrian civil war as bringing in the ‘added value’ of justice through its judicial and forensic expertise: ‘I have been arguing for some time that the main culprits will eventually have to join us in The Hague, city of justice and peace, to account for their actions’ (Koenders 2017). He then added that ‘something I always see in the Syrians I meet as Minister of Foreign Affairs. It is the incredible resilience of all those people whose lives and lands have been destroyed’ (2017). Because NMWC is a national museum it is not uncommon for ministers to attend an exhibition’s launch and to be invited to give speeches. As a representative of the State, Koenders’ contribution already frames *Aleppo* within precise positionalities: on one hand, the Netherlands and The Hague, the ‘city of justice and peace’ where the International Court of Justice is located, are identified as guarantors – able to make those responsible for the war ‘account for their action’; on the other, the Syrian people that are impacted by the conflict – and distinguishable from other Syrians that instead are ‘main culprits’ – are examples of resilience and worthy of *our* empathy and recognition.

However, both empathy and resilience have a checkered history within humanitarian ethics and liberal narratives. Carolyn Pedwell explains that whereas these discourses ‘pose empathy as universal’ they also inscribe the roles of “‘empathizer” and “sufferer” onto traditional social and geopolitical hierarchies’ – fixing in place the Other as always only the object of empathy (Pedwell 2016, 14). Sarah Bracke analyzes the pervasiveness of the concept of resilience in relation to the creation of a class of ‘new subaltern’ to respond to the needs of neoliberal capitalism: resilience, and not resistance, thus ‘becomes the very stuff of which agency is made off’ and ‘structural pressure, including oppression, is expected to be met with individual elasticity, rebounding, and adaptation’ (Bracke 2016, 851). Relatedly, Lewis Turner examines the prominence of the figure of the ‘refugee entrepreneur’ across the humanitarian sector and academic and media portrayals of Syrian refugees (2020). Through emphasizing their agency and creativity, refugees are reimagined as ‘entrepreneurs’ so they can also ‘be perceived as closer to whiteness, and to thereby generate sympathy and acceptance for them among middle-class, Western audiences and donors, who are imagined as white’ (Turner 2020, 138). The reproduction of ‘globally circulating colonial hierarchies of race’, in which Syrians occupy a different position in an implicit comparison with ‘African refugees’ underpins a specific political project:

‘resiliency humanitarianism’ demands that its ‘beneficiaries’ constantly ‘adapt’ and ‘bounce back’ in contexts of disaster and displacement’ and all that is needed is for “[r]efugee entrepreneurs”... to be allowed to embrace the forces of free-market capitalism’ (Turner 2020, 139).

If, as we will see, through *Afterlives of Slavery* the exploration of race as a power structure is at least partially included in the museum, with *Aleppo* the ongoing racial violence in what has been called the Black Mediterranean is diffused – rendered contingent to yet another war in a country we do not know.⁵ As P. Khalil Saucier writes in *Carne Nera*

the Syrian migrant and the Black from Nigeria equally exist, but their existence is not equal, for one is imparted a humanity that is withheld from the other. Mere existence does not assure inclusion into humanity, and existence gives no right to the constitution of a human space. At best it gives the right to be included into a space always already constituted by others...

Thus when only one or more than a thousand move across the aquatic threshold of the Mediterranean, we are witnessing the drift of boundaries between the human and non-human (Saucier 2021, 111)

Within the context of the NMWC what is proposed concerning the issue of migration is a version of cosmopolitanism ‘from below’, concerned with leaving behind universalist aspirations and finding instead ways to engage with the interrelatedness among citizens of the world.⁶ The exhibition thus carefully presents the tour guides as Syrians and inhabitants of Aleppo – and not through the label of refugee – and thus connected with Dutch people and Amsterdammers, who can admire the heritage of the city while also reflecting on the hard realities of war. However, it is precisely this emotion-based connection that needs to be scrutinized. *Aleppo* can be seen as the museum’s

5 Inspired by Paul Gilroy’s (1993) theorizations of the Black Atlantic, the concept of Black Mediterranean ‘captures the long history of racial subordination and resistance in the Mediterranean region. In some of the earliest texts addressing the Black Mediterranean, scholars such as Cedric Robinson (1983/2005) and Robin D. G. Kelley (2005) understood the Mediterranean as both a precondition for modern racial capitalism and as a site for the ongoing reproduction of regimes of racialization and Black subjectivities’ (Proglio et al. 2021)

6 Cosmopolitan ethics have been criticized extensively. For instance, in his critique of Appiah’s ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’, Alfredo González-Ruibal underlines how the notion ends up neglecting ‘global structural inequalities, long-term processes of oppression, and the real and traumatic impact that Western culture and politics exercise over the third world’. He therefore argues against the kind of ‘comfortable cosmopolitanism’ that ‘allows Western(ised) elites to keep their lifestyles and worldviews, while at the same time it appeases their consciences’ (González-Ruibal 2009, 6).

response to a period of mourning, of lives lost (but also of destroyed cultural heritage): the display and the tours, by personifying the war, attempt to respond to the differential of grievability that frames Syrian lives as ‘lose-able’.⁷ But with *Aleppo* and the tours the museum also provides a safe space for the ‘liberal-minded Dutch public’ in which to explore how does it feel to leave your home behind you. This type of engagement – contingent and unidirectional – cannot lead to anything else than a reaffirmation of Europe as a safe haven, Europeans and Dutch as ideal liberal hosts, and Syrians as ideal liberal candidates for inclusion: but only insofar they are willing to use their memories of the journey to reinforce Europe’s welcoming performance. And only insofar they can demonstrate their willingness to integrate and adapt to the Netherlands’, or any hosting country, ‘feeling rules’ – the norms and values at the basis of culturalized citizenship (Duyvendak et al. 2016). World citizenship, although presented as equally shared between the museum’s publics, appears instead restricted to a particular type of audience, unequivocally ‘Dutch’. The true meaning of safety is lost in the narrative since, as Bengin Dawod observes, being physically safe does not make up for the loss of all systems of reference, of the quotidian relations that anchor people.

it’s not about walking home at 3 AM. Here you don’t know *how* to trust: no one is going to kill you but you don’t know anybody. I don’t trust people or they don’t trust me. The translation, the switch, takes time...it takes years (Dawod 2018)

On not being a ‘refugee story’

In one of the videos shot as promotional material shot for the exhibition, a young Syrian man named Armen is introduced to viewers through his story: he came to the Netherlands after applying for asylum, a decision motivated not by the desire of escaping the war but by the adversities he had to face for being gay; he recounts the memories of the ‘process of coming to the

7 In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler contends that ‘precariousness’ is the ‘shared condition of human life’ and develops the concept of ‘grievability’ to describe how the recognition of ‘life that matters’ hinges on the fact that living beings might die: [o]nly under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear’ (2009, 14). However, precariousness and grievability are differentially distributed: certain subject positions are more precarious than others, and certain lives are recognized as more grievable than others since ‘the shared condition of precariousness leads not to reciprocal recognition, but to a specific exploitation of targeted populations, of lives that are not quite lives, cast as ‘destructible’ and ‘ungrievable’ (2009, 31).

Netherlands' including the several interviews he had to sustain before 'the Netherlands chose me to come there' (Tropenmuseum 2017). He stresses how he was chosen instead of choosing the hosting country and that after a year and a half in the Netherlands he is happy 'living in freedom': after struggling at first because of the isolation, his life changed after joining the Amsterdam Gay Men's Chorus, starting to learn the language, and then successfully undertaking the *staatexam* (state exam) for Dutch as a second language. Next, he started working at the Tropenmuseum and also joined a theatre group – an activity that he also loved in Syria. In the video, he states that he will be shortly enrolled in school to pursue a Bachelor's degree in hotel management – for the second time since his degree certificates are not recognized in the Netherlands: 'but I'm happy doing it because you gain more experience' he remarks. He concludes by saying that his biggest goal is to start a family and become a father (Tropenmuseum 2017). The short video presentation tries to avoid clichés and a stereotypical portrayal of 'the refugee' as a victim. But at a closer look, the character of Armen introduced in the video (to be distinguished from the real-life Armen Melkonian) unsettlingly reproduces the culturalist tropes at the base of contemporary liberal notions of inclusion and exclusion into the Dutch nation.⁸ In the context of culturalized politics of citizenship sexual freedom is construed as 'Dutch' while homophobia as 'Muslim'. Balkenhol et al. in fact observe that: '[s]ex talk in the Netherlands constructs a number of distinct raciocultural others: Muslim citizens (in particular girls and women) are portrayed as anachronistic remnants from an age of sexual oppression that Dutch society is deemed to have left behind'; at the same time, "'black" sexuality alternates between the exotic and the abject' (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016, 110). Dutch national culture is thus narrativized as liberal and progressive by muting queerness in

8 This phenomenon isn't restricted to the Netherlands but has global expressions: Jasbir Puar has called 'homonationalism' the process through which gay rights have been reordered into an 'optic, and an operative technology' through which 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' of some gay and lesbian subjects function as 'a barometer' measuring whether the Muslim Other possesses 'the right to and capacity for national sovereignty' (Puar 2013). Jin Haritaworn et al. have used the term 'gay imperialism' to describe another facet of this phenomenon in which racism becomes a 'vehicle' for white gays and feminists to enter the political mainstream (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008). This politics is exclusionary towards the majority of Muslim women and queers but allows for a minority to gain recognition through 'hyper-assimilationist arguments': few 'exceptional' individuals are brought forth as examples of Muslims that have 'emancipated or liberated themselves from their repressive culture, by embracing the gender-progressive culture of the "liberal West"' (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008, 21). This narrative is instrumental to construct the West as a 'safe haven for Muslim women and gays, which includes them, protects them from the violence of their communities, and gives them opportunities to make their voices heard' (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008, 21).

the background in favor of a mainstream gay identity that does not question heteronormativity and instead falls back into its model of ‘domesticity and consumption’ (Duggan 2002 in Mepschen, Duyvendak, and Tonkens 2010, 971). Further, as Stefan Dudink points out, homosexuality, as it is articulated in debates about Islam and integration, has ‘become white’, meaning that it has become indiscernible from a ‘whiteness that... represents the unspoken and unspeakable assumption that what in the end holds the nation together is race’ (Dudink 2011 in Balkenhol et al. 2016, 110). In other words, the self-image of tolerance and acceptance and of the Netherlands as safe haven for LGBTQI+ individuals is not so much tailored for those to include through this narrative, but rather for those to exclude through it – coinciding with whoever is not ‘white’ enough for the nation. The story told in the video presentation provides the picture of a ‘newcomer’ that comes from Syria, happens to be gay, and leads a full and interesting life in the Netherlands – dividing their time between his many cultural interests and his study. A young, accomplished man ready to enjoy the infinite possibilities of ‘living in freedom’. This way the promotional video does not contradict the narrative of ‘exceptionalism’ which is increasingly used not only to constitute a liberated Muslim subject but also foregrounds the criteria according to which refugees, Muslim or otherwise, should be allowed to find safety in the ‘West’. Thus, while having arrived in the country as a refugee constitutes an obstacle, belonging to a sexual minority affords Armen a ‘ticket into whiteness’ since his chances of integrating are measured against the potential to shorten the distance between him and an ideal liberal Dutch subject.

In contrast with the video presentation, in his tours Armen Melkonian narrated a much more complex reality, his background as layered as the history of Aleppo: he is not Muslim but Armenian Christian, he spoke of his personal life as a university student but also as part of the city’s underground queer community, and about how after the Armenian genocide, his forefathers were welcomed in the city. When I met him for our interview, he was in the process of obtaining his degree and talked gladly about his progresses, while also recognizing that for him the Netherlands is not yet ‘home’: ‘because for Dutch people I’m still considered an outsider, although I’m very accepted by my friends...people still look at you in a different way and that’s what stops me from feeling at home’ (Melkonian 2019). He recalls how after the initial sense of isolation, he started to share his story: ‘some were like “oh here we go with the refugee story” ... I’m not a refugee story you know?’ (Melkonian 2019). His talent for storytelling and his interest in deepening the discussion led him to the Tropenmuseum and guiding tours. I ask him whether for him

the constant sharing during the tours was sometimes ‘too much’ to which he confidently replies that

I’m a spotlight guy, I don’t mind at all. I’m open to anything, I have nothing to hide...and that’s actually what helped me coming so fast to the Netherlands, I shared everything I told them all my life and that made them trust me: ‘this guy has been honest with us and we can prove everything so . . . (Melkonian, 2019)

The openness about his private life and sexual identity is, in his narrative, what afforded him humanitarian protection. Melkonian was more readily available to be interviewed than any of most museum and cultural organization staffers I contacted: not because he is a ‘spotlight guy’ but because the continuous performance of availability and transparency is what is presented to him as the admission ticket to his new ‘home’. George Yúdice examines how, in the context of ‘culture-as-resource’ performing one’s identity – especially when it is framed as culturally different – becomes mandatory to articulate subjectivities and to campaign for rights and recognition. As the author puts it: ‘so long as you can assert that you have a culture (a distinctive set of beliefs and practices), you have legitimate grounds for enfranchisement’(2003, 56). Today, the performativity ingrained into the ‘identities’ available to Melkonian, and to other subjects stuck in the waiting room of full belonging, is taken for granted as the necessary prerequisite to successful adaptation.

He lists all that contributes to making him ‘proud of who I am and what I have achieved: I speak fluent Dutch, I study at the hotel school, I worked for the Tropenmuseum, etc. etc.’ (Melkonian 2019). Volunteering in a prestigious institution is, together with his educational and work attainments, further proof of the potential to become fully integrated according to the culturalized norms of the hosting country. This opportunity would have probably not been available to him without using his memories of coming to the Netherlands as a resource, meaning as a tool to make his identity available and readable throughout the various stops that have led him to his new life. Providing a story, filled with intimate details, for the immigration officers in charge of asylum applications is only the first step. Through his work as a volunteer, which continued after the experience with the Tropenmuseum concluded, Melkonian endeavors to make different publics understand that

they have to give us a chance because it’s easy to judge: ‘oh these refugees are using our tax money’. Even some language teachers saying ‘yes you have to do your homework because I’m paying from my taxes for your education.’

And that was really harsh, but at some point, we learned to defend ourselves by saying ‘yes you’re paying for us but then we will work and pay taxes for your

pension’, so it’s an investment! (2019)

The transactional character of demonstrating belongingness is understood by Melkonian, who uses his achievements to perform not only his compatibility but also the ‘usefulness’ of himself and other Syrian refugees.⁹ He also is deeply aware of the limits to Europe’s welcome and the conditional character of Dutch tolerance:

I don’t want to complain about the Dutch culture, I’m living here and I’m going to be part of it somehow and it’s nice. Every culture has a positive side and a negative side but what I’m trying to say it’s how to make it easier for newcomers and how to make it easier to just trust you and accept you...

So, if I complain about the weather and I say ‘oh it’s raining ugh grey sky’ the first thing they say is ‘yes go back to your country’ but if there was no war, if everything was fine in my country, I wouldn’t even be here! It’s not our fault that we are refugees, and besides everybody in the Netherlands complains about the weather!

But this is what I mean, it’s the smallest things: you can just say ‘yes the weather is bad’. They make the choice to make it difficult for you. Not everybody, there’s people that do their best to help you. I’m not saying that I’m not grateful but still, there’s this other kinds of people constantly making your life difficult (Melkonian 2019)¹⁰

Between Armen the character in the museum’s video presentation, Armen Melkonian as a captivating tour guide, and Armen Melkonian relating his experiences in our conversation about settling in the Netherlands there are

9 After the exhibition ended, Melkonian started volunteering with VluchtelingenWerk Nederlands, the Council for Refugees, in a project called *Bekent maakt beminde*, which translates to ‘getting familiar makes you closer’. Volunteers work in pairs, comprising of a refugee and a non-refugee, and travel to schools, workplaces and different types of organisations, to ‘remove prejudices and create understanding’ (Vluchtelingen Werk Nederland). The project’s web page states that these meetings consist in learning ‘factual information about refugees, but especially their personal story: why does someone have to flee and what is it like to build a new life in the Netherlands?’. Melkonian tells me that he leads meetings two or three times a month and that the best part is getting questions from people ‘especially from children... they cannot even imagine being not accepted by their families because they’re gay, since they are born in a country where it’s normal’ (personal interview 2019). As we have seen in the previous paragraph this ‘normality’ has been the result of a quite ‘sudden assertion of a European “tradition” of anti-homophobic and anti-sexist “core values”’ which as Haritaworn observes is ‘less a reflection of progressive gender relations than of regressive race relations’ (Haritaworn, Tauqir, and Erdem 2008, 10).

10 The figure of the ungrateful migrant has been examined by Halleh Ghorashi: although research shows that Dutch migration policies have never been particularly lenient, the fact that they did not lead to ‘successful’ integration (in neoliberal terms), is used as proof that tolerance failed and that ‘migrants are not doing their best to make something of their lives. They are, in fact, asking too much from society’ (Ghorashi 2014, 104).

of course degrees of separation. But all three versions are telling a story in which memory, identity, and cultural heritage are interwoven to produce an image of ‘goodness’: a ‘good refugee’ that will make a ‘good citizen’ when the opportunity will arise. If we look at the Tropenmuseum with its specific history and its specific claim for engendering world citizenship, and we look at this exhibition and the inclusion of ‘locals’ as tour guides, the image of who exactly is envisioned as citizen starts to emerge: and it is perhaps more problematic than expected in the context of a small-sized temporary exhibition.

The personal memories of life in Aleppo and the selection of certain elements of Syrian cultural heritage act as a resource for the tour guides, who are given the opportunity to use the stage of the museum to start grounding their new identity in accordance with the culturalized values and norms that characterize the membership to the nation. This opportunity is given to imbue with authenticity the museum’s pedagogical mission: to show visitors that there is more to Aleppo than being ‘reduced to a hotbed and its former inhabitants into refugees’ (National Museum of World Cultures 2017b). And yet the guides have been selected chiefly because of their connection with the experience of refugeeism. For this reason, their memories are also a property: a transactional asset that allows them to exchange personal stories for a type of more or less temporary inclusion that, in this case, takes the form of being seen as ‘more than a refugee story’. In addition, by looking closely at how the museum emphasizes personal stories we can see how, even within the context of decentering the authority of the museum, the representations of the protagonists of the exhibition still follow a specific script in which can be noticed culturalized echoes of the image of the ‘good/successful’ refugee as the one closest to ‘our values/culture’. This in turn strengthens the divide between *us* a cosmopolitan public consuming their stories and *them* as potential citizens whose ticket into full, unconditional belonging depends on performing their identity in line with our expectations. The second part of this chapter will examine how the model of memory as resource and property for all minoritized subjects is difficult to eschew also outside of the walls of the museum.



Aleppo | Interview met Armen

TRP Tropenmuseum
744 iscritti

Fig. 5 Screenshot from the promotional video 'Interview with Armen' on the museum's YouTube channel. The caption reads 'the first four months were really lonely and sad, because,' against the background of a maquette of the old city of Aleppo. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.



This Refugee Boat Now Tours Amsterdam's Canals

AJ+ AJ+
1,23 Mln di iscritti

Fig. 6 Screenshot from the video 'This Refugee Boat Now Tours Amsterdam's Canals' on Al Jazeera's YouTube channel showing participants in one of the Rederij Lampedusa's tours. Courtesy of Al Jazeera.

Rederij Lampedusa: cruising the memory of migration

Throughout the second decade of the 2000s, the name Lampedusa has become synonymous with Europe's migration crises and with catastrophe: a tiny island occupying an area of approximately twenty square kilometers periodically submerged by a human tide of people looking to escape wars and poverty, desertification, and disaster. Or in the alternative, a human tide made of possible terrorists and sneaky economic migrants coming to threaten Europe's way of life. Whichever narrative we decide to subscribe to, the images are there: boats and dinghies filled to the brim, the harbor or the detention center crammed with people. Lampedusa is here and there, its name is not only an ominous symbol for people planning the crossing of the Mediterranean; it has also been turned into something similar to a banner and a brand, under which different groups attempt to campaign for rights and recognition.¹¹ The borderization of Europe (Cuttitta 2014) and the exacerbation of policies regarding both entry and integration are explained as humanitarian endeavors: such measures are presented as necessary to prevent 'illegal migration' through trafficking (cfr. Pallister-Wilkins 2015). At the same time, these procedures are here to protect citizens from arrivals becoming *too many*. A variety of devices are deployed to vet who is allowed to enter and who is allowed to stay: from the creation of FRONTEX, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency in charge of the management of EU borders; to repatriation and even pushback at sea operations becoming more and more customary; to the establishment of 'reception centers' in which to hold asylum seekers and refugees for a varying amount of time while they wait for their cases to be 'processed'; to increasingly more stringent civic integration exams (see De Leeuw and van Wichelen 2014 on the evolution of naturalization requisites in the Netherlands). Without this complex infrastructure, European societies are painted as being under the constant threat of terrorism, petty criminals arriving en masse, but also the hazard of letting in people whose

11 Only in very few cases the name of Lampedusa has been reappropriated: one example are the groups called 'Lampedusa in Hamburg' and 'Lampedusa in Berlin' through which self-organised former 'Lampedusans' – migrants that have spent time on the island – have campaigned for access to basic rights and services in Germany. This example shares a lineage with the often-overlooked protest practices happening also on the island itself. These subversive acts have taken different forms over the years, from arson to symbolic occupations of public soil to lip sewing, but are 'easily contained and neutralised on Lampedusa' where any insurgent push is obstructed from view by the pervasive spectacle of 'bare life' through which the island is rendered 'the ideal stage to naturalize the distinction between the taken-for-granted, politically qualified life of the citizen and the debased and desperate existence of the migrant' (Dines, Montagna, and Ruggiero 2015, 437).

culture is perceived as being too different for successful integration.¹² The preliminary stage for accessing refugee status (or subsidiary forms of protection) is based upon a specific type of witnessing, one that relies on establishing the exact amount of trauma an asylum seeker has experienced and the degree of truthfulness of the story they are telling. Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman point out that the '[r]ecognition of trauma, and hence the differentiation between victims' hinges on whether politicians, aid workers, and immigration officers can 'identify with the victims, in counterpoint to the distance engendered by the otherness of the victims... The assessment of trauma is then also an assessment of "good" and "bad" victims, or at least a ranking of legitimacy among victims' (2009, 282). Personal memories of violence therefore effectively constitute the possibility of obtaining a ticket into safety; but after the first, prolonged hurdle of obtaining a residence permit, these memories continue to be a resource for turning the abstract figure of the refugee into a subject that is worthy of cultural if not political recognition – and us into an empathetic public.

This is attempted not only on the level of big and small organizers campaigning for improving the position of refugees and asylum seekers. By transferring admissions of responsibility in the domain of memory and cultural expressions – museum exhibitions, films, plays, workshops, and conferences – actual political responsibility is dispersed and rendered fuzzy while the policies that underpin the spectacle of the border remain unchanged or become even stricter (on the concept of border spectacle see De Genova 2013 see also Jones et al. 2017; De Genova 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). As the official commemoration of disasters gains terrain as a tool for self-reflexivity and as an expression of regret, the intimacies between migration policies and a selective and top-down heritagization of the 'crisis' are pushed out of view. As does the fact that the "refugee crisis" resurfaces within a specific conjuncture of racism in Europe' in which 'colonial legacies

12 Critical race and migration scholars have drawn attention to the various 'projects of illegalisation' that sustain contemporary state power. These not only target migrants through the constant threat of deportation, but also different categories of minoritised citizens exposed to 'disavowal, disenfranchisement, and effective de-naturalisation or de-nationalisation' (de Genova and Roy 2020, 352). These practices, although deployed through the recurrence to legal means need to be motivated and propped up by affective tools: a 'distribution of sentiment' (Stoler 2010a, 58) and 'choreography of the everyday' (Stoler 2010b, 17) which establish that certain people are 'naturally' prone to danger and devastation without ever naming the raced, gendered and classed reasons behind their exposure to unsafety. Stoler's work on the management of intimacy and desire in colonial regimes, such as French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies, is key to understand how technologies of governance can be retraced not only in the obvious – bureaucracy, laws, judicial ruling – but that they are also constituted through prescribing which feelings and sensations are allowed and which are forbidden.

of the construction of the racialised Other are reactivated and wrapped in a racist vocabulary, drawing on a racist imaginary combined with new forms of governing...through migration control' (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2021, 17–18). Memory becomes a resource then to prevent the question of why the public commemoration of deadly incidents caused by the EU's border regime coexists with the humanitarian efforts of the metropole. Each shipwreck, each disaster is met with a presentist urge to memorialize with responses varying in scale and intent: from a cross made with pieces of sunken boats exhibited at the British Museum in London to spontaneous memorials; or how the relict of the 2015 shipwreck, which caused the death of more than eight hundred people, has been turned into the artwork *Barca Nostra* (our ship). This was exhibited at the 58th Biennale di Venezia as a 'monument to contemporary migration, engaging real and symbolic borders and the (im)possibility of freedom of movement, of information and people' while highlighting 'our mutual responsibility representing the collective policies and politics that create such wrecks' (La Biennale di Venezia 2019). In 2019, on the occasion of the sixth anniversary of the 2013 shipwreck that killed over three hundred and sixty people off the coast of Lampedusa, the EU-funded project *Snapshots from the Border* launched a petition to make October 3rd the 'European Day of Memory and Welcoming'. This was done through a series of events held in twenty-eight European capitals, including Amsterdam where Rederij Lampedusa, the focus of the chapter's second part, participated with its tours in the day-long event ("Snapshots from the Borders" n.d.).

