

Dutch Dealings with the Slavery Past: Contexts of an Exhibition¹

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Confronting a nation with the less glorious, or even horrific dimensions of its history is a sensitive undertaking. Who wants to be a descendant of the bad guys? It might be even more sensitive to confront a nation with present-day legacies of such a past. Who wants to be accused of still belonging to the bad guys? Still, this is exactly what many cultural heritage workers and educators were dealing with during their preparations of all kinds of events and productions for the 150th anniversary of the abolition of Dutch slavery in 2013. How were they to avoid simple victim and guilt schemes and to seduce people to contemplate things they would rather not think about?

Of course, there are many ways to approach this problem. Much depends on who wants to present what to whom and to what purpose. Or, to be more specific, it is about representation: who speaks, how, why, and for whom? Before I present the specific case of the *Black & White* project at the Amsterdam Tropenmuseum, we need to understand some of the challenges involved in making public history on a contested past: slavery and its legacies. Therefore, I will address four dimensions or spheres in Dutch society where the slavery past is up against such challenges: the public sphere; the government, as representatives of the public sphere; academia, studying society and its history; and, last but not least, education and public history (museums, documentaries, magazines), presenting scholarly findings as well as popular developments.

The Public Sphere

This is a highly heterogeneous and fluid domain, as it is characterized by a diversity of socio-economic classes, ethnicities, religions, generations and political preferences and diversified views of gender and sexuality. This diversity scatters the stories people grow up with, which makes it hard to generalize about public opinion on a nation's past, not to mention its present-day legacies.

Who, then, is the inheritor of a nation's past? Is everyone living within the borders of the present-day Netherlands an inheritor of the Dutch slavery past? Or is it just the descendants of those who lived in the Netherlands in 1863, the year of Abolition/Emancipation,² and are still living in that territory today? This means that about two-fifths of the population are as foreign to that past as any other foreigner because they immigrated sometime after 1863. Twenty per cent of the population are no more than third-generation inhabitants of the Netherlands. What complicates it even more is the fact that this last group consists of descendants of the enslaved, approximately two per cent of the Dutch population. This makes it even more doubtful that the people of the Netherlands share a common opinion about their slavery past.

Nor is there any common ground amongst the native Dutch population. Many can be heard to say that their ancestors were common labourers, simple peasants, servants, in short, subalterns, who had a hard life too. So how on earth, they say, can they be considered to be the inheritors of a horrible past in which they were also victims of the ruling classes? The solution to this dilemma could be the position that once people identify with a nation, they also adopt its history, or at least the outcomes or benefits of that history, although that still is hard to imagine for those whose

ancestors were enslaved. This, of course, does not mean to say that identification is exclusive in this trans-national world; on the contrary, people can be inheritors of more than one national history, and of local and world history at the same time.

Until recently, the overall majority of people in the Netherlands actually had no idea about a Dutch slavery past whatsoever. This is now changing rapidly. The best indicator for this is a survey held by the most popular history magazine among representative samples of the Dutch population, asking which episode in Dutch history they found the most embarrassing.³ In the year 2000, 7 per cent put slavery/slave trade at the top of their list; this went up to 16 per cent in 2004 and rose to 24 per cent in 2008, making it the general number one of Dutch historical atrocities ever, i.e., worse than the Second World War, the ultimate benchmark in Dutch history. To this quarter of the population we can add those who think that slavery was bad, but that some other episode in history was worse. It is unclear how big this part is exactly, but it does mean that a substantial part of the Dutch population is aware and ashamed of the slavery past.

There is, of course, also a very substantial part of the population that is either not aware of this past at all, or that is aware but not embarrassed or ashamed. An example of the latter is a statement posted on an internet forum for Dutch seniors, about Members of Parliament who addressed the theme of the Dutch slavery past in Parliament: ‘We are not responsible. Obviously they are still afflicted with a “do away with us” mentality. Let these persons resign from Parliament’.⁴

Public opinion, therefore, is differentiated and divided on the subject of the slavery past. It is not commonly accepted as a fact of history we all share, like the Eighty Years War against Spain or the lost football match final against Germany in 1974. The best example of the sensitivity of history that is not commonly shared is probably the recent public debate in the Netherlands on the question of whether Saint Nicolas’s helpmates, black-faced Black Petes, are racist or not. Some say they are related to the slavery past and illustrative of Dutch racism, or at least a relic of a past that should be done away with as soon as possible. Others cling to the idea that Black Pete is part of an innocent Dutch tradition for children, who has nothing to do with racism at all and who got blackened by climbing through chimneys to give presents to children. This heated ‘debate’ has been accompanied by bomb scares and numerous death threats.

