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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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## 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 antiracismebeweging 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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