The project of Rederij Lampedusa (Lampedusa Cruise, RL henceforth) was initiated by artist Teun Castelein in 2015 with the support of the municipality of Amsterdam and Dutch funding bodies such as the Amsterdamse Fond voor de Kunst, the Mondrian Fund, and Stichting DOEN. The core team is composed of Castelein, Felice Plijte in charge of all organizational matters, and Dafne Gotink who is responsible for producing the texts. During the spring and summer months, RL offers canal tours for 35 Euros per person (previously donation-based) and, for 350 Euros, private tours in the form of shuttle services to the De Parade theatre festival or tailored for educational school trips (Rederij Lampedusa 2020). Twice a month there is an event called *Friday Afternoon with Mr Friday*, which is free of charge and offers a varying cultural program in partnership with organizations like the photography museum FOAM or the storytelling group Mezrab. Because of their legal positioning, the crew members that have refugee or asylum seeker status cannot receive a regular salary, instead, they are given compensation through a state-run volunteering scheme called *vrijwilligersvergoeding*

(volunteer allowance) that cannot exceed five Euros per hour or one hundred and seventy Euros per month; the rest of the people collaborating with the Rederij are employed as freelancers.¹³ The original idea behind RL was to find ways to counteract how the media portrayed the ‘refugee crisis’ and how, in turn, the public perceived ‘newcomers’: ‘I think that the traumatic imagery that has been used by the media... in the long term it’s not helping the case’ says Castelein (2018). The images of “‘mass immigration’” are what scares people in the Netherlands and Europe, he continues, convincing them that the only solution is to close borders (Castelein 2018). With the Rederij instead ‘we focus on individuals and we do it in our poster campaigns, in our movies, or if the media or the BBC is coming’ (Castelein 2018). When I ask him what motivated him to undertake such a project, he jokingly replies that maybe he is becoming ‘just like my father...because my father is a social worker so maybe is in our DNA that if you see the potential of working in a collective, that if you help each other people do grow...you stimulate each other and it’s wonderful’ (Castelein 2018). It took two years of negotiating with Italian authorities but finally, in 2015, Castelein was granted permission to transport two boats to Amsterdam: the bigger one originating from Libya was named Alhadj Djuma or Mr. Friday, while the smaller one from Tunisia, was called Hedir; later in 2018 a third boat, named Gamela and coming from Egypt, was added to the fleet.¹⁴ The first time I joined a canal tour was in September 2017 at the beginning of my research project and not too late after having moved to Amsterdam. I arrived a few minutes late and found that the rest of the visitors had already arrived: it was a small group composed mostly of older

13 In addition, RL has also established partnerships with several organizations like ZEP theatre group, the art center Mediamatic, the Volkshotel, which offers to its guests the possibility of sailing with the Rederij, and Booking.com, which assists with marketing and ICT solutions as part of their Social Responsibility program (Rederij Lampedusa 2020). The operations of RL are managed through the Stichting Gelukszoekers (fortune-seekers foundation): this term *gelukszoekers* is used disparagingly by the Dutch right to indicate that migrants leave their country to find their ‘fortune’ in the West. The foundation thereby aimed at reappropriating this word and launched with a campaign advocating for the idea that ‘[t]o us, everyone is welcome. Whether you’re on the run from war or simply looking for a better life. The world is ours and everyone is in pursuit of happiness’ (Stichting Gelukszoekers n.d.).

14 Castelein’s first visit to Lampedusa goes back to 2012 for his submission to the Identifying Europe edition of the Twente Biennale of Contemporary Art: it consisted of a tongue-in-cheek video in which he played the part of an entrepreneur looking to sell the ‘yachts’ from one of the island’s landfills which became known as ‘boat cemeteries’ (Twente Biennale 2013). As observed by his colleague Dafne Gotink, today Castelein is reluctant to speak about this first contact with Lampedusa because he no longer stands behind the video and its content (Gotink 2018). But what stayed with him after the experience was the desire to make something with the boats he saw abandoned on the island

people that appeared to be Dutch, a mother and daughter visiting from the US, and another person who asked permission to audio record our guide Tommy Hatim Sherif (after the tour I learned they were another researcher from the University of Amsterdam). The ship's captain Yusuf Adam Suali started the engine and, upon leaving the dock, Sherif asked if we could guess how many people it carried during the crossing of the Mediterranean. The answer was seventy-six, in striking contrast with the regulations of the Dutch navy which state that such a small vessel can only contain a maximum of fourteen people. Upon learning this, the small audience let out an audible gasp.

The tour paints contemporary Amsterdam as a welcoming melting pot made unique by its inhabitants' one hundred and eighty nationalities. As we pass historical sights Sherif uses the historical landmark visible from the boat to anchor its stories about the city, which flourished thanks to the contribution of famous emigres but also thanks to assets accumulated by enslavers and plantation owners. He then starts recalling his journey to Amsterdam: Sherif was a writer and activist in Cairo and worked at a TV station in the city when in 2012 started helping refugees arriving from Syria. He recounts that when one of his friends questioned him about helping people that he thought would end up stealing their houses and jobs, Sherif answered 'today I'm helping them maybe tomorrow I'll be a refugee' (fieldnotes 2017). His prediction came through when, following Al Sisi's coup in 2013, he had to first live in hiding and then flee Egypt and claim asylum in the Netherlands: 'most people think I came by boat because I'm a refugee, but I came by airplane' he says (fieldnotes 2017). His style of storytelling is dynamic and captivating, the jokes land at the right time, and the more sobering parts are told in a still very accessible manner. The audience and I feel engrossed by his story which, at times, was in stark contrast with the beauty and calmness of an end of summer afternoon cruise through the city's historic center. After exiting the bustle of the canals, captain Yusuf Suali also begins to tell the story of how he reached the Netherlands from Somalia. But he is interrupted by the police approaching us on a boat and ordering Suali to follow them to a designated spot where they can conduct their inspection. The reason why we are being halted is not immediately clear: whilst Sherif explains the nature of our activities onshore, the mostly Dutch audience still in the boat is inclined to protest. Luckily, with a phone call to Teun Castelein, the situation is quickly resolved. As we return safely to the docks everybody comments on the bitter irony of learning that we were stopped for being 'too many' on a boat that at one point had to hold seventy-six people. Since then, each time I joined a tour was very different from the previous one: the rhythm and atmosphere of the tour

depended largely on how the tour guide approached the storytelling, during the *Fridays Afternoon* events the presentations could be more or less structured, the communal moments with food and music more or less efficacious. One element that repeated itself occurred when the attendees were invited to ask questions to storytellers and presenters: the less knowledgeable they appeared to be about the ‘migration crisis’, the more personal the queries would get.

A boat tour and a multidirectional project?

Due to the structural lack of subsidy of the cultural sector, to access funding, projects need to be structured around topics of proven societal relevance – such as the ‘migrant crisis’ – and around participatory goals, which must include as much diversity as possible. And although in RL’s case storytelling is the result of a collaborative effort, the over-valorization of agency in refugee’s ‘success stories’ works in line with implicit goals of cultural policy both local and at the EU level: participation and outreach programs become the stage on where to show successful examples of integration – mutually culturally enriching, a victory over many struggles. With this observation, I do not mean to single out Rederij Lampedusa as an example of bad practice or as a project borne out of disingenuous intentions. Rather, I would like to underline how any cultural or heritage projects that wish to engage with people who occupy a vulnerable position cannot do without the financial or infrastructural support of a system that rewrites agency as a mixture of grit and flexibility – as a completely depoliticized personal asset, which is needed to succeed in carving a place for yourself in society. RL also intends to enable refugees ‘to find their way to contribute to our society’ (Castelein 2018), or in any case to give them a sense of purpose while they are either stuck in legal limbo or until they are authorized to work. Thus, the self-presentation of the crewmembers revolves around their agency: through their stories the public can learn about how they extricated themselves from difficult situations, how they faced multiple challenges after their arrival, and how they persevered to make this new, strange society into a home for themselves. For instance, Tommy Hatim Sherif recognizes that his work with RL has given him a sense of purpose and opened a lot of doors for him through media attention, which in turn led to work opportunities in theatres and storytelling events. He simultaneously says that storytelling ‘is like therapy’ because ‘every time I tell my story I see more details’ but also that these are ‘hard memories, so sometimes it’s just a bit heavy...but I have to accept it because this is my work and I love my work’ (Sherif 2019). Although Sherif’s experience has

been largely positive, it is also impossible to separate his words from the fact that so many of the projects offered to refugees and asylum seekers are only a temporary way out from living in the AZCs, the asylum seekers centers where they are forced to live as they wait for the legal resolution of their cases. This model of participation, especially when based on sharing stories and memories related to the experience of refugeeism, therefore can never be seen as chosen in total autonomy. And while it can offer opportunities for professionalization, these are usually limited to few not all participants. And yet the optics of happy diversity and ‘good’, active citizenship operate through these projects too and rewrite them as success stories – a testament to migrants’ resilience and creativity. This way hiding from view the lack of alternatives and prospects for all that, despite their willingness to participate, will see for instance their asylum request rejected.

For these compounded reasons, it is also difficult to exactly pinpoint the position of Rederij Lampedusa across the entanglements between institutional, top-down approaches to memorialization and grassroots initiatives that aim to counter-act predominant narratives about migration. When asked about the concept behind the project, Castelein first calls it drolly ‘a very aggressive hobby’ (Castelein 2018). On a more serious note, he adds that he believes that through the team’s ‘playfully but also sometimes questionable approach’ RL manages to reach out to people newly arrived in Amsterdam to learn together ‘how they can find their way to contribute to our society’ (Castelein 2018). Gotink recalls that, in the beginning, several people found the idea of using boats from Lampedusa quite offensive: she does not specify by whom, but one article, titled *Lampedusa Boutique Activism*, which was published in 2016 in a magazine for Italian speakers living in the Netherlands, focused on ‘ethical implication of using aesthetic representations of the plight of asylum seekers to make a consumer product’ (Sfregola and Polo 2016). Gotink argues, however, that RL’s provocative spirit is needed:

because it makes visible a lot of things that people don’t normally want to see or want to be confronted with. As soon as you bring it out in the open people are like ‘you can’t do it it’s stigmatizing’, but the whole concept is about destigmatizing if you ask me. Because it’s pretty joyful: they tell a story and talk about themselves...they want to be something else than ‘refugees’ (Gotink 2018)

The narrative of RL follows two main threads: the comparison between migrants of today and the past – both arrived in the Netherlands escaping something, both capable of contributing to Dutch society; and the authenticity of their stories through sensorial and emotional registers – engendered

through storytelling based on their memories and through the tangible reminder of Mediterranean crossings provided by the boats. Karina Horsti conceives their function as a ‘mobile memory site’ providing ‘an authentic experience – not by preserving the boat as it was during the crossing, but by renovating it for use’ (Horsti 2019, 60). She argues that, as a ‘material remnant of the border spectacle in the Mediterranean’, boats could potentially contribute ‘to make bordering visible to the citizens of a country implicated in the creation of the European border’ (2019, 61). This dialogue between past histories and current memories appears to follow the model of what Michael Rothberg calls the multidirectionality of memory. The scholar coined this concept to account for how the capacity to remember historical tragedies does not operate as ‘struggle over scarce resources’: instead memory is always ‘subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing’ (2009, 3); according to Rothberg collective memories of different violent histories ‘emerge in dialogue with each other’ (Rothberg 2019, 20) and thus can become a resource to activate against nationalism and populism since it has the potential to create ‘new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice’ (2009, 5). In the case of RL, by telling their personal stories of migration the guides insert themselves in this ‘multidirectional network’. As Horsti notes, this along with the analogy with the struggle of immigrants of the past could potentially produce solidarity in the public that, upon hearing their stories and sensing the physical presence of the boat, perhaps will be able to stop conceiving contemporary migration as ‘sudden “crisis”’ and instead look at it as ‘a continuum of mobilities that have shaped societies for centuries’ (Horsti 2019, 62). But it is another point that the author raises that I find significant: according to Horsti in fact, ‘[t]he presumed suffering of those who crossed the border or died at the border becomes part of the object’s imagined biography’. The “authenticity” of the object then increases the value of the “new” artefact or event’ (2019, 4) – in this case, the tours.

Whereas for the people working behind the scenes of the Rederij is important not to spectacularize the arrival stories, crewmember Sami Tsegaye feels that, at times, tour participants ‘like to ask about what they don’t understand and sometimes they ask too much, and questions that are too personal’ (personal communication 2018). Reflecting on his experience in the asylum system, he shares the conviction that for the people he sees joining the tours is fundamentally impossible to comprehend or even ‘imagine life as a refugee’ (pers. comm. 2018). Gotink is mindful that during tours ‘sometimes it’s also about putting “the refugee” on a pedestal...like “oh you’re the refugee please talk to us!”’ (Gotink 2018). She recalls the feeling of ‘looking for

“difference” at the time when she first started to put together the RL tours and was looking for guides with a connection to the topic of migration: “who’s an immigrant? Whose parents are immigrants? What’s interesting to say about migration?”” she would ask herself while assembling the team of storytellers (Gotink 2018). In the beginning, Dutch actors with a migration background gave the tours while later RL established a collaboration with the ZEP theatre group to develop a script and train asylum seekers so they could tell their own stories. Throughout this process, Gotink was acutely aware that she was no longer ‘seeing people as Amsterdammers’ and that even the famous emigres featured in the tours are ultimately boxed in the category of ‘immigrant’: ‘you are stigmatizing them again to destigmatize it [migration]’, she points out, ‘it’s like you are going into the ditch to come out of it, to do something good’ (Gotink 2018). This complexity, while it does not negate the similarities with a multidirectional model, it certainly reveals its ‘flaws’ or rather the points of rupture between what the project seeks to achieve – provide an avenue for being seen as ‘something else than “refugees”’ (Gotink 2018) – and the narrative it perhaps inadvertently pushes forward: in which guides are turned into ‘newcomers’, new to the city just like the guests on board, and yet they cannot escape their biography.

In a later work, Rothberg calls ‘differentiated’ or ‘long-distance solidarity’ (Rothberg 2019), the ways in which subjects that are implicated in structures of domination and oppression can take responsibility for dismantling them. But this move cannot happen within the confines of an event – or a boat tour like in this case – that, in the attempt of sensitizing its public, ends up replicating a narrative that presents Amsterdam – a stand-in for Europe – as a safe haven. And while refugees become a kind of ‘citizens-in-waiting’, whose humanity will eventually be recognized and deemed worthy of the affordances of safety and belonging promised by ‘full’ citizenship. After succeeding in surviving the journey, the permanence in asylum seekers’ centers, the interruption of their family and professional lives, the instability and lack of prospects, now as ‘newcomers’ they only need to persist and offer up a performance of availability and flexibility to whoever asks for it – for the border patrol agent, the immigration officer, the police, but also to the eyes of concerned citizens and whoever wants to know *more*. Each tour is different from the other, and guides may go ‘off-script’, and conversations could go deeper so a narrative of progress despite adversities is not transmitted without discrepancies or moments of pause. But by attempting to redraw the figure of the refugee into that of a newcomer – not much different from the many expats living in Amsterdam – RL ends up obscuring the inner workings of

a system that is steeped in racial thinking and that determines the price of inclusion through a careful distribution of state protection and state violence.

Castelein is aware of the one-sidedness behind that the fact that ‘personal stories get more interest’ and therefore he would like the tours to be more standardized to avoid having to rehash painful memories. Speaking of the crewmembers doing the storytelling, he realizes that they might ‘have the feeling that they have to please the guests’ (2018):

I don’t want to tell their misery all the time, then it’s a sell-out of their drama and that’s definitely not what I want. Mo [crewmember Mohammad Al Masri], for example, wanted to do a full re-enactment of his journey. I asked him why he wanted to do it and if it was because he sensed that people want that...and he said yes;

[c]uriosity is something human and we focus on migration...that’s our topic. So I understand why people expect to know from newcomers the story of their journey. It’s a communicational challenge to turn it the other way ‘we’re just another shipping company that focuses on Amsterdam but we have a crew of newcomers’ (Castelein 2018)

Each time I returned to the tour I noticed the audible gasp the audience lets out once they learn how many people these boats originally carried. Gotink underlines that as soon as the public hears the story of how many people originally traveled on that same vessel across the Mediterranean ‘the experience of being on the boat changes and the story becomes very real all of a sudden’ (Gotink 2018). She believes that it is important to always tell the exact number ‘because it’s so easy to forget’ but also wonders whether sometimes the reaction from the public could boil down to wanting ‘to be seen as a good person, you want to perform your own humanity’ (Gotink 2018). Thinking back about my experience onboard I share with her my response to the storytelling: ‘you’re in public, so you have to have a reaction. I also probably did something like that during my first cruise – maybe I gasped, maybe, later on, I laughed at something else’ (fieldnotes 2018). And each time I returned I took on the role of researcher – notepad in hand, trying to capture with my notes what was happening around me and observing the audience’s reactions. The public varied in its composition, sometimes I could spot other academics, other times there were families, or people visiting Amsterdam, one time it was a small group of young people that had been volunteering in Moria – the Reception and Identification Centre on the Greek island of Lesbos known for its terrible living conditions. Around me I could see focused expressions and friendly faces, but also skeptical looks or hands raised to ask what was going to be an invasive question. Shock or frustration

or a feeling of powerlessness would meet the parts of the story involving traumatic memories. But there were also moments of levity thanks to the guides and during the breaks in which to share food and listen to music. The point, however, is not to determine whether such reactions are authentic or not. Broadly they do seem to be following a specific pattern across the storytelling: ‘human curiosity’ always follows the initial surprise, and the replies to questions posed by the audience elicit more surprise. Curiosity and surprise, whose outward expressions might be exaggerated by being in public, need to be analyzed not just as individual reactions but as affordances of the specific audience, which gets on the boats in the very center of Amsterdam. This location, not just geographical but also epistemological, allows for particular ways of knowing and not knowing. It gives people permission of wanting to know more, to access an intimate, bone-deep understanding not of the phenomenon of migration, or the history of Amsterdam as a city of arrival but of how does it feel to leave a home behind and to seek safety elsewhere.

Rederij Lampedusa and other projects featuring the voices of ‘real refugees’, regardless of their artistic, social or economic value, gain legitimacy by tackling issues like migration and border crossing that are both topical and dramatic. But RL ends up renouncing any real possibility to ‘act upon the present’ (De Cesari 2012) by delimiting its role to pragmatism: the idea of mixing bits and pieces of Amsterdam’s old and new heritage of migration to change the narrative surrounding ‘newcomers’ ends up reinforcing the image of Europe as a safe haven and land ‘where there is a future’ (Castelein 2018). Castelein and his collaborators put real care into their work and into their efforts to establish collaboration with their migrant crew on equal footing. But the attempt to portray them at once as ‘something more than refugees’ and new Amsterdammers deserving of a chance just like everybody else, ends up reinforcing a disconnect: we are all different but equal, and yet they cannot live like us. My direct observation of the interactions happening between the public, including myself, and the crew members on board Rederij Lampedusa has led me to conclude that what needs to be closely examined, in this and other similar projects, is not the performance through which ‘refugees’ negotiate their presence in the country, but *our* performance. Even without any indication from the staff, the stories told will be conforming to our expectations of how a ‘good’ refugee should behave: professional, available and resilient. A small or big exhibition, tour, or any type of event should endeavor to turn back the mirror on the privilege behind our knowing and not knowing. And how our empathy depends on the intimate knowledge of someone’s pain.

Conclusion

Cultural participation through projects on the heritage of migration ticks most boxes: it attends to the self-image of openness and tolerance of the city/nation, and Europe in broader terms, while consolidating the script of a society open to diversity; and it fulfills the criteria of social responsibility of partners while positioning the organizations running these projects as allies. The reason why I wanted to connect two formats and two containers – an exhibition and a boat tour, a national museum and an artist-led project – completely different from each other is to make clear that narratives about who can and cannot aspire to belong are produced and circulated across big and small cultural organizations, century-old institutions and temporary projects. Even without any indication from the staff, the stories told by refugees will conform to our expectations of how a ‘good’ migrant should behave: professional, available and resilient.

What I sought to highlight throughout this chapter is that projects such as these, although eminently cultural and without political ambitions, are still presented as the trojan horse through which progress will be ushered into society. And yet, as long as the memory space that connects imperial afterlives to contemporary migration remains ‘drowned’, these projects will remain the backdoor through which to reinforce the global performance of knowing certain things and of not knowing others – of willfully choosing to believe that ‘they are here’ because we/Europe let them. Heritage projects that aim at questioning the processes of ‘storying’ the present (Hall 2005) need to pull apart the notion of hope for a better tomorrow and expose the exclusionary politics that feeds on it. Journeys towards Europe, across the Mediterranean and/or from locations where ‘imperial debris’ (Stoler 2013) pollute the lives of people, cannot be heritagized without first a journey into Europe, into its skin folds: looking from up close at what we are expected to forget. The next chapter will use the Tropenmuseum’s exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery* as the backdrop to examine how the institution is responding to a transnational discourse around the enduring legacies of colonialism; while also reframing the claim to full belonging of Afro-Dutch citizens by centering the figure of the descendants of the enslaved.

CHAPTER 4

‘All the things happening outside the museum push me back in’: Exhibiting the Afterlives of Slavery

Introduction

As we have seen in Chapter 1, although the history of slavery and colonialism has been memorialized by people of African descent in the Netherlands throughout the twentieth century, over the last three decades the scale of remembrance has grown (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020). There has been a shift, however, in how these claims are articulated, if until the 1980s slavery was referenced in the context of workers' liberation and anti-capitalist struggle, starting from the early 1990s, black grassroots organizations began to mobilize the memory of slavery by 'focusing not on Dutch colonialism or the proletarian revolution, but on citizenship' (2020, 7). On the other hand, depictions of suffering have been a crucial part of mainstream scholarly and media reports on slavery whilst also being featured in books, exhibitions, and talks that attempted to commemorate this part of history. A discourse on emotional pain and trauma is deployed when Afro-descendant Dutch people protest against inequalities and racism. If right-wing parties and populist pundits openly disparage any memorial project on the history of slavery and accuse Surinamese Dutch to exploit their 'victim-status' to obtain advantages, the mainstream reaction of compassionate understanding still 'serve[s] in the iconography of a caring nation' (Balkenhol 2014, 121). In addition, in recent years the memory of colonialism and slavery has been also mobilized to demand the 'decolonization' of institutions responsible for upholding oppressive and discriminatory structures.

This chapter contextualizes recent developments in how the memory of slavery is being mobilized in the Netherlands by zooming in on the Tropenmuseum's exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery*.¹ My analysis is derived from extensive fieldwork over the course of two years in the museum, which involved repeated visits to the exhibition, participation in tours and public events related to it, as well as interviews with key informants. The chapter charts the evolution of the discursive space from which the exhibition has emerged in the first section; then it examines the 'diffuse points of intentionality' (Mason and Sayner 2019, 17) of the curatorial approach; the third section delves into the issues raised by the inclusion in the display of items referring to the contemporary movement against *Zwarte Piet*, a blackface character in the annual Saint Nicholas festivities; finally, the fourth section looks at

1 A previous version of this chapter has been published in the International Journal of Heritage Studies with the title 'All the things happening outside of the museum push me back in': thinking through memory and belonging in Amsterdam's Tropenmuseum (Caradonna 2021)

recent examples of how the museum has been collaborating with activists as part of its commitment to a decolonial approach. Can the Tropenmuseum, not only through its programming but also at a structural level, reflect on the ‘coloniality within’?