The Government

The second sphere in Dutch society where challenges about the slavery past can be encountered is the institution that, in changing compositions, represents the majority of the people: the government. This, obviously, is also a problematic sphere because if a government is anything, it is inclined to engage in political opportunism and not inclined to deal with a contested past, despite itself having played a dominant role in that past.

Obviously, the Dutch state provided a legal and political basis as well as the infrastructure for slavery. It was also the government that eventually, at least formally, abolished slavery. There can be no doubt at all that the Dutch government held responsibility for slavery. After 1863, however, when former enslaved people had become free citizens and former slave owners had

been compensated for their lost property, the Dutch government ceased to feel any more need to deal with its slavery past in any way.

This attitude only changed more than a century later when the Dutch government began to be challenged by immigrant groups from Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean in the late 1990s to face up to a slavery past it had facilitated for so long and that was now, in retrospect, coming to be considered a crime against humanity. In 1998, the Afro-Dutch women's movement Sophiedela presented a petition to the Dutch Parliament called *Traces of Slavery*, in which they demanded a monument to commemorate slavery. Eventually, this demand was accepted by the Dutch government. After a few years of negotiations and fights between Dutch policymakers, on the one hand, and the National Platform Slavery Past, uniting a large number of Afro-Dutch associations, on the other, a national monument was erected in Amsterdam and unveiled by the Queen and the Prime Minister in 2002. One year later, the national institute for commemorating and studying the Dutch slavery past (NiNsee), funded by the government, opened its doors. A third outcome was the production of a school TV series on Dutch slavery, also funded by the government.⁵

One year before the slavery monument was unveiled, the Dutch Minister attending the UN World Conference Against Racism in Durban, South Africa, had said that Dutch slavery had been a 'great injustice done in the past' for which he, on behalf of the government, expressed his 'deep remorse'. Since that day, representatives of the Dutch government have repeated these or similar words at least once every year. However, the word apology or apologies was not used once, which was mainly a matter of money. While still in Durban, the very same Dutch Minister, Roger van Boxtel, declared that 'our Cabinet feels that paying for reparations is not a proper way to recognize that slavery was a black page in our history'.⁶ Paying for a monument, an institute and a TV series, however, was considered to be an instance of good governance and 'a stimulus to improve the position of ethnic minorities in their active citizenship'.⁷

The times have changed rapidly since then. In 2008, the former Minister for Integration Affairs, Rita Verdonk, an immensely popular leader of her own populist party at the time, received a lot of positive response when she observed: 'They want to erect slavery monuments everywhere in the Netherlands and now they also want to abolish our Saint Nicolas feast (because of Black Pete)!!'⁸ Although Verdonk retreated from the political stage, the tone of the political debate has become only tougher and more intolerant since then, and those using this rhetoric now have a substantial representation in Parliament and other political forums.

The slavery past, therefore, is a far from generally accepted part of Dutch political awareness. On the contrary, one of the aims of right-wing politicians appears to be to restore a conspiracy of silence on this past. In 2012, the government withdrew its funding of the NiNsee institute, less than ten years after it had helped to found this slavery institute.⁹

Minister-president Jan Peter Balkenende:

"We mogen nooit meer zwijgen, dat is te lang gedaan"

Op 1 juli j.l. hield minister-president Jan Peter Balkenende de keynote-toespraak tijdens de Nationale herdenking Nederlands slavernijverleden in het Oosterpark te Amsterdam. Bijgaand een samenvatting van de toespraak van de premier, die begon door te refereren naar Tula, de leider van de slavenopstand van 1795 op Curaçao.

Balkenende: "Wij verlangen niets anders dan onze vrijheid. Met deze woorden maakte Tula zijn wensen kenbaar. Tijdens een bezoek eerder dit jaar aan Museo Tula op Curaçao, werd ik op indringende wijze geconfronteerd met zijn verhaal. Museo Tula is de voormalige plantage Knip waar de opstand begon en



Prime minister Balkenende: 'Too long we remained silent, silent, that should never happen again', 1st July 2008. (Photos: NiNsee)

Diepe spijt voor slavernijverleden



'Deep remorse for slavery past'; government-officials at yearly commemoration, 1st July 2009.

