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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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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.