Everybody wants to ‘do something with slavery’

The exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery* (*AoS* hereafter) – or *Heden van het Slavernijverleden* ‘present of the slavery past’ – was inaugurated in Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum on October 6, 2017. In the original plan, it was described as a ‘semi-permanent exhibition’ since it was supposed to last two years in preparation for the refurbishment of the permanent collection, which was planned to reopen in 2021 with a deeper focus on the legacies of Dutch colonialism as heritage shared by all Dutch citizens.² Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the uncertainty it has caused also in the cultural sector, *AoS*’ duration was extended until May 25, 2021. The reason why I chose to focus on this exhibit lies precisely in the particular position it occupies in the timeline that connects the memorialization of slavery to political issues in society at large – which are specific to the Dutch context but also shaped by transnational discourses. The new impetus that this particular kind of ‘difficult heritage’ (Macdonald 2015) has received is usually made to coincide with the period between 2011, the year in which anti-racist activists started the campaign *Zwarte Piet is Racisme*; and 2013, the year that signed the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Dutch kingdom. On the occasion of this *jubileum*, two exhibitions about slavery opened in Amsterdam, one in the Scheepvaart Museum (maritime history) and another one in the Amsterdam Museum (the local civic museum). In the same year, the *Mapping Slavery* project was initiated by Dr. Diennek Hondius and independent researcher Nancy Jouwe, which focuses on the material traces of slavery in the Dutch metropole. Also in 2013, Jennifer Tosch inaugurated the increasingly popular *Black Heritage Tours* to unearth the histories of the black diaspora in the city. Robin Lelijveld, who has worked on the *AoS* in quality of researcher, confirms that ‘since 2013, it’s becoming more and more popular, almost

2 In the end, the refurbishment resulted in the exhibition *Onze Koloniale Erfenis/Our Colonial Inheritance* which opened on June 24 2022. I decided not to include an examination of the new exhibit in this chapter because the focus of my analysis are the preceding stages and a time in which the museum was undergoing a transition. An in-depth analysis of *Our Colonial Inheritance* as the outcome of this process needs time and space in a measure that I could not provide within the structure of this dissertation, which when the display opened had already entered its final form.

a competition' and that institutions are becoming slightly too eager to 'do something with slavery' (Lelijveld 2019). During the decade between 2011 and 2021 – the year in which the exhibition closed – the discourse around the memory of slavery and its significance for the Dutch public has indeed significantly changed. And if we take into consideration only the period of time in which *AoS* was open there is a difference between 2017 when the commemoration of slavery seemed bound to incur in resistance and criticism from a part of society; and 2021, in which almost all heritage and cultural institutions in the city have found a way to respond and make their own the demands for decolonizing the museum.

The conceptual framework at the basis of *AoS* borrows from Saidiya Hartman's 2007 book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* in which the afterlife of slavery is theorized as a particular mode of engagement with the past not stemming from

an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment (Hartman 2008, 6)

The premises for reintroducing the topic of slavery in the museum were laid during the 2017 symposium titled *A Shared History– Conversations on the Slavery Past in the Present* organized by RCMC. In the presence of the then-Minister of Education, Culture and Science Jet Bussemaker, a group of scholars, activists, artists, and community leaders, debated how slavery has been both commemorated and forgotten in the Netherlands, and which steps they deemed necessary for instead 'creating a more convivial society where all feel welcomed' and whether through remembering slavery 'we can come to a healing for the past' (Research Center for Material Culture 2017). The emphasis placed on the concept of 'healing' can be found in the actual display as *AoS*' exhibition maker Richard Kofi underlines: together with the curatorial team he formed with Robin Lelijveld and Martin Berger, NMWC's curator for Middle- and South America, Kofi aimed to avoid feelings of 'gloom and guilt' and to facilitate a deeper reflection on the legacies of slavery (Kofi 2019). This vision stemmed also from the curators' visit to the *Slavery and Freedom* exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), which also centered the agency of the enslaved people and the strategies they adopted to resist oppression and dehumanization.

AoS was co-funded by the European Union's Creative Europe Programme as an outcome of the four-year collaborative project SWICH - *Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage: Ethnography, Museums of World Culture and New Citizenship in Europe*, which involved academic partners and ten ethnographic museums. When I spoke to Martin Berger about the inception phase of *AoS* he recalls how, in the weeks following the symposium, media attention was pointed instead to the news that the Rijksmuseum, the Netherlands' biggest museum, was going to devote an exhibition to the history of slavery in 2020. The announcement came only days before the exhibition *Good Hope. South Africa and the Netherlands from 1600* opened at the Rijksmuseum provoking a lot of criticism for being 'a missed opportunity' (Sheperd and Ernsten 2017) that failed to acknowledge that 'colonization is both a historical crime and a violent process that perpetuates itself in the present moment' (Zeefuik 2017). This was the first of the points that writer and activist Simone Zeefuik, from the group Decolonize the Museum, made in an open letter to the museum that received widespread attention, and was co-signed by many Dutch and international scholars, activists, and artists. Decolonize The Museum, comprised of Zeefuik along with activists Phoenix and Hodan Warsame, had been vocal in criticizing NMWC initially through a Twitter hashtag through which they sought to 'expose the violence perpetuated by ethnographic museums by critiquing its Eurocentrism, white supremacy, its assumed neutrality and its excuses of "only having so much time/space"' ("Decolonize The Museum Conference" 2016). In 2015, at the invitation of Wayne Modest, and then head of the curatorial department Laura Van Broeckhoven, the group staged an intervention in the museum during which a network of around forty people convened to share their views and rewrite the exhibitions' interpretative material. The new texts were displayed alongside the original museum version and the intervention culminated in the *Decolonize the Museum* conference in 2016 in which Zeefuik, Warsame, and Phoenix led a discussion on how:

. . . the museum experience of ourselves and our friends whose heritage is studied and analyzed, but who, ourselves, are seldom the target group of ethnographic museums.

Simultaneously, we push a conversation about how if at all the ethnographic museums can contribute to reinstating the agency and histories of colonized peoples, life and territories.

Last but not least, Decolonize The Museum is about educating and challenging the organization so that neo-liberal conceptions of 'diversity' do not become the limit of change for these institutions ("Decolonize The Museum Conference" 2016)

AoS then was born at a moment in which the museum had already started to open a line of communication with activists, and with the intention of providing a tentative but solid answer to the issues that were raised against the Rijksmuseum: as a national museum, the Tropenmuseum would be in the position of making a statement even with a temporary display while also demonstrating to have received the lessons coming from global decolonial scholarship and local activists. But would it be possible to make a statement in this sense precisely at the moment in which ‘diversity’ started to become a buzzword in the Dutch cultural sector? And what would the terms of the collaboration with activists and grassroots organizations be?

Before I delve into these questions, more details are needed about the exhibition itself and the space it occupied within the museum. Although it was assembled in only a few months, *AoS* had the ambitious goal of providing a platform through which to collect impressions and feedback to prepare for the upcoming refurbishment of the permanent collection of the Tropenmuseum, to be inaugurated in 2022 and titled *Onze Koloniale Erfenis* (our colonial legacy/inheritance). This was done through a ‘talk to us’ section containing feedback cards with quite complex questions for the public, asking: ‘what is the price of freedom? What do you turn to for strength? What does the history of slavery have to do with you? and Is Ketu Ketu relevant to all Dutch people?’. Berger underlines how this interactive element has been put in place, not only for the museum, but also for visitors: ‘they represent the fact that we realize this is the story that we share with everyone, and that we [the museum] are only one voice among many and that your voice counts too’ (Berger 2019). Moreover, to include multiple voices and find ways to ‘give up the power’ (Kofi 2019), a steering committee was invited to provide input during the exhibition’s preparatory phases, and a collaboration was established with Warsame, Zeefuik, and Phoenix, as well as The Black Archives, for the revision of the texts. The museum borrowed some items from the Archives’ collection and involved students from their network to give tours of the exhibition. In addition, Mitchell Esajas, one of its founders, participated in one of the consulting sessions during *AoS*’ preparatory phase.

The display unfolds across three connected rooms making up one of the shorter sides of the first floor of the museum, which develops around the monumental central atrium called the Lichthal (‘light hall’). In the central room, around ‘the talk to us’ section, five thematic areas are divided between panels propped up by grid-like structures: ‘the creation of race’, ‘blackness as product’, ‘protest’, ‘freedom’, and ‘creativity and resistance’. Each is accompanied by a video recording played on a large screen featuring

different experts: Gloria Wekker on the cultural archive of colonialism in the Netherlands, Karwan Fatah-Black on the hidden meanings of the process of manumission, Amade M'charek on how anthropology contributed to inventing race and Winti priestess and activist Marian Markelo on how this religion and philosophy emerged in Suriname during slavery. In the two smaller adjacent rooms, the attention is instinctively drawn to two videos that feature Dutch-Surinamese artists Onias Landveld and Dorothy Blokland performing spoken word poetry. Landveld's piece focuses on how the languages, the words, and the histories of his ancestors are connected in him, whilst Blokland invites visitors to join her in her search for the meaning of freedom. The thread of resistance and the emphasis on the agency of the enslaved are woven into the display through several stories and objects: from accounts of uprisings on slave ships to the month-long revolt on the island of Curacao led by Tula, to how the formerly enslaved Jan Houthakker endeavored for abolition in Suriname and bought the freedom of other enslaved people. There are also texts that reveal the ambiguities within the struggle for liberty: for example, the history of Maroons, the group of plantation fugitives that created independent tribes in Suriname by joining indigenous people but that, in exchange for treaties that granted them territorial autonomy, returned other enslaved people they had previously freed; or the story of Elisabeth Samson, the daughter of an enslaved woman and a black man, who was 'born free' and thus able to inherit and successfully run several coffee plantations in Suriname. A pair of shackles and a branding iron, which already belonged to the museum's collection and were previously displayed, are featured as a tangible reminder of the violence and dehumanization of slavery.³

The same perception of present-ness is achieved through a photograph of thirteen-year-old Johannes Kodjo, captured while he played drums in the 'human zoo' display in Amsterdam's Museumplein in 1883. The drums, which are part of the Tropenmuseum's permanent collection, are exhibited this time to make visitors aware that dehumanizing practices continued after slavery was formally abolished in the Dutch Kingdom in 1863. A section titled 'freedom of thought' features books and pamphlets on loan from The Black Archives featuring the work of anti-colonial intellectuals and activists like Anton de Kom, and an audio recording of The Black Archives' Mitchell Esajas and activist Marysé Jansen de Lannoy highlighting the critical views

3 These two items are now part of the 'slavery' windows of the Canon van Nederland, which is an educational tool commissioned by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science in operation since 2006 which includes in its 'windows' objects and artifacts related to eras and topics throughout the history of the Netherlands.

expressed by these authors on the subject of slavery and its legacy; whilst a panel within the ‘protest’ display focuses on objects that have been used in contemporary anti-racism protests in the Netherlands.

Empathy, not guilt

Despite being quite dense with information, *AoS* takes up a relatively small space on the second floor of the museum: it is surrounded by the *New Guinea*, *Southeast Asia* and *Indonesia* (formerly *Eastward Bounds!*) aisles that make up the permanent collection. Reviewing the exhibition, Heitor Augusto notes that reaching *AoS* after having visited the rest of the floor might leave visitors ‘with a sense of disappointment’ since the critical point of view that characterizes the temporary exhibition is largely absent in the permanent collection where ‘the colonial gaze seems to remain untouched’ (Augusto 2019). This area of the museum, which includes the Colonial Theater display I described in Chapter 2, appears to be in stark contrast with the curatorial intention behind *AoS*. In the months running up to the exhibition, several texts were added to the original display to put both objects and the history of the collection in context by highlighting, for instance, how ‘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’ (in van Huis 2019, 232). However, despite these improvements, Iris van Huis notes that throughout the floor ‘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’ (van Huis 2019, 233). The contrast between older and newer curatorial approaches is to be expected – and welcomed – yet a text connecting *AoS* with the rest of the floor would have been useful to gain an understanding of these developments, and of why certain parts of the collections look in a certain way. This is especially the case for first-time visitors and/or audiences with no point of reference for the specificities of the Dutch context.

The element of present-ness implied by the concept of afterlife is only partially achieved: this seemingly stems from a cautious approach on the part of the museum since, at the time in which *AoS* opened, in Berger’s words it ‘was never going to please everybody’ (2019). In particular, he anticipated the reactions to the exhibit as being split between people pointing out that the exhibition featured ‘too much violence’ and equally those potentially disappointed by the fact that there was ‘not enough violence’ (2019). Berger

also observed that for RCMC's director Wayne Modest it was important to imbue in the exhibition a 'sense of hope' by highlighting the strategies that enslaved people put in place to preserve their humanity in the face of extreme violence. Berger, however, seems conscious of the limits intrinsic to projects that are supposed to cover such an extensive and contested territory:

I don't want to say that we failed, but we weren't able to do it to the extent we wished in the beginning. But what we were able to do I think was to show continuity with the past.

And that's also why we started the exhibition with spoken word by a contemporary person to show this idea, predominant in Dutch society, of 'what should we care? It was a long time ago, it's not important to us today' it's wrong (Berger 2019)

By emphasizing histories of survival and not of victimhood, and by focusing on the ambiguities of freedom, the display works to eschew a feeling of hopelessness while also carefully avoiding provoking feelings of guilt. In fact, in the media coverage of the museum, the intention of steering clear of guilt-inducing imagery and narratives is remarked on almost each time *AoS* is mentioned (see for example van der Valk 2017; van de Velde 2017; van Schoonhoven 2019). The relationship between the heritage of slavery and the affects it mobilizes is complex as Sherilyn Deen shows. In her analysis, the recurrence of the categories of guilt and shame and hostile responses against them are not an expression of defensiveness but an attempt to obtain what she calls 'colonial numbness' meaning 'the desired state of recognizing those histories as irrelevant, distant...' (Deen 2018, 20). Rejection of the 'modern guilt complex' (Pim Fortuyn quoted in Balkenhol 2014, 111) in reaction to the work of activists can be observed quite transversally across the political arena (Deen 2018, 17-20). In recent years, this opposition has become more of an interplay between political actors that refuse the association and others that insist on the importance of apologizing for the past. On one hand, Prime Minister Rutte continues to oppose an official apology for the slave trade even in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest in the Netherlands (Lammers 2021). On the other, the municipality of Amsterdam after commissioning a study on the role of the city in the trade (Brandon et al. 2020), publicly apologized. *De slavernij in Oost en West: het Amsterdam-onderzoek* (Slavery in East and West: A study of Amsterdam) edited by Brandon et al. 2020 is representative of an important step forward and thus helps to make Amsterdam's major gesture more meaningful. Yet according to Michel-Rolph Trouillot, these types of collective public apologies are entrenched within a very recent past in which they functioned as 'abortive

rituals' (Trouillot 2000). These are performative acts obscuring the causal links behind 'the structures of privilege unleashed by a history of power and domination' thereby impeding the evaluation of 'current losses induced by the reproduction of these structures' (Trouillot 2000, 183).

Berger's reasoning is in line with these concepts when he argues against 'the question of who's guilty of what' since he does not find it productive: 'you can only feel guilty for what you do in the present with that past'(2019). He reverses the criticism usually waived by right-wing pundits towards instead learning how we are 'guilty of misusing the privilege that you have because your ancestors did certain things' and therefore learning how consequently 'power is distributed in the world and in the Netherlands' in ways that strengthen inequalities and injustice (Berger 2019). He is aware of the need to 'find a balance' as an institution and is mindful of how 'the museum cannot tell people how things should be, but it can help people to understand why the world is like it is. If you help them understand how race was created then they might reconsider what they think of the present' (2019). So, on one hand, the museum's stance of avoiding guilt can be seen as a pre-emptive measure against the expected backlash and disavowal, or as a way to avoid alienating those visitors that still prefer to cling to the idea of a Dutch Golden Age. On the other, from my interviews does emerge the desire of provoking a deeper reflection on the 'structures of privilege' produced by colonial 'power and domination' and not on the 'original sin' of the enslavers. Ultimately, these 'diffuse points of intentionality' (Mason and Sayner 2019, 17) end up muddling the goal of the exhibition. This happens for example, in relation to the panel that focuses on the key issue of the 'creation of race': in the portion of the display with this title, race is described as a power structure, grounded in religion and physical anthropology, which developed into a social and cultural system that propagated racial inequality. The wall text reads: '[t]he abolition of slavery did not mean the end of this inequality, these ideas are still being circulated as grounds for new forms of racism to this day. So racism is something that was made – which means that it can also be unmade' (National Museum of World Cultures 2017). Such a conceptualization while making clear that race has no biological basis and that inequality continues in the present, still does not fundamentally question how these 'new forms of racism' operate. That is, not simply as behavior of individuals and groups, not as much as pseudoscience, but as a political idea, an active policy, and a quotidian regulatory structure. At the same time, the inclusion of objects related to anti-racism movements in a national museum like the Tropenmuseum signals a refreshing willingness to engage with the topic. But the lack of any

information on how the Dutch anti-racist movements developed and in which context they operate glosses over the very thing the panel, and the exhibition as a whole, should deconstruct: that the ‘boomerang effect’ (Césaire 2001) of colonialism lives on as the inherent violence of belonging for some and not all, and through the hidden criteria that allow citizenship to be unequally split across the former metropole.

Enclosing these issues within the cultural terrain and privileging a perspective that highlights personal relationships and feelings towards the afterlives of slavery, fails to address how this ‘common history shared by black and white’ is not evenly shared by all Dutch citizens. For some, the engagement with the memory of slavery remains theoretical and thus the exhibition provides an opportunity for creating empathy in this portion of the public (since guilt is framed as counter-productive and polarizing). For Dutch citizens of Surinamese and Antillean descent – for whom this particular memory is tied to their claim for recognition and citizenship rights – the exhibition, by highlighting their agency offers a corrective to how they are represented. Focusing on the figure of the descendant as a stand-in for ‘black’ Dutch citizens prefigures their identity as cohesive and unified by this experience. As we will see in Chapter 5, this framework cannot be applied to all groups: for instance, Marleen de Witte observes that ‘[c]ross-cutting the notion of (and struggle for) black citizenship, then, is a distinction made between (Afro-Caribbean) postcolonial belonging and (African) postmigrant (non-)belonging’ (2019, 217). This is especially the case for first generations, for whom this node ‘complicates the primacy of the dominant-whiteness versus subaltern-blackness opposition and the singularity of notions like black citizenship and “the black struggle”’ (2019, 217). Ultimately, although emphasizing the agency of descendants is a step forward from the victimhood framework, the next section will show how this category does not evade the model of memory as resource and property imposed by culturalized politics of citizenship.



Fig. 7 Detail of the section 'Freedom of Thought' featuring a portrait of Anton de Kom and books on loan from The Black Archives collection. Photographer: Vittoria Caradonna. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.



Fig. 8 Detail of the panel on anti-racist protests against Zwarte Piet. Photographer: Vittoria Caradonna. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum

The Zwarte Piet debate and everything 'it glosses over it'

When putting together the exhibition, *AoS*' curatorial team was looking for ways to steer clear of the fixed roles in the 'social drama' surrounding the commemoration of slavery in which a 'well-rehearsed set of roles' (Balkenhol 2014, 110) is split between 'white' Dutch minimizing the aftereffects of colonialism and slavery and black subjectivities reduced to victimhood or anger. Instead, Berger comments that they tried:

to create empathy - not a point of recognition because I think that goes too far - but empathy for those people that visit with their kid and say they will never come back, to help them understand that Zwarte Piet is part of a larger power structure that was created in the colonial era. And on the other hand do justice to these histories, which are often overlooked (Berger 2019)

The mention of Zwarte Piet (Black Pete) refers to how this particular element of the Dutch 'memory-heritage-identity complex' (Macdonald 2013) acts as a catalyst for current discussions on race and racism in the Netherlands. Zwarte Piet is one of the enduring blackface caricatures in Europe's folklore, which in the Netherlands originated from a popular children's book titled *Sinterklaas en Zijn Knecht* (Saint Nicholas and his servant), published in 1848, in which Piet is introduced as Saint Nicholas 'helper'. Since then, in the annual St. Nicholas celebrations that take place nationwide, Zwarte Piet is seen sporting a minstrel outfit, golden earrings, a curly wig, and a blackened face with bright red overdrawn lips. In recent years, and in response to growing criticism, many explanations have been provided for the physical appearance of the character. The most widely circulated is that the face is not painted black to mock Afro-Surinamese and Afro-Antillean citizens but because Piet gets dirty with chimney soot while helping Saint Nicholas to deliver his gifts to children (Lamers 2009, 443 in Meijer van Mensch and van Mensch 2012). The fact that when this figure was created and popularized the Netherlands was 'a global colonial power involved in slavery and the slave trade for more than 200 years' is not mentioned (Esajas 2014, 3). At the same time, protests against the use of the character are framed as stemming from contemporary 'politically correct' attitudes, thus obscuring the fact that the racist dimension of Zwarte Piet has been criticized from at least as far back as the end of the 19th century by groups of overseas nationals from Suriname and the Antilles. For instance, in 1994 an Amsterdam activist group demonstrated in favor of 'an anti-racist Sinterklaas' fest that would not feature Zwarte Piet (Lamers 2009, 441); and in later years, several other actions were organized 'against degrading racist impersonations of Black people' (2009, 442).

More recently, there have been attempts to meet these requests but they have been limited to painting the face of Piet impersonators in other colors, or more recently turning them into ‘sooty Petes’ by using make-up that replicates dirt from chimneys. Very few municipalities have taken a stance over which colors should Zwarte Piet sport, and none has withdrawn their subsidy for the public celebration, which ranges from a few hundred to tens of thousands of Euros in major cities. Whereas this financial aspect is also overlooked in the explanation of why the tradition should continue unchanged, arguments defending it have centered around the idea that Sinterklaas ‘is an innocent children’s festival, that children have no concept of race or racism, and that the celebration must be shielded from criticism in order to protect children from emotional harm’ (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016, 102). In 2011 the performance *Zwarte Piet is Racisme* by artist Quinsy Gario, and the viral video of his arrest during a protest, jumpstarted the coming together of anti-racism activists in a movement called Kick Out Zwarte Piet. Despite this new wave of anti-racism demonstrations, in 2015 the tradition was included in the national inventory for the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Balkenhol, Mepschen and Duyvendak 2016, 103). Activists, however, continued to organize yearly actions despite the climate of intimidation that some right-wing self-appointed heritage custodians created around them without active condemnation from the authority.⁴ In the exhibition, the reference to this issue is limited to the panel about ‘protest’, which features items from several recent anti-racism campaigns, including a sign from the Black Lives Matter Netherlands 2014 campaign; a photo from the Decolonize the University movement during the occupation of one of the buildings of the University of Amsterdam in 2015; and the 1873 campaign pins worn by activists to stress that the date of the abolition of slavery should be postponed of ten years since the enslaved populations had to complete a

4 Mitchell Esajas recounts what happened during a meeting of Kick Out Zwarte Piet in 2019 and condemns the silence of the Prime Minister after the attack: ‘Last Friday I was present as a co-organizer at the national congress of Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP) in a former school building in The Hague. About ten minutes after the start, we were startled by loud banging on the doors. Windows were smashed, we heard heavy fireworks and screaming men. We realized that hooligans were trying to storm inside, it was terrifying. Only afterwards did I hear what had happened outside and realized that we were lucky that they were unable to enter. Thirty to forty men, armed with heavy fireworks, clubs, and most likely more weapons - on the evening of the commemoration of the Kristallnacht - had attempted to violently disrupt the meeting with the intention of attacking KOZP sympathizers...The Prime Minister has not yet said a word about this act of terror against peaceful protesters in the political capital of the Netherlands’ (my translation Esajas 2019)

10-year apprenticeship (Willemsen and Nimako 2011). In the center of this section, there are two t-shirts from the anti-Zwarte Piet protests along with a pair of boots that belonged to the costume of comedian Erik van Muiswinkel who impersonated Piet in a popular TV show until 2016 when he decided to step down since he felt that the portrayal was hurtful for many people. Although the exhibition features only these few objects openly referring to the Zwarte Piet debate, Berger reports on an incident in which a parent visiting it with their child was enraged at the sight of a panel that featured these objects (2019). These heated reactions are one of the reasons why the curator initially wanted to avoid displaying anything related to the character: he feels that the dispute around it has become so predominant ‘that it glosses over all the other things that are behind it’ (Berger 2019). Instead, the topic that he would have preferred to foreground was the portion showing a recent case of ethnic profiling; hanging on the side of the display, printed screenshots from Twitter recall when the famous Dutch rapper Typhoon was stopped by the police because he was driving an expensive car.⁵ Presented without commentary and, due to its lateral positioning, only visible from up close, this is the most conspicuous section of the display providing an example of how racism impacts the lives of people in contemporary Dutch society. Berger believes that this combination of elements works because it enacts contrast thus making the normalization of institutional racism visible. However, in a display that is globally so dense with information and texts, the connection between the anti-Zwarte Piet protests, the backlash to it, and ‘all the things that are behind it’ might get unintentionally lost.