Academia

The third sphere in the present context of the Dutch slavery past is academic research, which is also subject to intensive debate. However, it is a less fluid and more stable sphere than the previous two. At the same time, however, it is less accessible to the general public.

Slavery, the slave trade, *marronage* and slave resistance have been studied by academic researchers in the Netherlands more or less since the 1940s/1950s. However, it was only from the 1970s that its production became more substantial. Between 1970 and 2000, two to three books and some five articles a year on average were published on slave-related topics, including quite a few PhD dissertations. Over the next decade, this has increased again. I counted at least four books a year on average as well as at least some six to seven articles a year, probably more, published in academic journals. At present, there are at least some thirty researchers working on Dutch slavery-related topics. About one-third of these are descendants of formerly enslaved Africans, meaning that some sort of Afro-emancipation has indeed occurred in this part of academia.

Of course, these figures do not say anything about the contents of what is published about the Dutch slavery past. In former publications, I have tried to show that it is possible to differentiate between a white (neo-)colonial and a black postcolonial position in research, and that these positions are not necessarily linked to skin colour.¹⁰ Rather, they are linked to historical perspective: whose story do they mean to present, from what angle, with what kind of analysis and relating to what meta-historical narrative. This means, of course, that there is no common Dutch academic historical viewpoint in relation to the slavery past. Even the differentiation into black and white perspectives is not something that is widely agreed upon. On the contrary.

Let me take myself as an example. I have been grouped by some in one corner with the most Eurocentric, white historian of slavery in the Netherlands, but this historian does not want me to be in his corner at all, and we consider each other adversaries. I have also been accused of not sufficiently stressing the economic exploitation of the enslaved, which would imply a white

approach, whereas a black historian described me as an example of a white historian with a black perspective in a recent issue of a scholarly history journal.¹¹ Obviously, the question of perspective is decisive but complicated, and there is absolutely no common approach of academia towards the Dutch slavery past. The most reassuring aspect of the debate is that as long as there is a debate ongoing, there is less likelihood of the conspiracy of silence returning to cover up this part of history once more.

Education and Public History

This dimension may be the most important because history as presented in schools and museums is meant mainly for the future generation. It has an aura of ‘truth’, legitimized as such by teachers, textbooks, curators and probably even more so by the State, as it is the State that determines the attainment targets of what children should know when they finish school. This implies that what is not taught or learned must obviously be of lesser importance.

Since the 1990s, slavery has been one of the educational core goals (*kerndoelen*) formulated by the Ministry of Education that schoolchildren in secondary education should learn about. This has been even more formalized since a state commission formulated a national historical canon, in which ‘Slavery’ is one of the fifty so-called ‘windows’ on Dutch history. Children have to be familiar with at least three historical concepts relating to the theme of slavery: the transatlantic slave trade, plantation colony and abolition.¹² So, obviously, a lot has changed since the days I went to school when only one sentence in my secondary school history book was dedicated to the Dutch slavery past: ‘Around 1860 slavery was abolished, first in the East and then in the West [Indies]’.¹³

One of my former students, Lucia Hogervorst, studied the way in which slavery has been presented in history school books for primary education since the 1950s.¹⁴ Very briefly, her findings were as follows:

- 1950s: no mention or very briefly; often no more than one sentence
- 1970s: no mention or very briefly, though a bit more than before, mainly on slavery in the U.S.A.
- 1990s/2000s: mention of slavery in every textbook, substantially more and with a better balance between Dutch and North American slavery
- In three of the four latest methods, personalized stories are presented to make the school children empathize with enslaved children in the past; there is also a new focus on slave resistance and *marronage*, and the word ‘negro’ has been replaced by ‘African’.

In 2011, the Amsterdam council asked researcher Ineke Mok to investigate the attention given to slavery in secondary school history books, which showed the following outcome in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1: Number of pages on slavery in history books per educational type.

Book	level 1 and 2 vmbo	level 2 and 3 havo	level 2 and 3 vwo
Feniks	2/100 (2 %)	2/120 (1,7 %)	3/120 (2,5 %)
Geschiedenis Werkplaats	2/100 (2 %)	?	9/180 (5 %)
Memo	5/100 (5 %)	3/119 (2,5 %)	11/140 (7,9 %)
Sprekend Verleden	?	11/180 (6,1 %)	11/180 (6,1 %)

2/100 = 2 out of 100 pages dedicated to slavery (Africa and/or US and/or Suriname and Dutch Caribbean);
 ? = no data available.

Source: I. Mok, 'Juf, was dat écht zo?' *Lessen over slavernij in het Amsterdamse voortgezet onderwijs*. Report to the Amsterdam council, DMO, April 2011.

There are some major differences. *Feniks* not only dedicates the fewest pages to slavery, but most of these also focus on slavery in the U.S.A. and mention barely anything on the Dutch slavery past. The opposite is true of *Memo* and *Sprekend Verleden*, which have the most pages, with a substantial part of these being dedicated to Suriname and much fewer to the former Dutch Antilles. Obviously, it matters what book is used in school.

What matters even more is the attitude of teachers towards the theme of slavery. In this small survey, sixteen teachers at Amsterdam secondary schools were asked how much time they spent on slavery (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2: Amount teaching hours dedicated to slavery by 16 history teachers.

Teaching hours	Teachers	Mainly Dutch (NL) or U.S. slavery
0 - 1	1	U.S.
c. 2	6	NL + U.S.
3 - 5	5	NL + U.S.
6 - 9	2	mainly NL
> 10	2	mainly NL

Source: I. Mok, 'Juf, was dat écht zo?' *Lessen over slavernij in het Amsterdamse voortgezet onderwijs*. Report to the Amsterdam council, DMO, April 2011.

There is quite some differentiation here. All schoolchildren in the lower level of secondary school have two years of two teaching hours of history per week, that is 160 teaching hours of history in

total. This means that five hours is about 3 per cent of the total number, and ten hours between 6 and 7 per cent. The latter is quite substantial, considering that history covers not only Dutch history but also world history.

Most teachers tried to enliven their classes on slavery. Three paid for class visits to the NiNsee institute, which hosted a permanent exhibition on slavery; one showed an episode of the TV series *Roots*; two showed Spielberg's film *Amistad*; and seven showed parts, or all, of the school TV series on the Dutch slavery past made in 2002–2003.

This brings us from history at school to public history in general as we know that a substantial number of adults also watch school television. Therefore, about 100,000 adults probably watched the school TV series on slavery when it was broadcast in 2003 and 2004. We know for sure how many people saw the new series recently produced by public television, broadcast in September and October 2011: some 650,000 on average for each of its five parts, a considerable number of viewers for what is considered to be a serious subject. These viewer numbers do not include viewers who saw the repeat broadcast during those weeks, nor the internet broadcast, nor its complete rebroadcast in 2013. It was a positive decision to produce the series and to broadcast it on prime time (Sunday evenings at 8.15 p.m.). Obviously, this does not say anything about the contents of the series, but before I spend a few words on that below, we can conclude that a lot has changed on the history of slavery in the public domain since the end of the 1990s.

There were two permanent exhibitions on slavery: one at the Tropenmuseum and one at NiNsee. This last institute has now been closed down, however. The recently re-opened Rijksmuseum, which is also a national historical museum and which received spectacular reviews, has only a guiding app on colonial history including slavery. Over the past decade, quite a few temporary exhibitions have been dedicated to slavery; novels on slavery have been published, both for adults and for children; several films, documentaries, theatre plays and picture books have been produced. A substantial number of projects and events were launched in 2013, a commemoration year, but the majority of these took place in Amsterdam, much less so in the rest of the country.