Gloria Wekker, among others, has explored how the character is a pivotal figure in both the aggressive denial of racism that characterizes Dutch self-representation and the always lingering threat of unassimilable difference for those who refuse to participate in the denial. She calls the ‘silent rule in the Dutch citizenship contract’ the implication that ‘[i]f you want to be one of us, you, too, have to deny that there is such a phenomenon as racism in operation’ (2016, 157). Jessica de Abreu, co-founder of the Black Archives and member of Kick Out Zwarte Piet, writes that the character symbolizes ‘what white Dutch society expects from the colonized subject; to be grateful, and to keep smiling despite oppression’ and that it ‘personifies the calmness and compliance to ease white fear that Black people will rise in opposition’ (de Abreu 2018). The hostile response to criticism thus signals that ‘freedom

5 Surinamese Dutch rapper Glenn de Randamie, known as Typhoon, has been vocal about political issues throughout his career. As of 2009 he lived without a passport for a year and half after he refused to provide his fingerprints.

of expression is a prerogative of the normalized part of the [white] Dutch citizenry instead of a right of all citizens', and this is why when Zwarte Piet is publicly debated 'the 'membership of citizens "of color" into the Dutch nation is both claimed and contested' (Jones 2018, 122). In her analysis of the phenomenon, Patricia Schor underlines how framing the issue as a debate between a reasonable majority and a hurt minority is itself a manifestation of the 'racial grammar inherited from the Empire' (Schor 2020, 3), as well as of 'the constant negotiation of the weight of the racialized colonial past in the present' (Noémi Michel in Schor 2020, 11). This grammar is comprised of specific 'textual tropes' and 'symbolic dynamics' through which 'the relationship between Zwarte Piet, racism and slavery is softened' (Schor 2020, 16). Institutional declarations of sympathy for the pain caused by the character to Afro-Dutch citizens, and especially Afro-Dutch children, are recurring as are promises that the tradition will gradually change to accommodate their sensitivities. This gesturing demonstrates 'the willingness of those in charge of Dutch folklore to accommodate the demands of those feeling *hurt* by it' (Schor 2020, 18; original emphasis). But framing the issue in these terms 'empties race of its materiality and the conditions in which it operates' (2020, 16). Through these 'non-performative' pledges (Ahmed in Schor 2020, 15), offering compassion but not solutions, the values of anti-racism are associated with those same institutions that are politically responsible for perpetuating discrimination. Not only through age-old traditions but also with, equally age-old, barriers to education, employment, housing, and healthcare.

The protest against Zwarte Piet has been met with a slew of reformist gesturing, each corresponding to a new version of the character: rainbow-colored Petes, chimney-soot Petes, grey Petes. Perhaps the time in which Pete will no longer exhibit any face paint – nor curly hair wig, hoop earrings, and exaggerated lips – is nearer than ever. But while the removal of racist imagery is a sign of progress, this progress must be measured against the fact that it is encircled in a – more refined, less constrictive – but still repressive notion of who can and cannot belong. The debate around whether or not Zwarte Piet, or the attachment to it, is synonymous with being racist hides from view precisely how 'Dutchness' itself 'is a never-fulfilled promise for racialized people' and yet 'it is the normative standard by which all are judged' (Schor and Martina, 2017). The memory of slavery has had a precise role in how dominant actors have framed the protest and claims of Afro-Surinamese and Antilleans citizens. As we have seen in Chapter 1, the culturalization of citizenship has made use of a distorted interpretation of identity politics to pit different groups of post-colonial citizens against each other in a competition

over resources hinged on comparison. Those that could prove to have suffered, or that their ancestors suffered, in bigger measure than others would be the beneficiaries of recognition and, perhaps, material redress. In this context memory has become a resource and property; a tool to ground identities and make them homogenous enough to become interlocutors for the state. But, if in the 1970s and 80s the memory of slavery had been connected to anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle, in the 1990s it became a resource for campaigning for citizenship rights. Balkenhol and Coenders observe: '[w]hile the claim to citizenship addresses structural and everyday racism, the claim to centuries-old citizenship rights also narrows the scope of antiracist struggle to a new category: that of the "descendants of the enslaved"' (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 8).

The authors argue that this shift in how the commemoration of slavery is operationalized is currently taking the shape of 'a metahistorical search for black radical traditions of thought' (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 9). As we will see in Chapter 5 on the work of the Black Archives, this stems from the feeling of not having access to this recent past. For now, it is important to notice that, at the time in which *AoS* opened, it made a point of avoiding the category of victimhood and, instead, telling the story of complex characters while also centering the voices of the descendants as resilient and creative individuals. This shift, however, fails to address what is the price of being included in the production of slavery as a shared heritage - 'a common history shared by black and white - a past that continues to shape and influence Dutch society today' (National Museum of World Cultures 2017a). As we have seen in Chapter 1, the memory of past violence is offered to any marginalized group as property; an endowment that needs to be curated, preserved, and guarded against appropriation because its value lies in what it can be exchanged for. The largescale trade-off is to enclose any type of struggle within discursive rules that establish preemptively what can be said and what can be gained; relevance for visibility, respectability through recognition, the love of the nation in exchange for another enemy to fear. This way what is supposed to be the beginning - intervening in the nation's heritage - becomes the ultimate goal. The uneven conditions in which this particular past and its afterlife are 'shared by black and white' remain unexplored in the exhibition. But the hopeful outcome has been put in place by the museum for the public as a result of the institution's commitment to reflecting on its implication. Yet what does recognizing implication mean in this case?

Considering his experience consulting for the exhibition, Mitchell Esajas from the Black Archives observes that the process would have resulted

in more of a real exchange if the team that worked on the exhibition had also visited the Archives. In his view, this would have prevented how the narrative of the exhibit, ‘downplays or omits the role of those who were responsible for instituting the systems and structures of slavery’(Esajas 2018). He also highlights the problem of having an institution located in Amsterdam not ‘pay[ing] more attention to the role of the city, as Amsterdam was an owner of the colony of Suriname’ (Esajas 2018). This intervention is published in a text called *CO-LAB Zine*, produced by RCMC and containing critical reflections on how collaboration can be done in a museum context. So while naturally, the exhibition has limitations, these limitations are explained and accounted for in the zine by the curators, and academic experts as well as by Zeefuik, Warsame, and Phoenix from Decolonize the Museum and Esajas from the Black Archives. This is done in order to bring ‘diverse, even dissonant voices together as we learn, together, how to develop more inclusive practices’(Ouédraogo and Modest, 2018). But what also happens, through the exhibition and the collaborations and public programming connected to it, is that the museum manages to position itself within the public debate on colonialism and its memorialization in a specific way. The implicated institution produces a new timeline in which the latest modalities through which outsider experts are included in the exhibition overwrite a very recent past in which activist knowledge would have been discounted or regarded as too radical. And a present in which the push towards inclusiveness and to pursue a decolonial approach is dependent on the work and commitment of individual members of staff. This ambivalence is reflected in the words of then-director Schoonderwoerd, who remarks how ‘we [the museum] don’t take an activist position we take a radically nuanced position’ (Schoonderwoerd 2019). In relation both to NMWC’s repatriation policy and to the broader topic of how to achieve a type of ‘multivocality’, he stresses the importance of trying to not alienate any portion of the public – including those that might feel that Zwarte Piet is ‘not racism’:

We work with activists...but now we are questioning whether this focus on voices that have been out of the narrative for so long might feel for others that they are no longer included. In relation to migration, identity, Zwarte Piet... what should we do we other voices that say ‘don’t exaggerate’ or ‘that’s not racism’. How do we balance this multivocality? (Schoonderwoerd 2019)

It is indeed a difficult balancing act through which the museum presents itself as both a safe space for all kinds of publics, while simultaneously providing a platform for uncomfortable conversations. The limits to this project, implicating the institution but welcoming all voices, are echoed also

in the idea that *AoS* is bound to fail, which emerges in my conversation with Lelijveld and Kofi. As the most visible of the four museums that compose the National Museum of World Cultures, the Tropenmuseum straddles several intersecting public spheres; a transnational one in which the museum is in conversation with other institutions as heritage producers; and a local one in which the institution speaks to audiences that differently relate to the nation, the city, and the neighborhood. Grappling with its implication in colonial history fulfills the expectation placed on the museum as a leading actor within this multi-scalar stage. The last section will examine whether this commitment translates also into another type of self-reflexivity, which addresses the ‘coloniality within’ through which the institution produces and replicates structural inequality.

Doing decoloniality in the ‘happy talk’ of diversity

During a workshop titled *(De)coloniality as Unfinished Story* organized by RCMC in February 2019, Sumaya Kassim inaugurated the session by asking whether museums can or should be the right place for conversations about the meaning of decoloniality. She had first voiced this concern in her widely shared essay *The Museum will not be Decolonised*, which documented her experience working as co-curator with the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Her team, composed of women of color with different heritages, was put in the difficult position of having to educate the institution on how being invited as co-curators came at the price of having their ‘decolonial thoughts’ exploited. Meanwhile, ‘the human cost, the emotional labor, are seen as worthy sacrifices in the name of an exhibition which can be celebrated as a successful attempt by the museum at “inclusion” and “decolonizing”...’ (Kassim 2017). Decoloniality as ‘the production of counter-discourses, counter-knowledges, counter-creative acts, and counter-practices that seek to dismantle coloniality and to open up multiple other forms of being in the world’ (Maldonado-Torres 2016) is continuous work. Can ‘it’ be done in institutions such as museums, when their history is so rooted in colonial extraction? This is a vital question to explore within heritage scholarship and practice, especially since the answer coming from practitioners like Kassim seems to be veering toward a skeptical ‘no’. One element that emerged in my conversation with Robin Lelijveld is how today writing subsidy proposals ‘without mentioning community engagement, or slavery, or colonialism’ is almost impossible (Lelijveld 2019). Multiple factors have contributed to this recent development. On one hand, as we have seen, the groundwork of activists has been essential in raising the profile of these issues; on the other, as is often the case in the cultural sector,

their efforts have been co-opted by cultural policy and funding bodies and filtered through their language. The post-merger museum needs to straddle this aggregate of practical concerns; how to secure funding, political stances, and how to advance a decolonial approach. Doing this type of work means facing many difficulties arising from outside but also from inside the museum. Curators must learn to navigate implicit boundaries within the institution and often find themselves picking up work started by others. Layers upon layers of curatorial choices and policy strategies over which one has little control - 'you have inherited other's people work', as Lelijveld puts it (personal interview 2019). An example of this is the fact Richard Kofi will not be part of the team that will produce the 2022 exhibition, even though his work on *AoS* will serve as the basis for it. While both Kofi himself and Lelijveld stress that the 2022 refurbishment is in more than capable hands, this makes clear how each finished product does not depend on an abstract and solid structure, but instead on the individuals working to put together each exhibition. Inevitably, when one moves on (or is replaced) 'you lose something', Lelijveld remarks (2019).

What also emerged during my interviews is that the push towards change concentrates around one person - RCMC's director Wayne Modest who, since 2021, has been appointed also Content Director of the NMWC. Several interviewees indicate him as both the engine behind the museum's more radical approaches and a shield, protecting junior members of staff from the rigidity of the institution as well as 'making sure that everybody gets paid' when external collaborators are called to engage with the museum (Kofi 2019). Although Modest is perhaps the most visible (and, due to its seniority, the safest to single out), there are many more people working behind the scenes. Besides, he looks at the recent 'decolonial' turn in museums critically - '[w]e are competing as to who is going to be the person who uses the word "colonial" the most in a sentence. And who can be the best "decolonizer"' (Modest 2020, 67). In the recent publication *Across Anthropology*, he tells Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius:

Now every museum doing the decolonial in many ways works with the same groups of activists, divesting the responsibility for decolonization to them (activists or artists). Usually, they don't really go back and ask, 'What does it mean for my museum to start engaging with the question of the decolonial?'

They just simply think that inviting this person in or that one – this activist in, the same one another museum invited in – will solve the problem.

That is one of the things that we should be cautious about, if we are to take this moment seriously. It requires deeper work to think through how your

specific museum, in your country, articulates with specific forms of colonial afterlives – even if some of the issues we deal with are larger scale structures and discourses (Modest 2020, 69)

These observations are particularly interesting because they come from someone that occupies a managerial position in the museum. They can be read in parallel to Simone Zeefuik's intervention during an online talk at Het Nieuw Instituut in Rotterdam, another major Dutch cultural organization. She observes that in her experience:

what makes these institutions walk a different path is that they realize what it would happen if we completely lost interest in them: I think that a lot of these institutions exist by the grace of having still our attention.

. . . So what would happen if more and more people started gravitating toward these other organizations?

. . . people have been demanding change from institutions for such a long time and I refuse to believe that, and now I'm personifying them, an institution will wake one day and say 'hey, today we're going to do the right thing because now we get it'. I'm not romantic enough to believe that, I believe what is a stake is that these people need to believe: 'we have to do it' (*Monuments and the Reification of Anti-Black Violence* 2020).

Modest and Zeefuik's thoughts delineate the current climate in which museums and cultural organizations operate. The demand to decolonize the institution has been fully absorbed but not in the sense the activists had perhaps hoped for. At the same time, 'doing the decolonial' has lost some of its powerful epistemological weight in favor of modalities of temporary inclusion. Invitations to collaborate, as Kassim notes, are not conducive to change and rather put external collaborators at risk. Hardly any institution seems to be able, or willing, to create the conditions for long-term and sustainable diversity within their staff just as none avoid models of flexible employment, which increase the feeling of precariousness and replaceability of employees. In fact, although the decision to reshuffle the allocation of tasks or people across departments is framed as strategic savviness, in actuality it weakens the position of junior members of staff and external collaborators, who are tasked with the impossible job of having to change the institution from within in the very limited timeline offered by temporary contracts and collaborations, and without guarantees of long-term and stable income. So, if we acknowledge that the push towards a decolonial approach depends on the commitment to it of individual workers, what happens when they leave? And how sustainable is this model?

The commemoration of colonialism and slavery in institutional settings cannot, thus, be separated by a precise history of discounting the ‘human cost’ of such progress. For instance, the role of the activists who are now routinely invited to lend their voice, and therefore credibility, to the institution would be, until not too long ago, omitted from the museum’s narrative. In the Dutch (and European) context projects around the memory of colonialism can be led by individuals that seek to think through decoloniality as part of their curatorial practice; but at the institutional level, such projects also respond to the goal of attracting a more diverse audience in accordance with the aims of national and international cultural policy – and the funding secured through adherence to these objectives. As a result, the ‘happy talk’ of diversity (Ahmed 2012), as in the flourishing of examples of ‘good practice’ in reports and policy documents, is also making its way within Dutch institutions as ‘a way of telling a happy story of the institution that is at once a story of the institution as happy’ (2012, 10). This way, any achievement in terms of diversity at the level of programming, audiences, and staff is celebrated and advertised as proof that institutions are moving in the right direction – without questioning what exactly has changed, for whom, and for how long it will last. This non-performativity, through which the act of declaring ‘a bad practice’ is already considered ‘a good practice’ (Ahmed 2004, 16), is mirrored both in the responses in the *Zwarte Piet* ‘debate’ and in the lack of diversity. In both cases, it effectively prevents the conditions that would actually effect change.

The need for a diverse workforce, which would mirror more faithfully the actual composition of Dutch society, officially entered the discourse of cultural policy in 2011 with the Cultural Diversity Code, recently renamed Diversity and Inclusion Code. This document establishes the guidelines for embedding diversity in organizations that depend on public funding. Institutions are therefore compelled to present in their annual reports how they are implementing the code. In the 2018 report of the National Museum of World Cultures, diversity is framed as an asset for future-proofing and audience development; a diverse programming is necessary to attract those audiences that have not quite felt at home in the museum so far, so ‘they will gradually become more open to programming that is not specifically aimed at them’ (National Museum of World Cultures 2019, 12 my translation). Another section, focusing on diversity within the staff, reports the preliminary findings of a survey that compares data from the National Bureau of Statistics to prove that at least ‘one-third of the employees in our museum have a non-Dutch background and that this considerable diversity is also spread evenly over the job levels’ (2019, 12). What the report neglects to mention is that while these

numbers are relatively high when compared to the national average of 14%, two of these museums, namely the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam and the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam, are situated in two cities where over 50% of inhabitants have a ‘migration background’ (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2019).⁶ The issue, however, is not with numbers and percentages although they might need to be scaled back; nor is limited to language, though the usage in the report of definitions like ‘non-Western migration background’, with their specific genealogy as a marker of exclusion, are at odds with the museum’s endeavor of ‘consciously paying attention to language use’ (National Museum of World Cultures 2020, 13). But even if the methods and expressions which assess and embed diversity within Dutch institutions will be further developed and refined in the coming years, the problem is at the root. Sara Ahmed has extensively analyzed the ‘non-performativity’ of institutional commitment to diversity which operates according to a fiction in which the announcement that things will change is taken as evidence that things are indeed changing. Ahmed observes also how in those cases when instead an actual shift happens:

it remains dependent on the ongoing work of committed individuals even when diversity and equity have been embedded within the strategic missions and operational procedures of the organisation. This is why the work of diversity seems never ending (Ahmed 2012, 135)

These individuals, both internal staff and external collaborators, are tasked with advancing the diversity agenda while often being the few, or only, person sitting at the table actually embodying difference. In *This Work Isn't for Us*, Jemma Desai examines how being included or invited in the institution comes with a ‘human and social cost’, which is erased through a narrative of progress and change and of ‘we are all in this together’ (Desai 2020). The author notes that the ‘conciliatory language’ employed in diversity policies, with its focus on words such as ‘prejudice’ and ‘unconscious biases’, instead of racism and structural inequality, bulldozes the experiences of those employees that are ‘embodied in difference’ (Desai 2020).⁷ When these policies are turned into

6 And yet the National Museum of World Cultures is the Netherlands’ most diverse museum in terms of staff. A report from the NRC newspaper published in June 2020 caused ripples in the sector since it revealed that across all major art museums the number of employees of non-Western background in managerial positions is a six out of two hundred and thirty one (ter Berg 2020)

7 The 2019 report states that employees of the museums have started to receive training on ‘unconscious bias’ and on how to give and receive feedback ‘because it helps develop a culture

practice they do not only disregard how it will feel to enter a sector that is still predominantly white, but they can effectively result in aiding the process of ‘incorporation’ by which an institution ‘responds to opposition, not by attempting to stamp it out, but by allowing it to exist within the places it assigns, by slowly allowing it to be recognized, but only within the terms of a process which deprives it of any real effective oppositional force’ (Hall 2016, 50 in Desai 2020).⁸ When asked about the involvement of The Black Archives with the *AoS* exhibition, two of the founders commented:

Esajas: I do think they have made some progress in a sense they don’t have the colonial, ethnological type of exhibition anymore. But does it mean that [the museum] is decolonized now? I don’t think so. So yes, it’s a dynamic and a challenge we are faced with often, not just with the Tropenmuseum, but with all these white institutions who say that they want to be more diverse, include different perspectives or decolonize or whatever . . .

. . . I will always question what does it really mean [to decolonize] to me at least one element of it is the redistribution of resources. And that’s always when it gets...

De Abreu: tricky

Esajas: You know it’s nice to organize exhibitions and they will stay there for a few months, and they will hire a few people for a few months, but what happens after the exhibition? (de Abreu and Esajas 2019)

The comments coming from individuals inside and outside of the museum reveal a sense of guardedness stemming from the awareness that the ‘coloniality within’ of the institution cannot be challenged through diversity work, through the language of policy, and the advertisement of ‘good practices’. Pushing for change, in this fraught context, implies having to unpack what change means in a sector with an uncanny ability to turn struggles into metaphors, and material redistribution of resources and access into symbolic investments. Perhaps then, a museum that wants to use decoloniality as something more than a buzzword should recognize not only their umbilical relationship with the colonial, and the rationality that has created race, but also their just as close relationship with neoliberal technologies of managing diversity that

in which sensitive topics can be better addressed’ (National Museum of World Cultures 2020, 13)

8 The cultural workers’ testimonies that Desai has collected show how diversity policies that result in early career hiring schemes often establish a ‘dynamic of luck’, in which ‘the pressure and responsibility of being given the “golden ticket” into an otherwise inaccessible institution ‘creates a burden’ and ‘an implicit contract emerges; “we should be grateful”’ (Desai 2020, Ch. 2). She underlines that ‘this inequitable relating... intersects with histories of colonial dominance, extractive labor practice and patterns of racism’ (Desai 2020, Ch. 2).

unload the responsibility to create change on the individuals most ‘affected’ by the structural lack of it.

Conclusion

During her workshop, Sumaya Kassim powerfully stated that ‘your relationship with the museum mirrors the relationship that you have with the State’ (Kassim 2019). Inside and outside museums, as staff, visitors, or just passers-by – for Dutch citizens that do not conform to the white, middle-class, hetero (or homo)-normative paradigm, this relationship was seldom one of trust. And after many years in the museum sector, Richard Kofi does not hesitate to express his weariness: ‘they are just museums’ he says, meaning that despite how important AoS feels, limitations on how far and deep an exhibition can go are essentially a built-in feature (personal interview 2019). Kofi is hinting at something both more subtle and more insidious than structural restrictions within the institution, or its lingering appetite for tokenism. He continues by saying that ‘all the things happening outside of the museum push me back in’ (Kofi 2019). As a Dutch person of Ghanaian descent, he feels the responsibility to at least try to use the powerful technologies of the museum to address what he sees happening in the society around him, where racism goes unnamed and yet still cuts deep. His remaining doubts perhaps come from the awareness that while on the surface commemorating slavery signals progress, it will remain a non-performative until responsibility remains confined to history and heritage – and until material redress is postponed through calls for empathy and collective atonement.

The museum’s willingness to engage with the topic of colonialism and slavery and decolonization/decoloniality is in itself a victory – and not a small one, since the subject is largely still absent in the Dutch school curricula (see for example Weiner 2014). Further, the fact that the exhibition focuses on a critical perspective on the heritage of slavery, emphasizing the idea of contemporariness instead of locking colonialism in the past, shows considerable tenacity from the curatorial team. Ultimately, however, the way in which the concept of ‘afterlife’ has been deployed in the exhibition does not offer enough room to discuss how does it feel to occupy a space, within the city, the nation, and Europe, that had to be carved out of denial and aphasia. One final observation to be made concerns the fact that these projects are hard to disentangle from European cultural policy and funding streams, which actively support and have produced the wave of ‘intellectual and political labor on the colonial past’ in recent years (Stoler 2016). Ann

Laura Stoler asks whether this labor serves the purpose, not of historical reckoning, but as ‘an act of closure and of completion, as a new benchmark of virtue’, conferring ‘a new sense of moral and national conscience – precisely when the borders of Europe and who belongs in it are contested and racism across Europe is at once denied and celebrated...’ (Stoler 2016, 155–56). As we have seen in Chapter 3 this is indeed a concern when we examine projects like the Tropenmuseum’s exhibition *Aleppo* and the boat tours of *Rederij Lampedusa*. As Stoler does, we must question the synchronicity in how contemporary expressions of the memory of colonialism and slavery as well as first-hand accounts of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ have been increasingly heritagized starting from the mid-2010s. The next chapter will continue the exploration of how the memory of colonialism is being mobilized by examining Amsterdam’s The Black Archives: a cultural organization located in the same neighborhood of the Tropenmuseum that is establishing itself as an alternative center of knowledge production on the legacies of colonialism and anti-racism activism in the Netherlands.

CHAPTER 5

**Connecting the present and
past of activism in The Black
Archives**

Introduction

Mitchell Esajas: Black Lives All: Matter!
Black Female Lives All: Matter!
Black Queer Lives All: Matter!
Black Undocumented Lives All: Matter!
Black Muslim Lives All: Matter!
All Black Lives All: Matter!