This brings me to some critical notes. First of all, we should raise the question of whether the silence on the Dutch slavery past has been broken. I think it has been: it is harder and harder for anyone living in the Netherlands not to have heard about the slavery past. The next question, of course, is whether the silence on this past has been broken sufficiently and definitely. Then my answer must be no, absolutely not, for both quantitative and qualitative reasons. Quantity is under threat. Not only was the NiNsee institute closed down after only nine years, but the political and economic climate is such that there is a real chance that, after all the celebrations and events in 2013, it will be hard to put slavery-related topics back on the agenda or keep them there. The example of the U.K. in 2007–2008 has shown as much.¹⁵

A qualitative threat to the way in which the Dutch slavery past is presented is the tendency to downplay it. This is the case in academia, where some stress the financial insignificance of the Dutch slave trade or the fact that it was part and parcel of the colonial project like everywhere else. Views like these can also be heard in the public history domain as well, statements such as: without

a doubt slavery was very bad, but let us not forget that for a long time labourers in Europe had a bad time too. A recent example of such downplaying was evident in the TV series on slavery, which was rather unbalanced in its attention for defenders or relativists and the opposition against slavery and the impact of its legacies. However, I am still glad that the series was broadcast because it makes it even harder not to know that the Netherlands has a slavery past. At the same time, however, the series, which was researched for several years, shows how hard it is to present a balanced and inclusive story. Cultural heritage of the slavery past can be found in all corners of this nation, from slave-owners' mansions and abolitionist objects down to racist ideologies and colourful paintings in museums.

Meanwhile, however, the descendants of the enslaved have come to live here as well, and they have brought their legacies of this history with them. If we want to take today's history seriously, then we should redo our presentations of this history and at least examine the question if and how it continues to influence our time. This is exactly what we tried to do when I launched an exhibition project in the Amsterdam Tropenmuseum on legacies of slavery and the relation between black and white in the Netherlands.

Black & White

At a very early stage, somewhere in 2008, I asked the management of the Tropenmuseum if they would approve the staging a substantial exhibition in 2013 to tie in with the expected commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Dutch empire in that year. They almost immediately did, for several reasons. The national slavery monument, located in the park behind the museum, has served as the heart of the Keti Koti festival every 1st of July and was expected to play an even more central role in 2013. The NiNsee institute, moreover, was housed on the other side of the street in an annex of the Tropenmuseum, which also showed a permanent exhibition on the Dutch slavery past of some 200 m², with some loans from the Tropenmuseum. Even more important perhaps was the fact that the Tropenmuseum itself had been the first museum in the Netherlands to show a permanent presentation on slavery in – mainly – Suriname since 1999. Another important reason was that museums in the U.K. had just finished a successful bicentennial commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in 2008. Finally, the Netherlands were still in a state of economic prosperity and so was the museum. Reasons enough, therefore, to say yes to a commemorative project in 2013 and to expect it to be successful.

The only signs that things might become more problematic were the emotional debates that were taking place in Dutch society on the founding of a national slavery monument and the NiNsee institute.¹⁶ The first evaluations of the British bicentennial in 2007 had also shown that expectations tended to be highly divergent. It will be enlightening to turn to some of the British experiences before we take a look at those of the museum.

Laura Jane Smith observed that although 2007 was the perfect opportunity for museums to enlighten their audiences about British slave history and debates surrounding its present legacies, they, as well as their audiences, often hesitated to touch upon such an 'emotionally demanding, socially divisive and politically contentious' history.¹⁷ Part of this hesitation was caused by their

attempt to appeal to and educate the regular, mainly white and not-too-well-informed audience, while at the same time including an Afro-British audience and their perspectives on the past and the present. This implied that museums could not tell the ultimate ‘truth’ about Britishness anymore but had to become forums of debate and multivocality instead.

According to Smith et al., it was virtually impossible to combine all these objectives, although the attempts were impressive. At least one of the results was a heightened awareness of the complexities involved in wanting to be more inclusive and the conviction that a lot more had to be invested and researched – socially as well as financially – to make inclusiveness sustainable. ‘One of the key lessons learned from the Bicentenary must surely be the importance of confronting the fear of addressing dissonant and contested subjects’.

According to Waterton, Britain’s postwar shift to an ethnically very diverse society and the recent retreat from multiculturalism have resulted in the construction of a British identification with memories that say ‘don’t look back on the horrors of the past; they are not present anymore; we/you can’t undo them; we are not to blame; so instead let’s move on; we/you have never had it so good’. This trope, as Waterton calls it, seems to be inclusive; however, it evades painful historical legacies concerning racism and the negative positioning of marginalized groups.¹⁸

Although the Dutch situation differs from the British in having had a substantial Afro population in its midst for a much shorter length of time, most of the above-mentioned dilemmas are applicable to the Dutch situation as well. When I started the project at the Tropenmuseum, therefore, I knew we would have to deal with people – members of staff as well as audiences – who were largely convinced that the abolition of slavery should be celebrated but who did not want to see, let alone to address, dissonant and contested subjects.