(Mitchell Esajas #BlackLivesMatterNL Amsterdam (Improvised) Speech 2020 @mitch_positivity)

When on June 1st, 2020, Mitchell Esajas took the floor on Dam square, in front of approximately fourteen thousand people, he opened his address with this chant. He then admitted to not having prepared a full speech since the demonstration had been organized only a day prior. But he still wanted to voice his reflections upon the death of US citizen George Floyd, killed by police officer Derek Chauvin a few days before, on May 25th in Minneapolis. He wanted to express solidarity with the ongoing Black Lives Matter protests in North America but also wanted to point out that institutional racism is a problem in the Netherlands as well. He proceeded to lead the crowd in another chant quoting the words of Assata Shakur, a former member of the Black Panther and the Black Liberation Army. In his hand he had Shakur's autobiography, a book that he underlined is part of the collection of The Black Archives, the place where he works. After, he remembered Mitchel Winters and Mitch Henriquez who died at the hand of the Dutch police in 2016 and 2015 respectively.¹ Esajas also paid tribute to Perez Jong Loy who

1 Mitch Henriquez, an Aruban citizen vacationing in the Netherlands, was killed by Dutch police at a music festival in the Hague on 27 June 2015. He was restrained by five police officers and was choked to death. The official narrative that Henriquez had died at the hospital was disputed by videos taken by bystanders. The killing led to four days of rioting in the Hague, which resulted in hundreds of arrests and a ban on public assembly ("Killing of Mitch Henriquez" 2022). Mitchel Winters died on May 30, 2016 in Schiedam: he called the police from Beatrix Park and reported an armed robbery in which he gave his own description. The police officers that responded found Winters on location and warned to shoot if he didn't show his hands. The officer then fired seven bullets at Mitchel, provoking his death. Other victims of police violence were remembered during the demonstration like Rishi Chandrikasing, a 17 year old Dutch citizen, who was shot dead on November 23, 2012 by a police officer arrived on the scene at the Hollands Spoor railway station, after receiving a call stating that there was someone who was making threats with a firearm. The police waited for one minute before attempting to resuscitate him and he was then rushed to hospital where he died. He was not carrying a firearm and had only keys and a mobile phone in his pockets. The police took eight hours to contact Chandrikasing's family, even though his mother's telephone number was on his keychain ("Killing of Rishi Chandrikasing" 2022). On March 14 2020, Tomy Holten, a Dutch citizen of Haitian descent, died in police custody after being arrested in a supermarket in the town of Zwolle. His death was ruled as an overdose, but footage from the arrest shows police officers violently tackling Holten and pressing him on the floor.

had passed away in 2019, a beloved Afro-Surinamese activist and community organizer behind several campaigns around the memory of slavery – like the one highlighting 1873 as the real year in which slavery ended in the Dutch West Indies. In his semi-improvised speech, memory is the thread connecting past and present violence: a *long durée* that enjoins the racist world order created through colonialism and the enslavement of people, to current manifestations of police brutality and structural inequality, to anti-blackness intrinsic to migration policies at EU and national level (fieldnotes 2020). In a way, his speech effectively condenses the phenomenon I have sketched out throughout this thesis. Memory in Esajas’ words has also multiple functions: it works as embodied testimony of history, it is a political act in the case of the remembrance of victims of state violence, and is a mean to offer a tribute to a previous generation of activists, who have also campaigned for recognition and rights through memory work. This final chapter focuses on The Black Archives (henceforth TBA) to continue to explore the thread connecting memory to present manifestations of unequal, racialized, and precarized versions of citizenship. As we have seen, TBA is a cultural organization located in the same neighborhood as the Tropenmuseum that is establishing itself as an alternative center of knowledge production on the legacies of colonialism and anti-racism activism in the Netherlands. This chapter reads as a coda to the dissertation: it follows my attempts to connect the different threads running through it to a specific ‘here and now’. My analysis is derived from fieldwork between 2019 and 2020 that, because of the pandemic, had to shift from direct observation during exhibitions and tours, and interviews with key informants to utilizing and examining online sources. The chapter is divided into two parts: the first part describes how The Black Archives was founded and examines its positioning within international discourses on the colonial past and slavery and how the organization attempts to historicize itself in a longer tradition of anti-racism activism in the Netherlands. As the function of memory evolves to fulfill the needs of diasporas and the nation, what is the role played by TBA in producing and circulating notions of belonging, black subjectivity, and citizenship? The second part looks at the temporary project The Black Archives Bijlmer, which run between 2020 and 2021, in Amsterdam South East: a location particularly important in the postcolonial history of the country and where different configurations of blackness and belonging intersect. Connecting today’s struggles with those of celebrated black radicals and black Dutch activists appears to be fulfilling the need to exit

the constrictive categories that define our ‘historical present’ (Berlant 2011). At the same time, archiving the current movement seems important to avoid that other parties appropriating its narrative. But what can memorializing activism ‘as it happens’ achieve? And which politics does this specific type of producing cultural memory serve?

‘A space to feel safe . . . not only in our bodies but in our thoughts’

Among all the newly opened restaurants and cafes, hairdressers, and clothes shops that form now the backdrop of the Indische Buurt in Amsterdam East some places appear as they could speak of a different history. Less than a kilometer away from the Tropenmuseum, the Vereniging Ons Suriname (V.O.S., Association Our Suriname) has since 1973 found its permanent home in a former school building. The association, established in 1919, is one of the oldest Surinamese organizations in the Netherlands and throughout the decades has provided a meeting place for the Surinamese and Caribbean diaspora. What started as a platform to promote cultural exchange between the colony and the motherland, became in the 1950s a center for political activism. In particular, after the Surinamese students’ organization *Wie Egie Sanie* (our own things) joined the board, the association moved decidedly in the direction of Surinamese nationalism and socialist internationalism. And after Suriname’s independence in 1975, V.O.S. campaigned for the welfare of the thousands that left the country. Only in the 1990s, the association started focusing again primarily on Surinamese cultural heritage, arts, literature, film, and music in order to bring together older and second generations, who identify as Surinamese-Dutch but wanted to maintain a link to the country of origin of their parents and relatives. In 2016, a section of the building that V.O.S. has owned since 1994 has been made available for a new organization in Amsterdam’s busy cultural landscape called The Black Archives.

In the words of two of its founders, Jessica de Abreu and Mitchell Esajas, TBA operates as an “‘alternative archive” which encapsulates counternarratives to the dominant Eurocentric narrative (Esajas and Abreu 2019). It originated from the work they started through the New Urban Collective (NUC): a network of students and young professionals with ethnic minority backgrounds that aims to support young people by bridging the gap between local communities, grassroots organizations institutions, and local government. De Abreu and Esajas started this platform to combat the sense of isolation they had been experiencing during their studies since ‘[h]igher education can feel inaccessible for people of color, especially black people in the Netherlands’, with NUC they were looking to create ‘a space to feel safe

at the university, not only in our bodies but also in our thoughts’(de Abreu in Pitts 2019). The decision to expand the work of the network by also focusing on the history and heritage of different black diasporic communities in the Netherlands grew organically from this need. The first large acquisition of books consisted of a donation from Thiemo and Miguel Heilbron, the sons of the Surinamese sociologist Waldo Heilbron, who had passed away in 2009. To honor the legacy of their father, who had been committed to studying the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, they were looking for ways to make the collection available to the public so they donated a part of it to NUC. Together with Esajas and de Abreu, they opened the New Urban Café in Amsterdam North as a space where to hold events and where the books could be freely accessed. Soon after, however, due to the area’s rapidly increasing rents, they had to start looking for another suitable location. NUC was offered a space in the building of Vereniging Ons Suriname in exchange for taking the reins in managing the association’s extensive collection of books, documents, and artifacts about the history of the Surinamese community in the Netherlands: The Black Archives was born. Shortly after moving into the new space, they found several boxes containing books and objects collected by Hermina and Otto Huiswoud, two Dutch-speaking communist militants from the Caribbeans. The Huiswouds lived in Amsterdam in the latest stage of a life spent fighting against imperialism, and would then become the protagonists of TBA’s 2017 first exhibition titled *Zwart & Revolutionair* (Black and Revolutionary), which aimed to retell the story of these semi-forgotten figures by centering their position as descendants of the enslaved who then became ‘revolutionaries’.

Up until the forced break caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Archives’ programming has revolved around exhibitions and monthly tours of the collection along with events catering to the needs of a range of audiences. From hosting local politicians during the electoral period to networking events aimed at young people to organizing activities and workshops related to particular themes and occasions like the annual Keti Koti festival. In September 2019, I attended one of their Saturday tours in English together with a small group of international participants, and, shortly afterward, I joined a workshop organized for students of the University of Amsterdam that followed a structure similar to the tours. Both times the group was greeted at the entrance by Mitchell Esajas and then led to the upper floor where the public-facing portion of TBA’s archive is located. Among the rows of bookstands, a small seating space has been created: there Esajas began his presentation, standing between two small tables where some of

the most interesting items of the collection are on display. He explained how the histories of slavery and colonialism have been largely absent by Dutch public discourse and school education. Then, he directed the group's attention to the portion of the room dedicated to a collection of books, objects, and memorabilia portraying racial caricatures: from children's books and toys to coffee tins, to advertising posters, to playing cards. Esajas showed some of these artifacts to explain how ingrained racial stereotypes are in Dutch culture but also in the cultural archive of other former colonial powers like Britain – as the popular black face character of the Golliwog, of which TBA owns a puppet and a book, demonstrates. Despite even showing a pair of shackles that were used to constrain enslaved people, slavery was discussed not so much in terms of trauma or pain but as part of wider imperial and capitalist formations. Esajas' talk carried on moving between global contexts and local histories: by showing and discussing objects and books that were part of private collections assembled by intellectuals belonging to the Surinamese and Caribbean diasporas, he sketched a captivating portrait of how private mode of remembering intersect with the production of public knowledge on the afterlives of slavery and colonialism, which in turn provide a point of reference for the heritage Netherlands' Afro-Dutch communities.

Already from its name, TBA positions itself within a particular constellation of identity and meaning. However, it is important to point out that the notions of black and blackness do not refer to a homogenous group, nor are adopted and supported by all people of color living in the Netherlands. In her analysis of heritage-making practices of young Afro-Dutch people of Caribbean and Ghanaian descent, Marleen de Witte observes that '[c]ross-cutting the notion of (and struggle for) black citizenship' there is 'a distinction made between (Afro-Caribbean) postcolonial belonging and (African) postmigrant (non)belonging' (de Witte 2019, 617). The oldest and largest group of Dutch citizens of African descent stems from a 'double diaspora' that consisted, first, of the displacement of enslaved people from Africa to the Caribbean during Dutch colonial rule; later, different waves of migration from Suriname and the Antillean islands brought back these overseas national to the 'motherland' (de Witte 2019). Migration from sub-Saharan African regions instead started much more recently, in the 1980s: not all members of these communities have managed to access the naturalization process and some also do not possess official residency papers. The connection to an African heritage and notions of blackness has different meanings than for Surinamese and Antillean-Dutch versus groups with 'living connections to concrete places in Africa' (de Witte 2019, 614) – such as the Ghanaian

Dutch for example. This nexus ‘complicates the primacy of the dominant-whiteness versus subaltern-blackness opposition and the singularity of notions like black citizenship and “the black struggle”’(de Witte 2019, 617). In addition, several intellectuals have expressed their concern about adopting the discourse on blackness derived from US-based scholarship and activism: Gloria Wekker invites Dutch researchers to take into account ‘the differential geopolitical, national, and academic spaces that we inhabit within the Black diaspora’ (Wekker, 2009, 280). Similarly, Francio Guadeloupe challenges how certain US scholars ascribe being black as a ‘condition’ befalling only ‘brown-skinned sub-Saharans’ and their progenies (Guadeloupe 2022). Instead, the author proposes a manifold concept of ‘Blackness’: which can be used to ‘designate those who are being treated as waste regardless of their phenotype or ethnicity’; or, as ‘urban Blackness’ to describe an ‘emerging commercial identity signifying style, comfort, and success for those who can afford it’ (Guadeloupe 2022, 129). What is important to highlight for now is that it is mostly the current generations of activists that mobilize being *black* in relation to identity and political consciousness, but as Balkenhol and Coenders point out the contours of the ‘meaning of blackness’ continue to be ‘a site of political struggle amongst antiracists’(2020, 2). Also, the hyphenated identity of ‘Afro-Dutch’ is not uncontested: while its usage is increasing, especially among Afro-Surinamese citizens, it does not refer to a cohesive group. In the case of TBA using the denomination ‘black’ (and not the Dutch word *Zwart*) for the organization’s name and throughout a significant part of communication through the organization’s social media channels reveals the intention of connecting the Archives to a movement and genealogy that is internationalist in its intentions. It also seemingly ties in with Paul Gilroy’s conceptualization of the ‘black Atlantic’ which departs from essentialized notions of blacks as a group in opposition to whites, to instead produce an idea of blackness as enjoining different cross-Atlantic diasporas not constrained by national boundaries (Gilroy 1993).

Balkenhol and Coenders argue that engaging with the black radical tradition and the mobilization of the memory of slavery ‘have become “diasporic resources”’, which ‘are constantly reassembled and newly articulated’ (2020, 4). The authors also posit that the success of this strategy in recent years cannot be solely attributed to the influence of US-based scholars and activists in the Netherlands, but should be looked at instead as ‘a metahistory in which earlier uses of the past are re-interpreted and re-articulated for contemporary political purposes’ (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 10). Differently from their predecessors in the 1990s and early 2000s, the current generation of activists

– with whom TBA aligns in terms of objectives – are not solely concerned with making historical truths emerge; they are also engaging with “non-canonical intellectual traditions in the Netherlands and elsewhere capable of doing justice to the colonial past and slavery” (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 3). Building on the work of Hayden White, the authors employ the term ‘metahistory’ to describe how Afro-Dutch organizers attempt to foreground the racial-colonial dimension of structural inequalities ranging from the lack of opportunities in education, employment, and housing to police violence; but also behind the permanence of Zwarte Piet in blackface and Eurocentric curricula in schools and modes of representation in museums. By linking with international movements like Black Lives Matter the challenge then becomes ‘translating globally circulating discourses to local contexts, searching for ways to connect with, but also find their own positions within, these international arenas’ (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 2).). This objective runs parallel to also locate TBA along/within this Dutch anti-racist activism but also in opposition and/or watchful collaboration with bigger institutions that are interested in maintaining their relevancy through speaking on societal shifts. Following these insights, the next section will look closely at how TBA negotiates its position across institutional collaboration and activism on the ground; and at how they attempt to make the recent past of anti-racism activism known while also positioning the organization itself as an integral part of it.

Meta-historicizing the Archives

Since the inception of its public-facing activities, TBA grew its profile by alternating more grassroots activities with institutional collaborations. The first round of public-facing events inaugurated by *Zwart & Revolutionair* attracted both visitors and media attention and less than a year after their inauguration, TBA partnered with several other organizations for a special event titled *Moving Together: Activism, Art and Education – A Week with Angela Davis*. The week-long program was initiated by SNDO - School for New Dance Development in the context of the artist in residence program of the Amsterdam University of the Arts together with the Research Center for Material Culture. Davis visited the Archives and, during her keynote at the Vrije University, urged attendees to visit ‘this important place’. The participation of TBA in a project supported by several of the Netherlands’ most prominent institutional actors contributed to raising the profile of the newly founded organization, which in the same year also won the *Stimuleringspreis*

(stimulus prize) in the annual competition held by the *Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst* (AFK, the city's art foundation). The decision to award the prize to the Archives emphasized that the strength of the newly launched organization lies in its impossibility to define it with a single function: TBA operates as an 'art institution, a historical archive, a meeting place for activists or a debate center' and it is this winning mix that, according to the jurors, deserves to reach a wider audience 'hungry for a different perspective' (Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst 2020). Since then, the AFK has continued supporting the Archives awarding NUC with a multi-year subsidy for the period 2021-2024 of € 200.000 per year. This might seem a high sum (the total budget of the plan is € 41.536.070 for four years and spread among 126 cultural organizations), but the AFK recognizes that compared to TBA's sustained range and volume of activities the amount is justified and even conservative in relation to the planned expansion of personnel. During the first four years of activity, TBA has been operating with a very lean structure consisting of Mitchell Esajas in charge of general management, Jessica de Abreu for research and collection management, Camille Parker for production, and Shivani Jagroep as business leader – along with many volunteers, freelancers, and interns. The load of the work for TBA's intensive programming has largely fallen on this core staff and therefore the logistical support provided by institutional partners for bigger events seems to be indispensable. In their application for the fund, the Archives envisioned a yearly multidisciplinary program around a changing theme: in 2021, *Facing Blackness* about the hidden histories of black emancipation movements and the changing representations of people of African descent; in 2022, with *Gentrification* the program explores the notion of belonging in a changing city like Amsterdam where a booming housing market is rapidly causing the displacement of communities from the neighborhoods where they historically dwelled; in 2023, the topic will be *Black Queer Perspectives* and the history, empowerment, and heritage of black LGBTQI+ communities; in 2024, *Dynamics of the Diaspora* will center on the resourcefulness and diversity of various black diaspora communities.

If for AFK the fact that the Archives can work as a 'meeting place for activists' is part of the reason that makes this organization unique, the meaning commonly assigned to this label within mainstream Dutch media, politicians, and academic circles, is not always positive: it is often used as a synonym for too polarizing, too radical. On their part, de Abreu and Esajas are mindful of the risks intrinsic to establishing relationships with institutional actors. During an online talk hosted by Het Nieuw Instituut and titled *Monuments and the*

Reification of Anti-Black Violence in the fall of 2020, de Abreu explained in these terms how she conceptualizes the work done through the Archives:

I basically accepted a couple of years ago that fighting institutions, because that's part of activism. Institutions that are reproducing Eurocentric narratives, which are very toxic to our society because they deliver a lot of unequal power relationships... that's part of activism

But another part that I and many people are doing is to build our own spaces where we can put ourselves central. The thing that I have accepted about institutions is that yes, there will be changes, and thanks to people like Simone [Zeefuik], Quinsy [Gario] and so many activists things are changing... (*Monuments and the Reification of Anti-Black Violence* 2020)

De Abreu reiterates then that despite these achievements, being located in the Netherlands and being part of the European Union means also having to face the fact that 'we will always *not* be at the center of these institutions'; TBA represents then an investment in 'building [our own] monuments' and creating a space in which to 'put ourselves central' and 'where we feel safe, where what we feel and what we think is at the center of our being and our work...' (*Monuments and the Reification of Anti-Black Violence* 2020). But this strategy has another side to it, which is to negotiate with the same institutions responsible for reproducing 'toxicity': '... where the dominant institutions can help is by sharing resources, even funding. They do collaborate with other organizations, so they have not only to give stuff but also support the people that want to have their own narratives' (2020). Writer and organizer Simone Zeefuik, also invited to the talk, pointed out that certain institutions seem to advertise their collaboration with TBA as proof enough that they are dealing with societal issues: '... what they do is ask: but what should we do? We have The Black Archives, as that relieves them from responsibility' (2020). She is referring to the fact that, as the significance and 'name recognition' of the Archives has grown within Amsterdam but also in the national and international context, Dutch institutions have been inviting TBA to be part of their programming in a way that often resembles tokenism. In addition, Zeefuik highlights how the success of TBA and its efforts to center the black experience does not mean that it can be considered 'an alternative archive', De Abreu concurs that 'it has also been called an activist archive but no it's not. Why are you calling it that, you have to ask yourself' (*Monuments and the Reification of Anti-Black Violence* 2020). TBA's founders are also mindful of the risks intrinsic to establishing relationships with institutional actors: for instance, Esajas relays being invited to a talk on the topic of diversity organized by the Museum Vereniging (the Dutch museums association)

in 2019 and quickly realized that he was ‘the only black person there’ and that several participants appeared to be completely oblivious to what Keti Koti is (fieldnotes 2019). When I ask him about TBA’s collaboration with the Tropenmuseum, Esajas frames it as stemming more from a ‘relationship with Wayne Modest’ than with the institution as a whole (Esajas 2019). He elaborates on the difficulties related to working with an organization as layered as this ethnographic museum:

sometimes I think we are being used to legitimize certain projects within the museum, but we use them as well. We are using each other...it’s a process. I do think some people are doing their best, I think Wayne [Modest] is trying to do some good stuff (Esajas 2019)

Esajas also considers whether ‘white institutions’ can ever change since they are structurally entangled with the colonial legacy (2019). He also reflects on the position of TBA concerning activism and whether they are able to effect change in the institution:

Different people have different perspectives on it: some people see us as activists some people see us as a cultural center...to others, we don’t matter that much.

Our mission is partly to make hidden histories visible, partly our own activities, but also partly influencing other institutions: we don’t have the illusion that will change the whole world but it can contribute to a bit more awareness and understanding that we need to make more steps (Esajas 2019)

But like other people who, in and outside museums, are endeavoring for long-term change, Esajas is also wary of the many setbacks and a political climate that favor populist parties and right-wing movements:

Ultimately ... we want more radical change, institutional change, transformation even, redistribution of resources but these are large ideals that we hope for. But the reality, especially in the Dutch context is, that it’s already taking us ten years to change one stupid national tradition. So radical transformation will not be easy (Esajas 2019)

The ‘one stupid national tradition’ Esajas refers to is Zwarte Piet and how the efforts to raise awareness on its racist nature at the time of our conversation in 2019 had still not produced the desired change: Saint Nicholas festivities without the blackface character or a softened version of it. As we have seen in Chapter 1, Zwarte Piet is a pivotal figure in both the aggressive denial of racism that characterizes Dutch self-representation and the – always lingering – threat of unassimilable difference for whom refuse to participate

in the denial (Wekker 2016). The protests against Zwarte Piet have become a pivotal moment in the historicization of the new wave of anti-racism activism in the Netherlands, but also in how TBA is positioning itself within it.

In September 2020, shortly before the Archives were forced to forego public activities because of a resurgence in COVID-19 cases, I visited the exhibit titled *Surinamers in Nederland: 100 Jaar emancipatie en strijd* (Surinamese in the Netherlands: 100 years of emancipation and struggle). It opened in December 2019 and then, to make up for the months in which it was closed during several lockdowns was extended until June 2021. The dense display retraced the century-spanning history of the Vereniging Ons Suriname and connected it with the larger socio-political context of the Netherlands and Suriname's relations. Wooden panels are tightly positioned in the center of the room and feature texts, newspaper clippings, photographic and video material, and objects that anchor the story as it unfolds in front of viewers. On the wall next to the entrance, a big map shows the process of political decolonization throughout the 20th century and within it, a smaller map of the city of Amsterdam represents all the different locations occupied by V.O.S. before finding a permanent space in its current location.² The most striking part of the exhibition comprised three large textile artworks by Dutch-Surinamese visual artist Patricia Kaersenhout, hung in between the panels and portraying the *Vrouwen van VOS* (women from V.O.S.). Each printed canvas puts together two women belonging to different generations of activism: such as TBA's Jessica de Abreu together with Polly Levens, a board member of the association, who in the 1970s worked for the advancement of women organizations both in the Netherlands and Suriname. In the intention of the artist, this work – part of a series that started in 2018 – provides a visual representation of how every generation of activists stands on the shoulders of their predecessors. The exhibition does not only figuratively refer to this lineage but actively (meta)-historicizes the foundation of the Archives within

2 Behind a curtained door that leads to a smaller room, visitors can find the video installation *Aka Vuurmond* by multimedia artist Shertise Solano. The work is visible by looking at the ceiling on which shifting images of eyes, lips and smoke are accompanied by the sound of a *tambú*: a protest song about the Trinta di mei uprising in Curaçao on May 30, 1969 what started as an oil industry workers strike developed in a popular uprising that lasted until the following day: three hundred soldiers of the Dutch army were deployed to suppress it, leading to the death of two protesters while dozens were injured. The event was an important turning point in the relations between the Antillean island and the Netherlands: the military intervention by a former colonial ruler in a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands damaged the reputation of the Dutch government in international politics. As a result, a round of political and social reform took place and the Trinta di mei has become a central event in the collective memory of Curaçaoans.

it. The foundation of TBA is in fact made to coincide with ‘a new wave of emancipation and resistance’ as visitors can read in one of the dialog boxes:

After the violent arrest of Quinsy Gario and Jerry Afriyie during the Sinterklaas entry in Dordrecht in 2011, a new movement arose against *Zwarte Piet* and racism. With the emergence of The Black Archives in 2016, V.O.S. led by Vincent Soekra, Delano Veira and Ninan Esajas became once again, one of the central places where critical debates are organized on current, social and political issues (The Black Archives 2019)

This link points to how TBA also functions as a bridge connecting the older generation of Surinamese-Dutch organizers with the current Afro-Dutch one, whose emergence is framed as concurring with the *Zwarte Piet is racism* campaign by Curaçao-born artist Quinsy Gario and Dutch-Ghanaian poet Jeffry Afriyie (also known as Kno’ledge Cesare). Their arrest, and the way it was widely circulated and commented on through social media and by international news, did signal the emergence of a new phase in how anti-racism activism is organized and communicated from Amsterdam and other major centers to the rest of the country. The campaign consolidated through talks, conferences, and the formation of the action group Kick Out Zwarte Piet (KOZP) as a coalition between different groups and organizations like Nederland Wordt Beter, Zwarte Piet Niet, Zwarte Piet is Racisme, and Stop Blackface.

The protests against *Zwarte Piet* have become a pivotal moment in the historicization of the new wave of anti-racism activism in the Netherlands, but also in how TBA is situating itself within it. The success that TBA has enjoyed and the number of high-profile collaborations with institutions run parallel with a varying perception on whether or not the Archives do activist work or are run by activists. Activism in the sense of direct political action is not the core of TBA’s work, which instead is focused on archiving and exhibiting – and thus heritagizing – the past and present anti-racism movements. In doing so, and it is arguable whether this move is more or less deliberate, TBA reinforces the public perception of being seen as activists. What does this multiple positioning achieve? The success that TBA has enjoyed and the number of high-profile collaborations with institutions run parallel with a varying perception on whether or not the Archives do activist work or are run by activists. Activism in the sense of direct political action is not the core of TBA’s work, which instead is focused on archiving and exhibiting – and thus heritagizing – the past and present anti-racism movements. In doing so, and it is arguable whether this move is more or less deliberate, TBA reinforces the public perception of being seen as activists. On their part, de Abreu and

Esajas have been vocal about their support of KOZP although they stress how their participation happens in a personal capacity. It appears that the type of anti-racism activism that is being historicized through the work of the Archives needs to move in parallel with an explicitly cultural program. For instance, putting the Vereniging Ons Suriname back on the map as a center for arts, culture, and heritage, potentially the location of a museum, and home of a young and successful organization like The Black Archives becomes part of a successful strategy and long-term vision. Highlighting the importance of TBA's role in representing multiple diasporic communities and their heritage allows for gaining the type of recognition that ensures longevity, funding, and high-profile institutional collaborations; at the same time, by defining their role within the cultural field and through cultural activities TBA remains within the boundaries established by the Dutch discursive space on identity and heritage, in which belonging is first withheld and then made to slow-drip through gestures of recognition; this way, as a 'meeting place for activists' but not as an 'activist archive' TBA can garner enough legitimacy to appear as an interlocutor solid enough to participate in the 'approved space of politics' (Gilroy 1993, 114). The next section will follow these lines of thought through the example of The Black Archives Bijlmer: a temporary project in a historically black neighborhood in Amsterdam Southeast, which aims to provide a space for intergenerational dialogue between yesterday's and today's activists.

'We don't talk about inclusion and diversity we breath it'

In August 2020, The Black Archives Bijlmer (TBA/B) opened as a temporary space in the Amsterdam Southeast district, in an area at the border with the neighborhood commonly known as De Bijlmer. The main focus of this new venture was, according to architect and researcher Wouter Pocornie, to provide a meeting point for locals but especially young people and older age groups, who would not normally visit the main venue in Amsterdam East – whose public he believes is made largely of 'academics and artists' (Pocornie 2020). I visited the location in September 2020, less than a month from its official opening and not too long after the demonstrations that took place earlier that summer. Pocornie welcomed me and guided me through the bookshelves, each section dedicated to a different topic: 'slavery', 'gender studies', 'sexuality', 'feminism', 'sociology', and 'race studies'. This collection was assembled through donations from prominent Dutch intellectuals like Philomena Essed and writer Adriaan van Dis and sociologist Frits Corsten. A smaller cabinet

hosts the ‘Bijlmer dossier’ consisting of texts but also music and video materials from the borough that can help to gain a better understanding of its history and culture. In dedicated display cases are exhibited what Pocornie calls ‘conversation pieces’: two heavy volumes containing the register with the names of the enslaved people in Suriname and items representing racial caricatures. The long-term objective is to expand the collection to include themes and groups that represent current ‘blind spots’ – like the histories of the Ghanaian community in the Bijlmer (Pocornie 2020).³ Born and raised in Amsterdam Southeast, Pocornie talks passionately about the history of the borough in which he grew up. ‘We don’t talk about inclusion or diversity, we breathe it’ he says referring to young people between fifteen and thirty-five years old who also grew up in the area (Pocornie 2020). And yet he feels that for people belonging to these age groups the history of the Bijlmer and the well of memories that have uniquely shaped the diaspora experience in Amsterdam are not easily accessible. Therefore, he envisions the Southeast location of the Archives as primarily a place where to exchange knowledge: ‘something that is missing in academia’ he adds, broadly referring to the institution’s exclusionary methods but also to how the histories of the borough have been used to narrate it as a location alien to the rest of the city (Pocornie 2020).

Built between the 1960s and 1970s, the Bijlmermeer – locally called *de Bims/Bimre* – occupies a particular position within the history of postcolonial Amsterdam. Sharing a fate similar to other modernist estates in Europe, the Bijlmer also failed to attract the middle-class families it had been designed for (for a historical overview see Aalbers 2011; Helleman and Wassenberg 2004; Dekker 2016). Instead, after years of neglect and disrepair, the area became a destination for different waves of migrants: first from post-independence Suriname and then largely from West Africa. After being met with logistic chaos – and hosted in expensive and run-down boarding houses – the Surinamese Dutch citizens that had arrived in Amsterdam were sent to occupy the empty buildings in the Bijlmer or directly decided to squat them.⁴

3 Approximately forty per cent of residents are of Surinamese and/or Antillean descent and more than twenty per cent are of African descent – primarily from Ghana (Abdou 2017).

4 Due to the city’s chronic scarcity of accommodations the newly arrived were put in ‘guesthouses’: despite the unsanitary living conditions, the rental prices for rooms in these pensions were disproportionately high and usually paid through state subsidies. The activist group LOSON protested both the racist housing policies and the untenable situation in the guesthouses. Andre Reeder, a member of the group, documented the situation in the film *Onderneming Onderdak* – literally ‘the accommodation business’ (Kunstinstituut Melly 2017).

Balkenhol notes that, although not explicitly planned, overseas nationals from Suriname were relocated en masse ‘from the margins of Empire to the margins of the metropole’ (2014, 65) – in a place that would further their marginalization for decades to come. This is indicative of the role that race plays in ‘Dutch notions of self and modes of world making’ (2014, 65): at the conjunction between danger and exoticism the Bijlmer becomes ‘a place in the Netherlands that is not the Netherlands’ (Balkenhol 2014, 67). A district that was, and in the perception of many still is, situated geographically and discursively at the periphery of the former colonial metropole. Through the mobilization of the imaginary of the ghetto ‘the racial geography of empire was shifted and reapplied within the national boundaries’ (2014, 67) whilst ‘the notions of whiteness and “home” are folded into one another’ (2014, 68). Long before deprived neighborhoods started to be framed in public discourse as ‘objects of dystopian imaginations of multiculturalism gone wrong’ (De Koning 2015, 1205), the Bijlmer had already become ‘iconic’ in a particular sense (Balkenhol 2014, 67). As the Dutch political climate shifted – and embraced neoliberalism – local authorities started to look for ways to redevelop the area. When in the fall of 1992, a cargo plane crashed into two of the original honeycomb high-rise blocks killing at least forty-three people and leaving the local community bereft and traumatized, plans for the renewal of the area became more and more urgent.⁵ In 1995 the first demolitions started: since then, several waves of urban regeneration became the tool through which facilitate the spreading of owner-occupied households by ‘diversifying’ low-income neighborhoods through state-led gentrification (on the rationalities behind this move see among others Aalbers 2011; Abdou 2017; De Koning 2015; De Koning, Jaffe, and Koster 2015).⁶ This strategy

5 Remembered as the Bijlmerramp (Bijlmer disaster), on the evening October 4, 1992 a Boeing 747 cargo plane of the Israeli airline El Al crashed into the Groeneveen and Klein-Kruitberg flats in Amsterdam’s Bijlmermeer. The disaster killed at least 43 people. Early reports estimated at least 200 victims considering how densely inhabited the buildings were, but numbers were not reliable because many residents could have been undocumented at the time. Amy Abdou notes that in the hectic weeks following the event ‘[i]nstead of a show of support... the press quickly focused on the status of the illegals, as the Dutch government offered an amnesty package to the survivors’ (Abdou 2017, 194). This change of attitudes mirrored a broader shift in public discourse around migrants: if in the 1960s the Dutch government had portrayed undocumented immigrants as ‘spontaneous guestworkers’ who were regularised as soon as they found a job (Rath and Schuster 1995), from the 1990s on they were painted as “profiteers” who should be expelled instantly’ (Kloosterman, van der Leun, and Rath 1998, 252). Distinguishing between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ victims after the crash led to a broader discussion on the issue of illegal immigration as a threat to security that, according to van der Leun and Kloosterman, resulted ‘after years of benign neglect’ in an ‘explicit policy of discouraging undocumented immigration’ (2006, 60).

6 Today only six of the original honeycomb-shaped high rise blocks have been preserved: since

has been successful and the Bijlmer started to appear again as an attractive destination: for both prospective residents and the many working in the Amstel III Business Park – an area that is being redeveloped as mixed residential and where TBA/B found its temporary home.

Pocornie is very familiar with the overlapping geographies that constitute the Bijlmer: old and new residents, the remaining high-rise blocks and the new semi-terraced houses, the celebration of diversity, and the permanence of inequality. He relates how on numerous occasions he has been approached by the ‘borough’s gentrifiers’ and various stakeholders who ‘don’t have a plan but still present their projects’ (Pocornie 2020). He sees these ventures as playing on surface-level identity politics without any real understanding of what the Bijlmer actually needs (2020). Further, he points out how thirty years after the first wave of demolitions and redevelopment, the district’s still stagnant employment rates are in stark contrast with the booming business park across the railway tracks (Pocornie 2020).⁷ For policymakers and government officials that seek to improve its image, the Bijlmer becomes a zone of extraction: the same cultural expressions that could have made it into an unredeemable, ungovernable place are mobilized to construct a story of success despite adversities, in which difference is reworked into exotic appeal and blackness into commodifiable urban culture. As we have seen in Chapter 2 with the Indische Buurt, again narratives that emphasize diversity as an asset aim to replace those about failed multiculturalism. But, if we look at them from up close, they rely on figures of speech that are also dangerously close to colonial tropes: exoticism is painted over danger, adventure over fear. Diversity then is a charged notion in the borough: the lived multiculturalism that Pocornie describes throughout our conversation is the target of attempts to both commodify and criminalize it.⁸ And belonging is produced and articulated

2019, are officially designated as protected cityscape (*beschermd stadsgezicht*) by the municipality of Amsterdam.

7 In Balkenhol: ‘Over het spoor (beyond the tracks) is considered the rich part, whereas ‘this’ side of the train line is struggling with unemployment and all sorts of socio-economic problems’ (Balkenhol 2014, 73).

8 In his analysis of practices of containment and displacement through policing in large Dutch cities, Sinan Çankaya notes that increased securitisation measures are largely directed at young men that either constitute ‘matter out of place’ in more affluent areas or are framed as ‘target groups’ to be stopped and searched ‘in the areas where they presumably belong’ (Çankaya 2020, 717). In this context ‘self-governance’ implies ‘internalising these moralised geographies, conceding to state-imposed definitions of alterity, of not belonging, of not being from a particular urban soil’ (Çankaya 2020, 718).

by different groups of stakeholders and according to different strategies.⁹ A varying notion of blackness returns in its multiplicity of meanings to be employed in different ways by residents, local organizers, and political actors. For instance, Balkenhol examines how blackness and Africanness are juxtaposed in the discourses of Bijlmer inhabitants of Surinamese descent against their neighbors coming from West African regions – and vice-versa. Racial stereotypes inherited from the colonial archive are employed by Surinamese Dutch to equate being African with backwardness; whilst West Africans that, as a result of contracting migration policies, have continued to struggle to gain ‘papers’ mobilize colonial history to describe Surinamese-Dutch as lazy and relying on welfare provisions they have access to through their citizenship status (Balkenhol 2014, 85–88). Priya Swamy’s research among the Indo-Surinamese – a minority in the Bijlmer – reveals that this community has contrasting views on the matter: respondents in her study ‘scoff at the idea of the Bijlmer as a multicultural paradise’ and instead point at ‘the reality of living in a “black neighborhood”’ as a result of ‘the everyday experience of seeing black cultural and religious spaces and performances take place in the neighborhood’ (Swamy 2016, 70).

At the same time, in recent years, the neighborhood has witnessed the establishment of cultural and heritage projects that make use of the ancestral lineage with Africa or of the history of the Bijlmer as an identity-building tool. For instance, CBK – Centrum Beeldende Kunst Zuidoost (center for visual arts Southeast) was founded in the 1990s to provide access to contemporary arts while also dedicating part of its programming to the district’s Afro-Caribbean identity; Stitching Untold (Untold foundation) develops programs in the field of education, dance and theatre to connect

9 Pinkster et al. note that or the ‘old Bijlmer’ memory plays an important role in creating distance with the borough’s fame as dangerous ghetto. Locals share ‘elaborate personal memories to emphasize how the neighborhood has improved, thereby projecting stigma onto the past’ (Pinkster, Ferier, and Hoekstra 2020, 537). This study focuses on how the three main categories of residents deal with territorial stigma: white, middle-class respondents call the district South East instead of Bijlmer and justify their choice to live there by underlining the positives: “‘mixed”, “multicultural” and “colourful” ... a “window into the world”” (Pinkster, Ferier, and Hoekstra 2020, 533). Black middle-class respondents must deal instead with the fact that they ‘embody the racial dimension of stigma’ and so they emphasize the adjacency of white residents to ‘underscore the middle-class status of the area’ while also projecting negative stereotypes on the ‘old sections of the Bijlmer’: meaning the high-rises where people are renters and not home-owners – “‘bad” spots’ in contrast to Surinamese’s propriety (2020, 535). It is then by far on this last group, black residents in the high rises, that ‘the burden of reworking stigma’ falls: their strategy for attempting to reposition themselves as ‘good’ is to shift negative behaviours and characteristics on ‘bad’ residents – identified through the same raced, classed and gendered categories against which they are also judged (2020, 539).

young people of African descent to their identity, for example through events like the African Diaspora Performing Arts festival. The biggest event held in the borough is the Kwaku Summer Festival (previously known as Kwakoe Zomerfestival) which attracts around three hundred thousand visitors over four weekends. The festival started as a soccer tournament in 1975 and developed throughout the decades into a ‘major focal point for celebrating “black culture” in the Netherlands’ (Aalbers 2011, 1709) but it also ‘marks a moment wherein diasporic space is intimately tied to nostalgias that celebrate home, comfort and belonging through a wide range of multi-sensorial practices that are associated with blackness’ (Swamy 2016, 64). One organization that is directly engaged with heritage production is Imagine IC (Imagine Identity Culture), which was established in 1999 and shares its location at the center of the Bijlmer with one of the branches of the Amsterdam Public Library. Through a range of programming that focuses on participatory events, Imagine IC has been exploring the ‘emotion networks’ around heritage sites and objects related to, for example, the commemoration of slavery and the Zwarte Piet debate.¹⁰ TBA/B has therefore entered a space already filled with projects and initiatives attempting to provide a portrayal of the identity of the neighborhood. A more recent development of this process is the attempt of recuperating a notion of blackness that is more directly associated with the Bijlmer’s lineage of resistance and protest. So for instance in 2018, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the borough, Imagine IC co-organized with the Research Center for Material Culture an event titled *Stadsgevoel #4: verzet in de 50-jarige Bijlmer* (City feeling #4: resistance in the 50 years old Bijlmer). The event focused on the legacy of Zwart Beraad (the black council) an action group that lobbied for the Afro-Surinamese community during the first urban renewal plan in the mid-1990s. The group referenced the colonial past to describe the situation in the Bijlmer where few, white Dutch policymakers were deliberating on resources destined for the district.¹¹

10 Imagine IC has been developing these insights into a methodology called ‘emotion networking’ that takes into account how heritage objects do not necessarily elicit the same emotions of positive attachment and recognition among all that have with ties to them: ‘[r]ather than only involving like-minded members of communities, heritage workers must consider everyone with an emotion about a heritage item to be(come) part of an irregular network of emotions – including ourselves as heritage workers’ (Rana, Willemsen, and Dibbits 2017, 977).

11 At the time, what ‘[f]rom inside the political discourse in De Bijlmer’ was understood as ‘a trajectory of emancipation’, was framed through media and scholarly analysis as ‘the forced introduction of an issue that most believed strongly to be obsolete and non-existent in the Netherlands: race’ (Balkenhol 2014,76). As Abdou points out the antagonism against this particular moment in the history of the district, and its protagonist, is echoed in academic discourse as well: Dukes also frames this political intervention as divisive, ultimately motivated by self-serving agendas, and heavily

On their part, the Archives emphasize creating a space for intergenerational conversations: where old and young people, today's activists, and their counterparts from previous eras, can come together and share knowledge. For instance, on the day of TBA/B's opening, young people that had participated in the summer 2020 demonstrations were invited to share the stage with former members of the activist organization LOSON Ernestine Comvalius and Roy Wijks, who were invited to share their experiences in the 1970s and 1980s. To further these conversations TBA/B also features the brightly painted 'red room': a space in which local people from different generations will come together to record their stories. This, according to Pocornie, will serve as the basis for more research on oral transmissions of memories of the neighborhood. The opening of TBA/B coincided with a moment of elation, in which the massive participation in the demonstrations in solidarity with Black Lives Matter had imbued anti-racism activists with new hope. The numbers of participants in June 2020 were unprecedented: approximately fourteen thousand in Dam square and ten thousand in the Bijlmer's Nelson Mandela Park. At the time of my visit, the corridor connecting the two rooms which TBA/B comprises was filled with cardboard signs from the demonstrations. Pocornie tells me that TBA's staff has been collecting the signs after each demonstration in Amsterdam but also in Rotterdam, Almere, The Hague, and Utrecht and that they plan to digitize and perhaps display them in future exhibitions. 'We need to tell our story rapidly' he says, meaning that he is aware that the narrative around this moment in the history of Dutch anti-racism activism could be appropriated (Pocornie 2020). The last section of the chapter examines TBA's ongoing attempt to meta-historicize not only the recent past of activism and resistance but also its present.

reliant on categories imported from the Black Power movement – thus ignoring the different contexts in which the term 'black' has been used by post-colonial citizens to campaign for their rights. This and other similar analysis depict the low participation of residents to the urban renewal process as a consequence not of structural and political barriers to it, but rather as resulting from a general absence of interest in civic matters compounded by contrasts along ethnic lines, which were made worse by the involvement of groups like Zwart Beraad (Abdou 2017)



Fig. 9 Vrouwen van VOS, artwork by Patricia Kaersenhout portraying Jessica de Abreu a Polly Leven. Photographer: Vittoria Caradonna. Courtesy of The Black Archives



Fig. 10 'Racism is also a Pandemic'. Protest sign from Black Lives Matter 2020 demonstrations archived digitally by The Black Archives. Courtesy of The Black Archives.

Heritagizing activism (as it happens)

It is not casual that many of the cultural organizations that engage with the Bijlmer's layered heritage have been founded in the same years during which urban renewal plans were deployed, and have continued to operate in conjunction with neoliberal policies that aim to exalt the cultural diversity of the borough along with producing active and responsible citizens. As it is often the case, the dynamics at play in this particular neighborhood are not reducible to grassroots action versus state policies: as De Cesari and Herzfeld point out such 'reductionist dichotomies between bad heritage (by state and capital) and good heritage (by civic committees and protest movements)' do not work because the emphasis on participatory practices and local talents has become a 'shared language' across neoliberal policymaking and community activists (De Cesari and Herzfeld 2015, 172). The organizations I cited above and newer initiatives like TBA/B are all funded through a mix of public and private subsidies; and, similarly to what Mitchell Esajas remarked in relation to their collaborations with the Tropenmuseum, institutions and grassroots initiatives mutually feed on each other to legitimize their presence and their work within local cultural ecosystems. Beyond the instrumentalization of cultural and heritage projects to service state-led gentrification (on the topic see for instance De Cesari and Dimova 2019), different memories of dwelling in the Bijlmer are used by a variety of actors to produce narratives – sometimes contrasting – about the kind of belonging available to residents both new and old. The heritagization of certain elements of the borough's history has been and still is an integral part of the urban management strategies targeting the Bijlmer. But it needs to be framed against a specific sociopolitical backdrop in which the memory of the colonial past and the figure of the descendant of the enslaved have been mobilized to ground the identity of the borough's inhabitants: not migrants, but full citizens. This strategic use of memory has been instrumental in opposing the culturalist discourses framing Surinamese and Antillean-Dutch as bodies out of place – and reclaiming the right to belong.

During the several lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both venues of the Archives had to be closed to the public for long periods. In the end, TBA/B shifted its programming online and closed the location in the Bijlmer. But during the forced closures between 2020 and 2021, TBA managed to digitize a large portion of its collection: books and other written material have been cataloged in a new online archive, which also consists of other two sections that feature instead visual material. The first one is titled *Kick Out Zwarte Piet* and presents some items already in possession of the Archives:

for example, photographs chronicling the emergence of the movement born out of the *Zwarte Piet is racism* campaign in 2011, and a 1990s antecedent when activists reunited around the slogan *Zwarte Piet=Zwart Verdriet* (black Pete = black grief). Another section of the online archive is titled Black Lives Matter 2020 and contains photographs and pictures of the protest signs from the demonstrations. In addition, in the fall of 2020, the Archives curated a two-month exhibition *Zwarte Beweging #BlackLivesMatterNL* (black movement #BlackLivesMatterNL) in the central branch of the city's public library featuring photographic portraits of people that, in one capacity or another, are part of this multigenerational black movement: from Surinamese Dutch politician Sylvana Simons to artists Iris Kensmil and Patricia Kaersenhout, to rapper Akwasi, to TBA's de Abreu, Esajas and Camille Parker.

These two examples – Kick Out Zwarte Piet from 2011 and Black Lives Matter in 2020 – are put in dialogue with each other and memorialized as part of the ongoing history of anti-racism in the Netherlands. For TBA the need to collect and archive tangible traces of the demonstrations while also historicizing this movement is a vital part of their objectives: inequality and discrimination need to be fought through education and through connecting contemporary struggles to the long durée of coloniality. Therefore, on one hand, memorializing the 2020 BLM movement in the Netherlands felt like an urgent task precisely because of being able to take ownership of the narrative of what contemporary anti-racism activism looks like and what it stands for. On the other, like on the occasion of the talk at De Nieuw Instituut de Abreu feels the need to clarify that TBA is not an 'activist archive'. This is to underline the fact that TBA should not be undermined by the label 'activist', which as we have seen, has been predominantly utilized to distinguish between legitimate knowledge production – located in academia and other institutions – and activist accounts that are untrustworthy because too emotional, radical, polarizing. TBA provides a space that, through archival work and public programming, connects today's generation of activists to previous ones to a larger, international tradition of black radical thought. At the same time, TBA's work in experimenting with the production of a black subjectivity capable of fully expressing the multiplicity of identities and experiences of the diaspora, cannot fully circumvent how the diaspora has been built, categorized, studied by and through dominant discourses. Since memory is a powerful tool for subjectification, it is always used in two ways: by minorities to become visible and assert their right to belong and from state and state-like formations to request proof of a cohesive identity capable of fitting the 'approved space of politics' (Gilroy 1993, 114).