When I proposed staging an exhibition on the contemporary legacies of slavery in the Netherlands instead of an exhibition on the history of slavery in the Dutch Caribbean colonies, a number of staff members responded with remarks like: ‘we don’t have a collection on that’, or ‘I can’t visualize it; it seems to be more of a book to me than an exhibition’, or ‘our museum promotes, even celebrates multiculturalism and equality, so why stimulate negative feelings?’, or ‘let’s not overdo the problem where there is hardly any problem left; we’re all Dutch now’. Some just said: ‘Maybe we could do an exhibition on this theme in a smaller room rather than in the main hall because it will not attract a large audience, nor can it be translated into an attractive design’. Although it remains unclear if there were also other motives behind this kind of reasoning, it is a very important one in times of crisis and substantial financial cutbacks, which, some think, can only be overcome by putting on feel-good blockbuster exhibitions.

Eventually, the museum decided that if there was enough to show and the design could be made attractive enough, the subject had enough potential after all to be shown in the main hall. This was a courageous step because still not everyone agreed, but it fitted into the museum’s track record of confronting sensitive or contested issues. However, this would be the first exhibition solely dedicated to this society, focusing on ourselves. This was new to a museum that had started out as a Colonial Museum before it turned into an anthropological museum with a special focus

on international cooperation, with the latter focus having more recently been replaced by popular and contemporary non-Western art.¹⁹

Despite this innovative move, discussions, obviously, were not over yet and continued to show how hard it is to make a shift from talking about ‘the other’ to reflecting upon ‘the self’. For example, the proposed title of the exhibition, ‘Emancipation in Black and White’, was not only considered too complicated – emancipation was supposed to be linked to women’s liberation, not to black and white relations – but also too suggestive of antagonism between black and white and too much polarization. This was not the policy of the museum.

Another example is the ongoing debate about terminology. In the Dutch language, Africans are called black, whereas Europeans are called something close to the English ‘fair’, but almost never ‘white’. There was also debate on the use of enslaved rather than slaves, the use of the very new term Afro-Dutch, and when to apply a term like ‘racist’.

A third category of debate was on themes. Why should we only focus on the relationship between descendants of the enslaved and their enslavers, and not include other newcomers in Dutch society, such as Indonesians, or Turkish and Moroccan immigrants? There was also a great deal of opposition to making the Saint Nicolas figure of Black Pete (*Zwarte Piet*) part of the exhibition’s theme. To many he is just an innocent figure in a children’s feast, who happens to be black and has nothing to do with black and white relations. Finally, black and white sexuality as a theme was omitted without much debate for fear of turning something quite complicated into something cheap and vulgar.

These and other issues were not only debated by members of the museum project group who prepared the exhibition, but they were also consciously introduced to a focus group or sounding board, which had been selected from our own social networks and consisted of black, white, young, senior, male, female, academic and non-academic participants. While the project group was almost completely white, mostly female, and all highly qualified, this much more diverse group, in which black voices often claimed more space than white, hardly ever spoke with one voice. This showed it was fairly representative.

It also complicated things, however. The sounding board group, for example, did not agree with having a project title that stressed black as being different from white. Maybe they did not find that everything was in harmony now, but felt angry or afraid of stressing the idea of first and second rate, as in the formal distinction the Dutch government makes between indigenous (native) Dutch – *autochtoon* – and non-indigenous (new, foreign, immigrant) Dutch – *allochtoon*. On the other hand, they sometimes wanted to be more explicit and give more scope to the horrors of slavery and racism and stress unequal opportunities in this society. Of particular interest were their implicit exchanges about certain issues, such as when a perspective becomes too much of a passive victim narrative, or how many perspectives can be shown in an exhibition that is meant to attract a large audience. And who is actually speaking for whom, both on the sounding board and in the subsequent exhibition?