In the book *Black Man in the Netherlands: an Afro-Antillean Anthropology*, Francio Guadeloupe makes a distinction between who he identifies as Dutch ‘urban popular artists’ and ‘black activist-intellectuals’: the first group does not share the goals and modes of communication of the second and instead structure their work around an idea of ‘conviviality that nurtures them and feeds their utopian dream of an antiracist tomorrow’ (2022, 83–84). Among those that Guadeloupe sees instead as ‘categorically defin[ing] themselves as black in the US sense of the term’ (2022, 123) he names Esajas, Quinsy Gario, and Jerry Afriyie. Resuming Paul Gilroy’s project against ethnic absolutism, Guadeloupe posits that these activists are engaging in a ‘politics of fulfillment’, meaning that they ‘demand that the Dutch political establishment fulfills, meaning fully lives up to, the idea enshrined in the law of the land that all citizens ought to receive equal treatment and enjoy a life free of racism and economic injustice’ (2022, 83). In Gilroy’s original formulation, the politics of fulfillment indicate ‘the notion that a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished’ (Gilroy 1993, 37). They are juxtaposed to the ‘politics of transfiguration’ referring to the ‘emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors’ (1993, 37 emphasis in original). Whereas the first is a counter-discourse and as such still serviceable to modernity and its racializing projects, the second is a counter-culture whose ‘basic desire is to conjure up and enact the new modes of friendship, happiness, and solidarity’ that will follow ‘the overcoming of the racial oppression on which modernity and its antinomy of rational, western progress as excessive barbarity relied’ (1993, 38). These tactics can only happen at a ‘lower frequency’: ‘[c]reated under the very nose of the overseers, the utopian desires which fuel the complementary politics of transfiguration must be invoked by other, more deliberately opaque means’ (1993, 37). In Guadeloupe’s analysis, since the current generation of black activists limit their work to a ‘politics of fulfilment’ anchored in practical objectives and not utopian desires, the anti-racism they propose through their work is ‘dependent upon the Dutch government and NGOs, whose funding criteria demands that they present their case and themselves in the habitual ethnoracial categories of governance’ (2022, 83). He criticizes this as agreeing to a form of ‘essentialist identity politics’ which can end up producing ‘[r]eification and racialized camp thinking’ (2022, 83). My analysis partially departs from Guadeloupe’s since he seems to be emphasizing how this group of ‘black activist-intellectuals’ play into the ethno-racial categories

of governance of their own accord. I do not want to diminish the agency of individuals or groups and there is definitely an element of choice in how the new generation of activism chooses to portray itself. But this element of choice does not mean that the ‘black’ identity resulting from this process, is completely “‘self-achieved’” and fully ‘a reflection of ‘their own orientations, choices, and identifications, just as this was not in the case of the generation that arrived to the Netherlands in the years after political decolonization. (Jones 2014).

The cohesiveness of this identity does play into the ‘habitual ethnoracial categories of governance’ – because this is the ask behind the promise of inclusion, of safety-through-belonging. In the early 2000s utilizing memory as property and resource would take the more straightforward and top-down shape of the National Monument of Slavery and the National Institute for Dutch Slavery and its Legacy. In the 2010s, institutional – at the city/state/EU level – projects need to also make space for more grassroots initiatives. In particular, in the last half of the 2010s, there has been a development in this discursive space: actors that have reached a degree of authority and respectability in the eye of institutions are designated as valid interlocutors. And thereby are now allowed to intervene in these debates while also drawing the link between ongoing disparities stemming from the legacies of colonialism. But the terrain in which these claims are produced and circulated remains cultural just as the question of redress continues to be shifted onto symbolic investments anchored in representation. The fact that these interventions are not openly shunned is an ongoing development, not completely stabilized or accepted at all levels of society. Although concerning the memory of slavery this expansion of the conversation can be seen as progress, it also inevitably plays into creating ulterior distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ activists and grassroots movements: some are able to navigate the terms of the conversations while others are pushed to the margins, some learn how to become indispensable for the institution while their work becomes at risk of appropriation. Being an anti-racism activist through protesting Zwarte Piet has been the target of ridicule and dismissal by mainstream media and the target of aggression from right-wing groups. But, through a decade of effort, it has also evolved into a position that is not perceived as completely oppositional. The BLM 2020 demonstrations mark the moment in which this particular way of doing activism – which uses memory work to both criticize and be recognized by the state – has been legitimized as a valid interlocutor. Building on the momentum TBA, together with the organizations Nederlands Word Beter foundation, Zetje In, and Black Queer & Trans Resistance NL,

launched the *Zwart Manifest* (Black Manifesto) on March 25, 2021. This document features an action plan across twelve sectors such as education, the labor market, and arts and culture with the goal of combating anti-black racism. It is envisioned as a tool for politicians and policy-makers, providing them with concrete action points and recommendations on how to improve the ‘socio-cultural and economic level of Black people’ (“Zwart Manifest” 2021). On June 10, 2021, one year after the demonstration in the Bijlmer, the manifesto was handed over to the outgoing Ministers of Social Affairs and Employment and of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. After, in the fall of 2021, an exhibition titled *Zwart Manifest: op weg naar Zwarte emancipatie* (on the road towards black emancipation) opened at OSCAM, an arts organization also located in the Bijlmer.¹² The exhibit was a result of the collaboration between TBA, the other organizations behind the initiative, and the well-known cultural platform BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht.

This rapid succession of events – the demonstrations, the manifesto, the exhibitions – points to how TBA is continuously involved in a process of heritagizing a movement in the present. But at no point, this movement strays from a ‘politics of fulfilment’ that still maintains the State as the guarantor of rights and affordances and citizenship as the horizon on which to realize the promise of safety through belonging. This conviction is upheld even in the face of blatant neglect: like in the case of the so-called *Toeslaagenaffaire* (allowances scandal). In parallel with the demonstrations and the pandemic, another story emerged in the Dutch public sphere: a scandal that had been progressively uncovered by investigative journalists since the beginning of 2019, which revolved around fraud investigations into recipients of child benefit supplements. The tax office had been asking for the monetary allowances back retroactively as a result of inspections that targeted disproportionately families with a migration background. The investigations were initiated based on criteria such as dual nationality or foreign-sounding surnames (for example, all beneficiaries of Ghanaian origin were subjected to a check). The consequences on the lives of the impacted families have been enormous: amassing debt to the point of bankruptcy, losing homes or jobs, and a person taking their own life after being asked to pay back tens of thousands of euros (Levie 2021). And from 2015 to 2021, more than one thousand children of parents affected by the Affair were separated from

12 Standing for Open Space Contemporary Art Museum, OSCAM started in 2017 as a pop-up museum part of the programme to commemorate the Bijlmer’s 50th anniversary and has grown into a platform to stimulate and increase the interest in the arts for the residents of Amsterdam, specifically young people living in the Bijlmer

their families after the intervention of social workers. The scandal indeed resulted in the fall of Rutte's government but, only months after, the national elections reconfirmed him as Prime Minister. Since then, reports detail how the compensation schemes for affected families are lagging and, at the time of writing, the children separated from their parents have not returned home (Kleinnijenhuis 2020; NOS news 2022; Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek 2022). For all of these reasons, in June 2021, the organizations behind the Zwart Manifest discussed whether or not to hand over their action plan to two of the exponents of the government responsible for the scandal. Ultimately, however, the organizers decided to proceed since the recommendations in the manifesto 'should transcend party and politics in order to ensure the sustainability of tackling institutional racism' (@zwartmanifest 2021). But can sustainability grow from within systemic irresponsibility?

TBA is producing an autonomous cultural archive capable of retrieving the black radical tradition and connecting it to the history of homegrown Afro-Dutch activism. But demands for more – more radical change, redistribution of resources – must be articulated within the horizon of citizenship rights through cultural recognition. In such a context it does not come as a surprise to note how TBA plays up or down its hybrid nature – activist/non-activist – while it navigates the demands and affordances of culturalized politics. Foregrounding the memory of colonialism and slavery means acknowledging its potential to act as a resource to advance a political agenda. The goals of this strategy move between short-term representational progress, e.g. a stop to the Zwarte Piet character; but also long-term radical change, e.g. eliminating social disparities based on race (and gender, class, and ability) through a pedagogical project aimed at revealing the colonial roots of current systems of differentiation and exploitation. However, together with responding to the need for a 'safe space' where 'to put ourselves central', the Archives are helping to memorialize a certain version of activism as it happens. This means that before the potential of this movement is realized – or even before it can be called a movement – a loosely connected group of people, ideals, and goals for the future exists as an exhibition – it has entered the archive. This exceeds documentation for internal purposes and goes instead in the direction of using these memories, still not fully sedimented, as a resource: a way of connecting the past and present of black Dutch activism to strengthen its identity. But once this identity is established and made cohesive through social media profiles and state-subsidized meeting places it also becomes property: something to curate and guard from appropriation.

Ultimately, the very thing that makes a group identifiable and thus legible by state and state-like formations, is also what prevents real intersectional alliances with all those that live on the other side of safety. At the beginning of his speech in Dam square, Esajas named all the possible black lives that should matter. His list, which included ‘females, queer, undocumented, Muslim’ black lives, represented a gesture of both refusing a mono-definition of blackness and recognizing the need to link the variety of struggles with which racism and inequality interlock. But identifying lives that count through hyphenating adjectives means also renouncing ‘opacity’. Édouard Glissant demanded ‘the right to opacity’ in opposition to a Western thought based on a concept of transparency through which apprehend the Other: ‘[i]n order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce’ (Glissant 1997, 190). This ask has evolved along with the economy of desires supporting capitalist modes of governance: in order to accept you, in a near future but not today, I need intimate knowledge of how does it feel to want certain things and being denied. And how does it feel to have a taste of it, a piece of the pie. While naming categories can be in the context of a demonstration a moment of communion or mutual recognition, outside of that moment and location it is also a plea: for the State to stop brutalizing and start protecting, to cease to discriminate and embrace all – because of their difference and not in spite of it. This plea comes with a tangle of wants and aspirations that make up the bargain of belonging: aspiring to normativity means aspiring to safety, which means having to perform one’s identity as readable as possible for the institutions regulating life. This trade-off, of which memory has come to represent a portion, is what prevents solidarity from turning into political action: not only because of the always lingering fear of repression. But because of just how effective the promise of the ‘good life’ – for at least some of us – continues to be. Even in the face of the continued, violent evidence that *our* safety is based on the precarity of someone else: the bad citizen, migrant, activist.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how through their work The Black Archives is working to surpass the nested categorization of black/descendant/victim. The first section describes the founding of TBA and examines the tensions within the notion of blackness deployed to articulate the type of diasporic subjectivity that is also at the center of TBA’s work. The second section has examined

the positioning of TBA in relation to institutional collaborations, a practice that is as common as it is layered, while also analyzing how TBA inserts itself in a lineage of resistance that connects different generations in the fight for anti-racism. Intergenerational exchange is also the purpose of having a location in Amsterdam Southeast, next to the historically black neighborhood of the Bijlmer – the focus of the third section. Until this temporary project finds a new, more permanent home TBA is continuing to provide a safe space where the histories of the Surinamese, Antillean and African diasporas can be told. However, despite its grassroots base, the Archives, as the fourth section concludes, plays into a type of contemporary ‘politics of fulfilment’ that entrusts change in the hands of the same actors that are responsible for its infinite delay. Heritagizing activism ‘as it happens’ is at risk of diminishing its political weight and potential for coalition building. Whereas today’s activists need to recuperate the memory of past emancipatory attempts, becoming legible as a valid interlocutor for the state means having to play into its normative project of belonging through citizenship.

Accepting to use memory as a resource means also for it to become a property: the bargaining chip to obtain visibility and recognition from the state and transnational governance actors. To refuse this means subjecting oneself to the continued threat of violence awaiting on the other side of safety: those that choose strategies of dis-identification – militant, non-normative, queer – with the promises of belonging are exposed to the brutality of the state. Conversely performing an identity that is not cohesive enough, and using memory only as a tool for private modes of commemoration, results in disinterest from the funding bodies that support the projects of activists-cum-cultural organizers. Finding a balance between these pushes and pulls is increasingly difficult since personal beliefs and political claims must fit into the mold of what counts as the proper tools and avenues in which to articulate dissent.

CONCLUSION

Breathless belonging

The virus is closely following the lines of inequality and in fact exacerbating them...

. . . There is a real divide in our society between those who have a kind of security and ability to stay at home, like I am here and those that are forced to go out in the world to work as essential workers to provide the means of life for those who are privileged enough to be able to stay home...

It shows that . . . you have a group of people that are vulnerable because of the way they have been racialized, their class position, their work, perhaps also their age. But there is also a category of privilege in which we are benefitting from the vulnerabilities of others. It's not simply reflecting these divides but it's actually exacerbating them (Rothberg 2020)

When Michael Rothberg made this statement in July 2020 the pandemic had already thrown in sharp relief the 'lines of inequality' he referred to, along with also demonstrating how protection is intimately bound with being at home. This dissertation would have probably looked very different if it had not been written throughout a two-year global health crisis. But even without the literal correlation between being at home and being safe brought by the virus, my thoughts were already concerned with the meanings behind this relation. Building a sense of home on unstable grounds is not an experience only limited to migrants and diasporas, minorities and dissidents. What is splintered across race, gender, class, nationality, sexual preference, age, and ability lines is the possibility to choose the degree of instability and precarity one can live with. The wrong combination of these identifiers transforms the feeling of home from something relatively private and intimate to something to achieve. The promise of domesticity materializes through having the right papers, house, job, and a number of accrements big enough to work as proof of permanence and stability.

To belong, or maybe to be seen as belonging, then is not only a matter of emotion but it makes the difference between whether someone is able to overcome something, little or big, without the fear of having to completely upend their life. It validates the expectation to receive the same opportunities, rights, and level of security that are afforded to people who are *really from here*. It makes the difference between being able to choose to go or to stay, to identify or not with a variety of 'homes': the city, the nation, Europe. The horizon of finally being included in a pact of protection keeps shifting, however, according to rules that are in place to maintain the distance between

desirables and undesirables. If we look at migration towards Europe we can observe the production and deployment of a variety of notions connected to who is allowed to come and settle, which have kept shifting from the post-war years. These criteria remain at their core economically driven but the narrative constructed by political elite actors gives European citizenship and migratory regimes a patina of inevitability: ‘we can’t welcome everybody’ but also ‘they must be kept out because their culture is so different it threatens our way of life’.

Examples of what happens when you have the wrong combination of physical features and papers are all around us: cautionary tales in the form of people –strangers inhabiting the ‘pockets of abandonment and differential belonging’ engineered by late liberalism (Povinelli 2011, 18). The locations from which I start my analysis, however, are not that of exclusion and abandonment: the memory of colonialism and slavery is becoming a central aspect of the discursive space on heritage and belonging; the ‘refugee crisis’ has been memorialized across multiple projects and most of them have sought to include the voices of refugees themselves; protesting Zwarte Piet is no longer seen as a fad promoted by a handful of hotheads. These shifts are still unfolding and the progress they signal is unevenly distributed within the economy of attention in which memory works as resource and property: as a tool to ground identities and give substance to rights-based claims. And yet accepting uncritically each of the examples above as proof that things are changing for the best would mean ignoring the material realities of marginalization and precarized life. What has guided me through this project has been the intention to avoid dissecting which particles of these movements are effectively signs of progress and which others are merely window-dressing. Rather, I tried to reflect on the politics motivating recent gestures of inclusion through the lenses of how this particular function of memory is developing.

This dissertation should be looked at as ‘project of tracking’(Lowe 2015) of some of the ways in which certain types of cultural memory – which sometimes have not yet sedimented in the form of shared heritage – become a resource and property for those individuals and groups who are ‘embodied in difference’ (Desai 2020), and therefore positioned outside of full belonging. Memory functions as a tool to ground identities and make them homogenous enough to become interlocutors for the state, and state-like formations; although this strategy is usually framed in mainstream discourses as stemming from the desire of minoritized groups to be fully included, the parameters of what exactly constitutes a valid attempt at memorializing and what is

considered a valid enough identity keep shifting. This is in turn instrumental for a sophisticated politics of recognition, which redistributes belonging among those that can prove to be ‘whole’ whilst postponing indefinitely any long-term, sustainable, structural change. The context that started to emerge throughout my research is one characterized by the outcome of three decades of heavy symbolic investments into an idea of culture as the arena in which to better articulate the request for recognition and redress.

In Chapter 1 I charted how the ‘unfolding “national story”’ (Hall 2005) about who can and cannot belong has been construed throughout subsequent political eras and directed at a variety of Others. What different groups of postcolonial citizens have in common with each other and with migrants that did not hail from former colonies is that, in the decades since their arrival, they have all been classified – from more to less assimilable – through ‘a political process whereby some others are designated as *stranger than other others*’ (Ahmed 2000, 6). The presence, symbolic and physical, of such strangers enables discourses that are not simply exclusionary but also productive: it is through them and the terminology used to ‘distinguish between “the real Dutch” and “the unreal Dutch” or “not quite Dutch”, that the Dutch nation and its foundational ethos is constructed (Jones 2014, 313). Under the aftereffect of post-Holocaust ethics and liberal notions of inclusion, European nations like the Netherlands have been reinvented as post-racial; at the same time, citizenship regimes and migration policies made use of reified cultural differences to explain and intervene in the lagging behind of minorities. The interplay between representation and recognition that has increasingly characterized the political landscape of the last thirty years cements the role of memory as a resource, and heritage as the portion of the public sphere more readily available for staking the claim to belong. This shift did not occur as the consequence of a natural inclination of postcolonial citizens, migrants, or any kind of ‘unsafe citizen’, but as a result of the gradual contraction of the spaces in which to fight political battles and their substitution with cultural avenues. Across the political spectrum, a narrative is constructed of permanent competition over which identities are more valid, which histories more tragic, which memories more compelling.

In the push-pull between minoritized subjects and governing institutions that build the criteria of what is considered an acceptable bid to citizenship and belonging, memory is presented to these groups as property: an endowment that needs to be curated, preserved and guarded from appropriation because its value lies in what it can be exchanged for. The largescale trade-off is to enclose any type of struggle within discursive rules that establish preemptively what

can be said and what can be gained: relevance for visibility, respectability through recognition, the love of the nation in exchange for another enemy to fear. This way what is supposed to be the beginning – intervening in the nation’s heritage – becomes the ultimate goal, and inclusionary gestures on the part of dominant state actors– and transnational entities like the European Union – are presented as the benevolent reaction to self-directed initiatives. The politics enabled through this trajectory, which is not unique to European countries and has been learned through examples like post-apartheid South Africa, allow the perpetuation of ‘capitalism disguised as democracy’ that ‘enables “belonging” but not a material redistribution of belongings’ (Myambo 2011, 65). What disappears in this performance is that the hegemonic parties determine which avenues and actors can be deemed legitimate interlocutors and which others – too naïve or destructive – must be ridiculed or condemned.

Chapter 2 shifts perspective by focusing on one of the main stages in which narratives about citizenship and belonging are produced and revised: the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam as it appeared in the post-merger years when it became part of the National Museum of World Cultures. Due to the global provenance of its collection and the ambition of being a museum ‘from today and around the corner’, the museum has seen its audiences multiply exponentially: from ‘postcolonial’ citizens to newer migrants to ‘neighbors’ – all are connected in the institution’s vision of world citizenship. The Tropenmuseum that I encountered as I approached it during my fieldwork between 2017 and 2019 was not the result of a clean slate brought about by the overhaul of its organizational structure; but rather the layered result of decades in which the museum’s critical consciousness had been evolving along with a new awareness on how to best explore its implication with the colonial project. But as the chapter shows, when the concept of implication leaves the terrain of theory to enter that of institutional life we must observe not only how the museum’s self-reflexivity is expressed within major exhibitions and high-profile public events; but also whether smaller, temporary projects convey the same degree of care. For this reason, the second part of the chapter examines two participatory projects that took place in the Indische Buurt, the formerly working-class district, now gentrified, in which the Tropenmuseum is located. Here the museum’s investment in nuanced and de-essentialized representation is not enough to create the opportunity to reflect on how the Indische Buurt has been transformed into a sought-after district by mobilizing a narrative of diversity as the happy byproduct of migration – that this way becomes completely de-historicized and de-politicized.

These projects, which only allow for a cursory engagement with the neighborhood, end up playing into modes of governance that make use of cultural participation to distinguish between good, active citizens and an unreachable Other. This modality of limited and uncritical involvement implicates the museum in something deeper than the typical ways in which heritage organizations and cultural projects are instrumentalized by public policy. It implicates it in the production of the Indische Buurt as a reconquered space, safe enough to enjoy for visitors and dwellers and yet increasingly inhabitable for its original residents. Ultimately, through the resonance given to criticism coming both from within the Tropenmuseum and from outside voices, a new timeline of change is created: each refurbishment and each change of name and mission happened in parallel with a range of societal shifts and yet, somehow, each breakthrough has not been accompanied by the structural overhaul it had advertised. These moments of reckoning are recurring and built within a precise economy – in competition but also in accord with other museums and cultural organizations. This way the cost of ‘progress’ is hidden from view by reordering cause and effect, before and after: that the evolution into a better Tropenmuseum happened along with neoliberal financial restructuring that led to about half of its staff being made redundant (Hilderling, Modest, and Aztouti 2014); that what has turned the Indische Buurt in a destination is the same thing that makes it unaffordable and therefore unlivable for some of its residents. And that when institutions endeavor to offer more nuanced and sophisticated approaches and a platform for previously excluded voices, we must pay attention to what is also being taken forward along with the advertised change.

Chapter 3 examines the temporary exhibition *Aleppo* in the Tropenmuseum and the canal tours of *Rederij Lampedusa*, two projects that rely on the presence of ‘real refugees’ to expand the knowledge of the public on the issue of migration. The reason to connect two formats and two containers – an exhibition and a boat tour, a national museum and an artist-led project – completely different from each other is making clear that narratives about who can and cannot aspire to belong are produced and circulated across big and small cultural organizations, century-old institutions and temporary projects. The exhibition carefully presents the tour guides as Syrians and inhabitants of Aleppo – and not through the label of refugee – and thus connected with Dutch people and Amsterdammers, who can admire the heritage of the city while also reflecting on the hard realities of war. However, it is precisely this emotion-based connection that needs to be scrutinized. By looking closely at how the museum emphasizes personal stories we can see

how, even within the context of decentering its authority, the representations of the protagonists of the exhibition still follow a specific script in which can be noticed culturalized echoes of the image of the ‘good/successful’ refugee as the one closest to ‘our values/culture’. With the tours, the museum also provides a safe space for the ‘liberal-minded Dutch public’ (Shatanawi 2012) in which to explore how does it feel to leave your home behind you. This type of engagement – contingent and unidirectional – reaffirms Europeans and Dutch as ideal liberal hosts, and Syrians as ideal liberal candidates for inclusion: but only insofar they are willing to use memories of their journeys to reinforce Europe’s welcoming performance. And only insofar they can demonstrate their willingness to integrate and adapt to the Netherlands, or any hosting country, ‘feeling rules’ (Duyvendak et al. 2016). World citizenship, although presented as equally shared between the museum’s publics, appears instead restricted to a particular type of audience, unequivocally ‘Dutch’.

The project of Rederij Lampedusa was initiated launched in 2015 and, until the forced halt caused by the pandemic, continued to attract visitors for its cruises over Amsterdam’s waterways. It was initiated by artist Teun Castelein and led by refugees in the role of storytellers. The narrative of the tours follows two main threads: the comparison between migrants of today and the past – both arrived in the Netherlands escaping something, both capable of contributing to Dutch society; and the authenticity of their stories through sensorial and emotional registers – engendered through storytelling based on their memories and through the tangible reminder of Mediterranean crossings provided by the boats. The guides have been selected chiefly because of their connection with the experience of refugeeism and thus their memories also function as property: a transactional asset that allows them to exchange personal stories for a type of more or less temporary inclusion. which takes the form of being seen as human beings instead of just nameless migrants. Being in the presence of ‘real’ refugees and ‘real’ boats is not only connected to a morally ambiguous desire for authenticity, but it also gives way to an unbalanced exchange between customers who are allowed and encouraged to ask questions and guides that must fulfill this desire for knowledge even if it means re-enacting negative experiences. Reactions of curiosity and surprise then need to be analyzed not just as individual responses but as affordances of the specific audience, which gets on the boats in the very center of Amsterdam. This location, not just geographical but also epistemological, allows for particular ways of knowing and not knowing. It gives people permission of wanting to know more, to access an intimate, bone-deep understanding not of the phenomenon of migration, or the history of Amsterdam as a city of

arrival, but of how does it feel to leave a home behind and to seek safety elsewhere. Each tour is different from the other, and guides may go ‘off-script’, and conversations could go deeper so a narrative of progress despite adversities is not transmitted without discrepancies or moments of pause. But by attempting to redraw the figure of the refugee into that of a newcomer – not much different from the many expats living in Amsterdam – Rederij Lampedusa ends up obscuring the inner workings of a system that is steeped in racial thinking and that determines the price of inclusion through a careful distribution of state protection and state violence.

I inserted Chapter 3 in the middle of the dissertation because I wanted to make clear how the juxtaposition of *strangers* versus an ideal liberal subject, which finds its roots in the advertised failure of multiculturalism, continues to have a normative effect in the present: even across locations and within projects that seek to offset prejudice and stereotypical representations. The power of this differentiating discourse lies in how it straddles populist invocations against the Other and its offspring, and the liberal left invites to humanitarian welcome: in the first, migrants, refugees, but also first and second generations need to be kept under surveillance and, preferably, out of Europe; in the second, they need to be helped fulfill their potential but only as long as they fulfill the criteria of loyalty to the hosting country’s value and culture. Any project that aims instead at radically rethinking the notion of citizenship status and national sovereignty as the only possible route into the rights and affordances of belonging remains at the fringes of the public sphere: an unpractical dream. In this sense, we must question the synchronicity in how contemporary expressions of the memory of colonialism and slavery as well as first-hand accounts of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ have been increasingly heritagized starting from the mid-2010s. The motive behind the current wave of ‘intellectual and political labor on the colonial past’ happening ‘precisely when the borders of Europe and who belongs in it are contested and racism across Europe is at once denied and celebrated...’ needs to be carefully observed since it could serve the purpose, not of historical reckoning. but as ‘an act of closure and of completion, as a new benchmark of virtue’, conferring ‘a new sense of moral and national conscience’ (Stoler 2016, 155–56).

Chapter 4 returns to the Tropenmuseum to examine how, through the exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery*, the museum attempted to both respond to a transnational discourse on the enduring legacies of colonialism and on how to decolonize institution; and, by centering the figure of the descendants of the enslaved, to reinforce the claim to full belonging of Afro-descendant Dutch

citizens. The memory of slavery has had a precise role in how dominant actors have framed claims of Afro-Surinamese and Antilleans citizens as connected to their identity more than to the fight for equality and material redress. For minoritized subjects memory functions as a resource and property: a tool to ground identities and make them homogenous enough to become interlocutors for the state. But, if in the 1970s and 1980s the memory of slavery had been connected to anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle, in the 1990s it became a resource for campaigning for citizenship rights (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020). The curatorial team of *Afterlives of Slavery* was mindful of the ‘social drama’ surrounding the commemoration of slavery in which a ‘well-rehearsed set of roles’ (Balkenhol 2014, 110) is split between ‘white’ Dutch minimizing the aftereffects of colonialism and slavery, and black subjectivities reduced to victimhood or anger. By emphasizing histories of survival and not of victimhood, and by focusing on the ambiguities of freedom, the display works to eschew a feeling of hopelessness while also carefully avoiding provoking guilt. Privileging a perspective that highlighted personal relationships and feelings towards the afterlives of slavery, however, fails to address how this ‘common history shared by black and white’ is not evenly shared by all Dutch citizens. For some, the engagement with the memory of slavery remains theoretical and thus the exhibition provided an opportunity for creating empathy in this portion of the public (since guilt is framed as counter-productive and polarizing). For Dutch citizens of Surinamese and Antillean descent – for whom this particular memory is tied to their claim for recognition and citizenship rights – the exhibition, by highlighting their agency offered a corrective to how they are represented. However, the display eschews making explicit references to how the afterlives of slavery and colonialism manifest in the lives of racialized subjects and thus ends up glossing over the material realities of differential and conditional belonging.

Through the exhibition and the collaborations and public programming connected to it, the museum manages to position itself in a specific way within the public debate on colonialism and its memorialization in a specific way. By emphasizing the implication of the museum’s gaze and history of collecting with the colonial project, the institution again produces a novel timeline of change. In this case, the latest modalities through which outsider experts are included in the exhibition overwrite a very recent past in which activist knowledge would have been discounted or regarded as too radical. Although collaboration is assessed critically through a text that the museum published in tandem with the exhibition, it still could not fully explore how, at present, the push towards inclusiveness and the pursuit of a decolonial

approach is dependent on the work and commitment of individual members of staff. The commemoration of colonialism and slavery in institutional settings cannot, thus, be separated by a precise history of discounting the ‘human cost’ of such progress. For instance, the role of the activists who are now routinely invited to lend their voice, and therefore credibility, to the institution would be, until not too long ago, omitted from the museum’s narrative. Moreover, such projects also respond to the goal of attracting a more diverse audience in accordance with the aims of national and international cultural policy – and the funding secured through adherence to these objectives. The comments coming from individuals inside and outside of the museum reveal a sense of guardedness stemming from the awareness that the ‘coloniality within’ of the institution cannot be challenged through diversity work, through the language of policy, and the advertisement of ‘good practices’. Pushing for change, in this fraught context, implies having to unpack what change means in a sector with an uncanny ability to turn struggles into metaphors, and material redistribution of resources and access into symbolic investments.

Chapter 5 continues the exploration of how memory can be operationalized to ground identities and strengthen right-based claims, by examining the role of The Black Archives (TBA) in producing and circulating notions of belonging, black subjectivity, and citizenship. Differently from their predecessors in the 1990s and early 2000s, the current generation of activists – with whom the Archives aligns in terms of objectives – are not solely concerned with making historical truths emerge. They are also engaging with “non-canonical intellectual traditions in the Netherlands and elsewhere capable of doing justice to the colonial past and slavery” (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 3). Afro-Dutch organizers attempt to foreground the racial-colonial dimension of structural inequalities ranging from the lack of opportunities in education, employment, and housing to police violence; but also behind the permanence of *Zwarte Piet* in blackface and Eurocentric curricula in schools and modes of representation in museums. By linking with international movements like Black Lives Matter the challenge then becomes ‘translating globally circulating discourses to local contexts, searching for ways to connect with, but also find their own positions within, these international arenas’ (Balkenhol and Coenders 2020, 2). For the Archives the need to collect and archive tangible traces of current expressions of a nascent anti-racism movement, thus historicizing it and connecting it to a lineage of protest, is part of a broader strategy in which inequality and discrimination need to be fought through education and through connecting contemporary struggles to the long *durée* of coloniality. For instance, the protests against

Zwarte Piet have become a pivotal moment in the historicization of the new wave of anti-racism activism in the Netherlands, but also in how the TBA is situating itself within it. The broader aim for the organization is producing an autonomous cultural archive capable of retrieving the black radical tradition and connecting it to the history of homegrown Afro-Dutch activism. Foregrounding the memory of colonialism and slavery means acknowledging its potential to act as a resource to advance a political agenda. The goals of this strategy move between short-term representational progress, e.g. a stop to the Zwarte Piet character; but also long-term radical change, e.g. eliminating social disparities based on race (and gender, class, and ability) through a pedagogical project aimed at revealing the colonial roots of current systems of differentiation and exploitation.

The success that the organization has enjoyed and the number of high-profile collaborations with institutions run parallel with a varying perception on whether or not the Archives do activist work or are run by activists. Activism in the sense of direct political action is not the core of their work, which instead is focused on archiving and exhibiting – and thus heritagizing – the past and present anti-racism movements. Operating within the confines of a cultural program, through which TBA highlights its role in representing multiple diasporic communities and their heritage, allows to gain the type of recognition that ensures longevity, funding, and high-profile institutional collaborations. At the same time, by defining their role within the cultural field and through cultural activities TBA remains within the boundaries established by the national discursive space on identity and heritage, in which belonging is something to pursue within the horizon of citizenship rights granted by the state. Together with responding to the need for a ‘safe space’ where ‘to put ourselves central’ (Esajas and Abreu 2019), the Archives are helping to memorialize a certain version of activism as it happens. This means that before the potential of this movement is realized – or even before it can be called a movement – a loosely connected group of people, ideals, and goals for the future exists as an exhibition: it has entered the archive. This exceeds documentation for internal purposes and goes instead in the direction of using these memories, still not fully sedimented, as a resource: a way of connecting the past and present of black Dutch activism to strengthen its identity. Once this identity is established and made cohesive through social media profiles and state-subsidized meeting places it also becomes property: something to curate and guard from appropriation. Following a trajectory that has been paved by the last thirty years of discourse on rights through recognition cannot be deemed a completely autonomous choice. And yet

playing along with these politics could end up jeopardizing the opportunity to build sustainable, intersectional alliances that seek to overturn the status quo instead of achieving a slightly less constrictive version of belonging.

The biggest strength of my work is that it tests my arguments by following different threads across multiple scales: a perspective that from bird's eye travels into institutional 'blind spots'. At the same time, it could be considered a limit the fact that each section in each chapter could have originated an entire dissertation just devoted to that sub-topic. For instance, the cultural policy analyst in me would have wanted to go into detail about how the notion of diversity has been deployed in a variety of policies, annual reports, and public statements across not just museums but the entire cultural sector. Another related theme is an investigation of the type of temporary appointments that make the turnover rate in museums so high and how it follows gender, age, race, and class lines. But however all-consuming might feel, the time and energy spent working on a doctoral dissertation represents the first step in a research career. And the tidal, at times dizzying, focus across big and small cultural organizations, century-old institutions and temporary projects is what has helped me in my project of tracking: I felt that to understand how memory and heritage do not only exist, but are produced, assembled and mobilized I needed to necessarily look in big and small places, and into the skinfolds of what appears solid and accepted. The natural progression of this work, and my general attitude regarding knowledge, would be to go in the opposite direction and focus on only one location and one project, and this way, compensate another limit of this thesis which has been the hiccupping rhythm in which I conducted my interviews. Going forward, and after having learned many lessons through trial and error, I would like to approach this part of research with less anxiety regarding whether I know enough to be asking certain questions, while still maintaining a deep awareness of the extractivist nature of academic work. The processes I have examined in this work is not limited to the Netherlands but is happening, at different speeds, across several locations in which a 'rediscovery' of the colonial co-occurs with a flattening of the narratives surrounding contemporary migration. The function of cultural memory that I have begun to explore can and should also analyzed in contexts different than the Netherlands and I hope I will have the opportunity to do so in the near future.

I am aware that the picture this conclusion paints is missing the oxygen-giving part in which I propose an alternative. My intention, fuzzy at first and then more and more concrete, has been to intentionally take a step back from looking at solutions and alternatives to instead focus on reflecting on the

nature of change and in particular, on what is accepted as a sign of progress. Although this dissertation cannot offer a roadmap to possible solutions or alternatives, it should be read as an invitation to remain watchful. Not in the sense of suspecting each other, of attempting to find what is wrong with projects and practices for the sake of being critical. But because in the face of rising inequality and precarity, affecting every sphere of our existence, we cannot accept that promises of gradual amendments can offer a roadmap for the future – that working for slow, trickle-down improvements can lead to radical change. And that, in the face of multiple life-threatening crises brought by the all-devouring needs of capitalism, it still makes sense to articulate political demands within the confines of propriety and civility and through arenas that are cultural – and whose survival hinges on being able to secure subsidies. Safe spaces, representational progress, and creative expression can be a cure for the permanent hangover of living contemporary life. But they cannot alone ensure the type of long-term solidarity and solid, uninterrupted intimacy between *us* and *them* that is needed before we can even begin to think how to act and fight jointly: not for unlimited progress, or unevenly distributed protections but for a future for all, everywhere.

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Summary

Memory as Resource and Property: Tracking the intimacies between ways of remembering the past and governing the present.

This dissertation consists in a ‘project of tracking’ (Lowe 2015) of how certain types of cultural memory become a resource and property for those individuals and groups who are embodied in difference and therefore positioned outside of full belonging. Memory functions as a tool to ground identities and make them homogenous enough to become interlocutors for the state, and state-like formations; although this strategy is usually framed in mainstream discourses as stemming from the desire of minoritized groups to be fully included, the parameters of what exactly constitutes a valid attempt at memorializing and what is considered a valid enough identity keep shifting. This is in turn instrumental for a sophisticated politics of recognition, which redistributes belonging among those that can prove to be ‘whole’ whilst postponing indefinitely any long-term, sustainable, structural change. The context that started to emerge throughout my research is one characterized by the outcome of three decades of heavy symbolic investments into an idea of culture as the arena in which to better articulate the request for recognition and redress.

If the roots of this phenomenon can be found in the advertised ‘failure’ of the multicultural project in the 2000s, it is the second half of the 2010s – the period going roughly from the ‘refugee crisis’ to the pandemic – to have witnessed a growing intensity in how cultural memory is staged as a resource and property. During this time the heritagization of the ongoing ‘crisis’ has moved in parallel with a new wave of knowledge production on the colonial past. At the same time, these years saw the spreading of populist rallying cries against the influx of migrants and a hardening of Europe’s border regimes. As Stoler (2016), among others, remarks this synchronicity needs to be questioned. By bringing together an interdisciplinary theoretical approach with an empirical focus on some of the locations in which the interplay between belonging and recognition takes place, this dissertation seeks to interrogate the politics that this evolving function of memory serves; and, using the Netherlands and the city of Amsterdam as a backdrop, it also investigates the locations, physical but also epistemological, in which the ‘unsafe’ belonging of old and new Others is construed and contested. The vantage point of this research consists in employing a multi-sited and multi-scalar point of view, which brings together a national institution such as Amsterdam’s Tropenmuseum, an artist-led project as Rederij Lampedusa, and The Black Archives, a grassroots archive. By examining projects that are different in

format and modality of engagement I wanted to make clear that narratives about who can and cannot aspire to belong are produced and circulated across big and small cultural organizations, century-old institutions, and temporary projects. Chapter 1 traces how these discourses have been engendered in the Netherlands, throughout different political eras, beginning with the arrival of overseas nationals from former colonies, and over a time period that goes from the post-war years to the 1980s. Since then and with the emergence of a sophisticated politics of recognition, cultural memory has been tied to identity: its mobilization allows subjects with an unsafe, unstable position in the recent past of the country to strengthen their bid to be formally recognized as belonging fully to the present and future of the Dutch polity. This model has been repurposed in recent times for each group of ‘newcomers’ arriving and wishing to settle in the country: time after time, elite political actors have deployed an ideal subject to oppose ‘strangers’, who are un-integrable because of their difference.

My findings are organized into four empirical chapters focusing each on a specific facet of the function of memory I study. Chapter 2 examines the Tropenmuseum in a phase of transition in which it both seeks to address its different, expanded constituency while also devoting a new awareness to how to best explore the institution’s implication with the colonial project. To test whether this commitment to self-reflexivity spills over outside the walls of the museum, the chapter examines two participatory projects taking place in the borough where the Tropenmuseum is located, which help produce this district as a cosmopolitan destination within the city but that fail to interrogate the colonial undertones within this narrative. Chapter 3 continues to dissect the tensions behind the museum’s mobilization of cosmopolitan ethics against essentialized representation by analyzing the temporary exhibition *Aleppo*. The recruitment of Syrian refugees as guides as part of the museum’s outreach program is not enough to offset a script in which the successful ‘migrant’ is the one closest to an imagined liberal Dutch subject. Similarly, the canal tours of *Rederij Lampedusa* rely on refugees as storytellers to expand the knowledge of the public on the issue of migration, which ends up buttressing the narrative of Europe as safe haven and of a ‘good refugee’ that uses the memory of their journey as a ticket into temporary inclusion. Chapter 4, by using as a backdrop the Tropenmuseum’s exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery*, contextualizes recent developments in how the memory of slavery is being mobilized through the figure of the ‘descendant’. For Dutch citizens of Surinamese and Antillean descent, this particular memory is tied to their claim for recognition and citizenship rights. The exhibition, by highlighting

the agency and resilience of enslaved people and their descendants, offered a corrective to how they are represented. However, the display eschews making explicit references to how the afterlives of slavery and colonialism manifest in the lives of racialized subjects and thus ends up glossing over the material realities of differential and conditional belonging. Finally, Chapter 5 analyzes the hybrid role of The Black Archives: together with responding to the need for a ‘safe space’ in which to center the experience of the Afro-Dutch diasporas, is also helping to memorialize a certain version of activism as it happens. For the Archives the need to collect and archive tangible traces of current expressions of a nascent anti-racism movement, thus historicizing it and connecting it to a lineage of protest, is part of a broader strategy in which inequality and discrimination need to be fought through education and through connecting contemporary struggles to the long durée of coloniality. However, once this movement is connected to an identity, established, and made cohesive through social media profiles and state-subsidized meeting places, it also becomes property: something to curate and guard from appropriation. Finally, I end the dissertation with some concluding reflection tying together the multiple threads that compose my argument and with the prospect of continue to examine the function of memory I have delineated across different contexts and locations.

Samenvatting

Herinnering als bron en eigendom: De intimiteiten opsporen tussen de manieren van herinneren van het verleden en het regeren van het heden.

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit een “project of tracking” (Lowe 2015) van hoe bepaalde soorten cultureel geheugen een hulpbron en eigendom worden voor die individuen en groepen die ‘embodied in difference’ zijn en daarom buiten volledige saamhorigheid worden geplaatst. De herinnering functioneert als een instrument om identiteiten te gronden en homogeen genoeg te maken om gesprekspartners te worden voor de staat, en staatsachtige formaties; hoewel deze strategie in het mainstream discours meestal wordt gekaderd als voortkomend uit de wens van geminderde groepen om volledig te worden opgenomen, blijven de parameters van wat precies een geldige poging tot herdenken is en wat als een geldige identiteit genoeg wordt beschouwd, verschuiven. Dit is op zijn beurt weer instrumenteel voor een geraffineerde politiek van erkenning, die het toebehoren herverdeelt onder degenen die kunnen bewijzen ‘heel’ te zijn, terwijl elke duurzame structurele verandering op lange termijn voor onbepaalde tijd wordt uitgesteld. De context die tijdens mijn onderzoek begon te ontstaan is er een die gekenmerkt wordt door het resultaat van drie decennia van zware symbolische investeringen in een idee van cultuur als de arena waarin de vraag naar erkenning en genoegdoening beter kan worden gearticuleerd.

Als de wortels van dit fenomeen kunnen worden gevonden in de geadverteerde ‘mislukking’ van het multiculturele project in de jaren 2000, dan is de tweede helft van de jaren 2010 - de periode die ruwweg loopt van de ‘vluchtelingencrisis’ tot de pandemie - getuige geweest van een toenemende intensiteit in de manier waarop het culturele geheugen wordt opgevoerd als bron en bezit. In deze periode liep de herdenking van de huidige “crisis” parallel met een nieuwe golf van kennisproductie over het koloniale verleden. Tegelijkertijd zagen we in deze jaren de verspreiding van populistische strijdkreten tegen de toestroom van migranten en een verharding van Europa’s grensregimes. Zoals onder andere Stoler (2016) opmerkt moet deze synchroniciteit in twijfel worden getrokken. Door een interdisciplinaire theoretische benadering samen te brengen met een empirische focus op enkele van de locaties waar het samenspel tussen toebehoren en erkenning plaatsvindt, probeert dit proefschrift de politiek te bevragen die deze evoluerende functie van het geheugen dient; en, met Nederland en de stad Amsterdam als achtergrond, onderzoekt het ook de locaties, fysiek maar ook epistemologisch, waar het ‘onveilig’ toebehoren van oude en nieuwe Anderen

wordt geconstrueerd en betwist. De invalshoek van dit onderzoek bestaat uit het gebruik van een multi-sited en multi-scalar point of view, waarin een nationale instelling als het Amsterdamse Tropenmuseum, een door kunstenaars geleid project als Rederij Lampedusa en The Black Archives, een grassroots archief, samenkomen. Door projecten te onderzoeken die verschillen in vorm en modaliteit van engagement wilde ik duidelijk maken dat verhalen over wie er wel en wie er niet bij kan horen worden geproduceerd en gecirculeerd in grote en kleine culturele organisaties, eeuwenoude instellingen en tijdelijke projecten. Hoofdstuk 1 laat zien hoe deze vertogen in Nederland tot stand zijn gekomen in verschillende politieke tijdperken, te beginnen met de komst van overzeese onderdanen uit voormalige koloniën, en over een periode die loopt van de naoorlogse jaren tot de jaren tachtig. Sindsdien en met de opkomst van een verfijnde politiek van erkenning, is het culturele geheugen verbonden met de identiteit: de mobilisatie ervan stelt subjecten met een onveilige, onstabiele positie in het recente verleden van het land in staat hun streven naar formele erkenning als behorend tot het heden en de toekomst van de Nederlandse politiek kracht bij te zetten. Dit model is de laatste tijd opnieuw gebruikt voor elke groep ‘nieuwkomers’ die het land binnenkomt en zich er wil vestigen: keer op keer hebben politieke elitemakers een ideaal subject ingezet tegen ‘vreemdelingen’, die onintegreerbaar zijn vanwege hun verschil.

Mijn bevindingen zijn onderverdeeld in vier empirische hoofdstukken die elk ingaan op een specifiek facet van de geheugenfunctie die ik bestudeer. Hoofdstuk 2 onderzoekt het Tropenmuseum in een overgangsfase waarin het zich enerzijds richt op zijn andere, uitgebreide achterban en anderzijds een nieuw bewustzijn ontwikkelt over hoe de betrokkenheid van de instelling bij het koloniale project het best kan worden onderzocht. Om na te gaan of dit streven naar zelfreflexiviteit ook buiten de muren van het museum doorwerkt, onderzoekt het hoofdstuk twee participatieve projecten die plaatsvinden in de wijk waar het Tropenmuseum is gevestigd en die ertoe bijdragen dat deze wijk een kosmopolitische bestemming binnen de stad wordt, maar die de koloniale ondertonen van dit verhaal niet ondervragen. Hoofdstuk 3 gaat verder met het ontleden van de spanningen achter de mobilisatie van de kosmopolitische ethiek van het museum tegenover de essentiële representatie door de tijdelijke tentoonstelling Aleppo te analyseren. De werving van Syrische vluchtelingen als gidsen als onderdeel van het outreach-programma van het museum is niet voldoende om een script te compenseren waarin de succesvolle ‘migrant’ het dichtst bij een verbeeld liberaal Nederlands subject staat. Ook de rondvaarten van Rederij Lampedusa doen een beroep op vluchtelingen als vertellers om de kennis van het publiek over het migratievraagstuk te vergroten, wat

uiteindelijk het verhaal versterkt van Europa als veilige haven en van een ‘goede vluchteling’ die de herinnering aan zijn reis gebruikt als een ticket voor tijdelijke integratie.

In hoofdstuk 4 worden aan de hand van de tentoonstelling *Afterlives of Slavery* van het Tropenmuseum recente ontwikkelingen in de mobilisatie van de herinnering aan de slavernij via de figuur van de ‘afstammeling’ gecontextualiseerd. Voor Nederlandse burgers van Surinaamse en Antilliaanse afkomst is deze specifieke herinnering verbonden met hun aanspraak op erkenning en burgerschapsrechten. Door de nadruk te leggen op de kracht en veerkracht van tot slaaf gemaakte mensen en hun nakomelingen, biedt de tentoonstelling een correctie op de manier waarop zij worden gerepresenteerd. De tentoonstelling vermijdt echter expliciete verwijzingen naar hoe de nasleep van slavernij en kolonialisme zich manifesteert in het leven van geracialiseerde subjecten en verdoezelt zo de materiële realiteit van differentiële en voorwaardelijke saamhorigheid. Ten slotte analyseert hoofdstuk 5 de hybride rol van *The Black Archives*: naast het voorzien in de behoefte aan een ‘veilige ruimte’ om de ervaringen van de Afro-Nederlandse diaspora te centreren, draagt het ook bij aan het gedenken van een bepaalde versie van activisme. Voor het Archief is de noodzaak om tastbare sporen van huidige uitingen van een ontluikende antiracisembeweging te verzamelen en te archiveren, en deze zo te historiseren en te verbinden met een lijn van protest, onderdeel van een bredere strategie waarin ongelijkheid en discriminatie moeten worden bestreden door onderwijs en door hedendaagse strijd te verbinden met de lange duur van het kolonialisme. Maar als deze beweging eenmaal verbonden is met een identiteit, gevestigd is, en samenhangend is gemaakt via sociale mediaprofielen en door de staat gesubsidieerde ontmoetingsplaatsen, wordt ze ook eigendom: iets om te cureren en te beschermen tegen toe-eigening. Ten slotte eindig ik mijn proefschrift met een slotbeschouwing waarin ik de vele draden waaruit mijn betoog bestaat samenbindt en met het vooruitzicht om de functie van het geheugen die ik heb afgebakend in verschillende contexten en locaties te blijven onderzoeken.

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