In general, the making of the exhibition was an emancipatory process in itself. After almost a year of debate, for example, it turned out that those who had been opposed to a title with black

and white in it now felt that *Black & White* was the perfect title. The marketing team concluded that the promotion campaign should centre on provocative statements, such as ‘The word Negro is an insult’, ‘Let’s stop talking about slavery’ and ‘Whites are still boss’. Others had discovered that Black Pete might indeed be a controversial issue, and that there were differences in being black or white in Dutch society. It is hard to tell whether all the museum staff were convinced of the necessity of this exhibition. What probably helped, however, while the exhibition was going on,²⁰ is the approach that was chosen for it.



The whole project, meaning the exhibition and an intensive programme of events scheduled to take place in and around the exhibition space, centred on a rather open and inviting question, not a statement: how have relationships between black and white people in the Netherlands developed since slavery was abolished? Starting with the apartheid of slavery overseas, now living together in this society, where do we stand today? And who are ‘we’?

Under this umbrella question, we formulated a number of sub-questions, such as: what and who is actually black or white? Does people’s skin colour reveal who they are? What did we see when we were looking at each other in pre-war times, when this society was still predominantly white? Do changing numbers also change relations? Does the rise of black national role models mean that colour is not an issue anymore? Do we want to look alike? Do we want to share (everything)? Do we want to make room for each other and take each other into consideration? And is any answer to these questions all right? What would you answer if you had the other skin colour?

The paintings, objects, photos, films, audio interviews, art objects and installations we selected or produced ourselves all had this questioning atmosphere. They invited the audience to look at and to reflect upon themselves and to discuss their thoughts with others. The latter seemed to happen much more often than is generally the case with exhibitions.

A very telling example in this regard is a famous picture of the Dutch national football team having lunch during the 1996 European Championship in the U.K.. The players are seated around three tables, with all the black players sitting together at one table and all the white players sitting at the two other tables. The white coach stands in the middle.

This picture triggers a large number of questions and opinions. Have the white guys excluded the black guys, or the other way around? Is it only natural to be more comfortable with people who look the same as you do, and should we change this, like we have changed so many 'natural' things over time? Was this particular seating plan arranged from above, in this case by the coach, or was it like this every day? Do we realize how accustomed we have become to having black national heroes representing the Netherlands on the world stage? And is it like this in every sphere of Dutch society? The list of questions is endless, and so is the list of answers. Most questions were formulated by visitors themselves, and the museum did not provide any answers, although its nuanced and informative approach left little room for blatant racism.



Conclusion

The *Black & White* project dealt with all four dimensions of Dutch society where challenges about the slavery past and its legacies could be encountered: the public sphere, from the museum staff down to the potential audience, with preconceived ideas about Dutch society and its history; the government, which obviously plays a role in black and white relations and which is also the museum's main funding agency; academia, which provided much of the research that went into the exhibition; and, of course, the sphere of education and public history, in which the museum itself is a prominent player.

The questioning rather than declarative approach of this project has worked well in attracting and connecting the different spheres that were dealing with contested histories. The government dramatically cut back the museum's budget, on the one hand, but subsidized the *Black & White* project through its commemoration fund²¹ and even held it up as an example for others, on the other. In the public sphere, the project appeared to be successful as well, and the attention it received in audio-visual, written and social media was quite overwhelming. One factor which helped was that at the start of the exhibition, the question of whether Black Pete was racist or not and the underlying question of whether Dutch society was actually racist or not, resurfaced on a nationwide scale. The open and questioning approach of the project, using popular culture and art

to translate complicated scholarly or political materials into familiar questions and dilemmas, as well as the accompanying events, appeared to be helpful in attracting a highly diverse audience.

The questioning approach also appeared to be working on an individual level, as shown in visitor responses given in a number of interactive devices in the exhibition. These invited visitors to respond to issues such as being looked at as being ‘other’, stereotyping, the Black Pete debate (design a new one, or delete him) and particular dilemmas and statements (for instance: how acceptable is racial profiling by the police?). Responses turned out to be highly mixed and divergent. On a wall surrounding a kind of plaza at the end of the exhibition, people could stick up notes with their opinions. It was almost moving to see notes saying ‘Black Pete is racist!’ and ‘Black Pete should stay!’ hanging side by side.

There is a final aspect of this project which did not work well, or rather, which was still not questioning enough. The exhibition was still in danger of presenting a white gaze at black. It did question ‘self’ – both black and white – but it hardly questioned whiteness enough. Perhaps this is a theme for the next project. In any case, this project showed that the authority of public history lies not in its ability to translate exclusive knowledge and explain how it really is or was but in its ability to ask inclusive questions.

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Notes

¹ This is an earlier version of a chapter under the same title published in Carla van Boxtel, Maria Grever, Stephan Klein, (eds.), *Sensitive Pasts: Questioning Heritage in Education*. New York/Oxford: Berghahn Publishers, 2016, 92-108.

² Abolition is the term used for the (white) action of making a juridical end to the system of slavery; emancipation is the term used for the process of setting enslaved blacks free.

³ *Historisch Nieuwsblad*, July 2000, 2004, 2008.

⁴ www.seniorweb.nl (accessed 15 September 2011).

⁵ M. Balkenhol, 'Tracing Slavery; An Ethnography of Diaspora, Affect, and Cultural Heritage in Amsterdam' (PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2014).

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⁷ Vaststelling van de begroting van de uitgaven en de ontvangsten van het Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties (VII) voor het jaar 2002.

⁸ R. Verdonk, Founding Speech, *Trots Op Nederland*, 3 April 2008, Amsterdam, www.refdag.nl/media/2008/20080404_Speech_Rita_Verdonk.pdf (accessed 10 March 2015).

⁹ The institute still survives due to a small subsidy of the municipal government of Amsterdam and is now generously housed in some offices of the Amsterdam Municipal Archives.

¹⁰ For example, A. van Stipriaan, 'Disrupting the Canon: The Case of Slavery', in *Beyond the Canon: History for the Twenty-first Century*, eds S. Stuurman and M. Grever, London, 2007, 205–219.

¹¹ See P.D. Gomes, 'Slavernijgeschiedenis in de Landelijke Dagbladen', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 124, 3 (2011): 351–367, 397; P.D. Gomes, 'If You Don't Tell it Like it Was, it Can Never Be as it Ought To Be', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 125, 2 (2012): 237–241; P.C. Emmer and G.J. Oostindie, 'White is White and Black is Black and the Twain Shall Never Meet? Response to Patricia D. Gomes, Slavernijgeschiedenis in de Landelijke Dagbladen', *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 125, 2 (2012): 233–237.

¹² Vaststelling van de begrotingsstaat van het Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (VII) voor het jaar 2006, TK 30 300 VIII, no. 43.

¹³ W. Beemsterboer and C.J. Canters, *Novem, Wereld in Wording*, The Hague, [1954] 1971, 13th revised edn.

¹⁴ L. Hogervorst, 'Is de Slaaf Slecht Bedeeld in het Onderwijs? Een Onderzoek naar Beeldvorming rond Slavernij in de Naoorlogse Nederlandse Geschiedenisboekjes', *Oso, Tijdschrift voor Surinaamse Taalkunde, Letterkunde en Geschiedenis* 25, 2 (2006): 56–67.

¹⁵ See *Museums and Society* 8, 3 (2010), special issue on museums and the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade.

¹⁶ See A. van Stipriaan, 'The Long Road to a Monument', in *Facing Up to the Past. Perspectives on the Commemoration of Slavery from Africa, the Americas and Europe*, ed. G. Oostindie, Kingston, 2001, 118–123; D.M. Metz, 'Erkennen en Herdenken. Het Nationaal Monument Nederlands Slavernijverleden Gezien in de Ontwikkeling van de Nederlandse Herdenkingscultuur' (Unpublished MA thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2002); J.C. Kardux, 'Slavery, Memory, and Citizenship in Transatlantic Perspective', in *American Multiculturalism After 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*, eds D. Rubin and J. Verheul, Amsterdam, 2009, 165–179.

¹⁷ L. Smith, G. Cubitt and E. Waterton, 'Guest Editorial: Museums and the Bicentenary of the Abolition of the British Slave Trade', *Museums and Society* 8, 3 (2010): 125.

¹⁸ E. Waterton, 'Humiliated Silence: Multiculturalism, Blame and the Trope of "Moving On"', *Museums and Society* 8, 3 (2010): 130.

¹⁹ D. van Dartel, ed., *Tropenmuseum for a Change!; Present Between Past and Future. A Symposium Report*, Amsterdam, KIT Publishers, 2009.

²⁰ This chapter was written during the second month of the exhibition, which lasted six more months (1 November 2013–1 July 2014).

²¹ Stichting Herdenking Slavernijverleden 2013.