

OUR COLONIAL INHERITANCE

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with Ilaria Obata**

Lannoo

**WERELD
MUSEUM
AMSTERDAM**

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This (Terrible) Inheritance

Wendeline Flores and Wayne Modest

Confronting Colonialism: A Brief History of (Semi) Permanent Displays

On June 23, 2022, we at the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, opened our newest semi-permanent exhibition. Titled *Our Colonial Inheritance*, this exhibition is curated as part of the museum's ongoing critical reflection on, and intervention in, the growing national and international discussions on European colonialism, its histories and its afterlives in the present. It was part of a project that began several years earlier, which would be the museum's first full refurbishment in almost two decades. Coming at the end of this refurbishment, *Our Colonial Inheritance* was, arguably, the most important part of this project, tying the earlier completed displays, for instance *Things that Matter*, a contemporary reflection on the multiple ways that objects shape and give meaning to people's lives, to the institution's colonial history.

As is well known, the Tropenmuseum is the successor of the Colonial Museum. Originally founded in Haarlem in 1864, the museum was established to support the Dutch colonial project. Indeed, for much of its early career, the Colonial Museum would serve as an *etalage* for the display of the products of a colonialism practiced overseas; an important part of its role being to educate a visiting Dutch public into the ideological underpinnings of colonialism, and to inform them about the "opportunities" of becoming part of the colonial project. As a result of its early successes, the museum would quickly outgrow its premises, leading to its relocation in 1926 to its current location in Amsterdam.

Much has already been published about the Colonial Museum, and the later Tropenmuseum, concerning how their practices shifted over time in response to national and international scientific and political changes. We know, for example, of the museum's early histories of display and collecting, of its early scientific inquiry into the *products of empire*. Some of the earliest collections of the museum are samples of minerals: bauxite or silver, or samples of coffee, tea, or wood. We are aware that upon moving to the new location in Amsterdam, the collections of the Colonial Museum were augmented with the ethnographic collections of Artis, the zoological park, objects collected within a framework of social Darwinism. Hereby was embedded in the institution what museum scholar Tony Bennett¹ (writing on the birth of museums) has described as practices that reinforced ideas of a *progressive taxonomy* of humankind. We also know of the museum's early practices in the study of racialised difference in its department of physical anthropology.²

In a recent publication, we wrote about how every detail of the building that houses the museum was designed to celebrate the Dutch colonial project.³ Numerous authors have also written about the decision to change the museum's name to the Indische Museum - The Museum of the Dutch East Indies - shortly after Indonesia declared its independence from the Netherlands in 1945. Similarly, the permanent name change from the Colonial Museum to the Tropenmuseum, after the Netherlands officially acknowledged Indonesian Independence in 1949, as well as the museum's entanglement with Dutch development policy, have been noted in a number of texts⁴ Indeed, from the 1950 until 2013, when the museum merged with the Museum Volkenkunde and the Africa Museum to create the National Museum of World Cultures, much of the museum's work centered around projects focused on development cooperation.

Our Colonial Inheritance was curated with this history of shifts in the museum, themselves responding to shifting political landscapes, in mind. It is commonplace that permanent exhibitions in museums emerge in response to such shifts, whether intellectually,

societally or politically. Permanent exhibitions can be understood as responses to the problem spaces or the (political) conjunctures that define any particular moment. The Tropenmuseum was no different: the refurbishment of the late 1970s and early 80s was, as some would argue, an early move away from the developmentalist narrative that governed its practice since the end of WWII. As several curators described it at the time, it was in response to a shift, also seen in academia, away from shame about, and therefore a silencing of, the colonial past in public discourse⁵.

At the beginning of the 21st century, new collection displays demonstrated greater attempts to deal with colonialism, as they were being advocated for within critical museology at the time, as well as movements in history writing, embedded within post-colonial studies, and efforts to write imperial histories. Like many other ethnographic museums, the Tropenmuseum was organised regionally, featuring exhibits on Africa, West Asia and North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Oceania and so on. This organisation reflected the strength and histories of the collections, but also the expertise of the curators⁶. At the core of this earlier permanent display, was an exploration of the colonial history of the museum, and more broadly the colonial histories in relation to the history of collecting and display. Arguably the most popular display at the time, which was interestingly also the most controversial for some, was what some have called the *Colonial Theatre*: an display that attempted to shift the colonial gaze, and included mannequins of both coloniser and colonised. If the ethnographic museum had been imagined as a window to the world, a diorama the size of a building where Europe organised the gaze onto a colonised world and its peoples, in the heritage theatre, the colonisers were also on display. Together with other parts of the display that explored Indonesia, this part of the permanent display was intended to engage critically with Dutch colonialism, and with the impact of colonialism on the colonised. It was an engagement with the entangled worlds that colonialism made.

Like many permanent displays, this refurbishment of the early 2000s received mixed reviews. For some, it was one of the few

displays that proffered any real, critical engagement with the colonial past, especially as it operated in an ethnographic museum. Indeed, for some critics, it became exemplary of the kind of critical reflexivity for which the museum has become known. However, the engagement with colonial histories was also viewed critically. There were those critics for whom it was “too postcolonial”. Indeed, in a country, but also in a field, that was not always willing to address its colonial history, this exhibition was seen by some as too critical of the Dutch, of Europe, of the West – it was seen as too radical. Conversely, there were those who thought that the exhibition didn’t go far enough. As one critique would say, the museum was “one of the most colonial museums in the world.”⁷

Societally, but also politically, *Our Colonial Inheritance* comes at a time of increased contestation over how to deal with the colonial past in the present. It comes in the wake of a decade long heated societal struggle with the question of whether Black Piet (Zwarte Piet) is a national treasure to be preserved, or a racist tradition that denigrates Black people. It comes after more than a half decade of growing demand from activist groups, nationally and internationally, for the decolonisation of cultural and academic institutions. The Tropenmuseum responded to this demand by collaborating with the activist group *Decolonize the Museum* to explore the complex entanglement of the museum, its history, but also its contemporary practices with colonialism. Furthermore, the exhibition comes in the wake of the *Black Lives Matter* global mobilisation movement against racism in 2020, the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements, and the numerous national and international calls for the removal of monuments that commemorate colonisers, whether in the form of statues or street names. The exhibition was curated in the moment of increasing requests to return objects that were looted by Europe during the colonial period and kept in museums, and of struggles in the USA and in Europe about Critical Race Theory, and questions around “woke”. It comes at a time where there is growing demand to acknowledge the links between our current environmental crisis and European colonialism. It with these political and societal pressing matters in mind that *Our Colonial Inheritance* is curated and to which it responds.

Whose Our, Whose Colonial, Whose Inheritance

The title, *Our Colonial Inheritance*, was carefully crafted. By using the possessive pronoun “*Our*”, together with “*Colonial*”, we wanted to push beyond what for some people in the Netherlands, but also across Europe and North America, was a normalised rhetoric of denial, a distancing of the slavery and colonial pasts, which Barnor Hesse would describe as a history “forgotten like a bad dream.”⁸ In this account, slavery and colonialism was not simply a temporal other, a past beyond any possible memory, but it was something that happened in a somewhere else, an over there, in which we, White Europeans, were not involved. For Michel-Rolph Trouillot⁹ this was a practice of *silencing*; for Ann Laura Stoler it is *aphasia*.¹⁰

Within the Dutch context, the colonial past is often seen as someone else’s history, the history of the formerly colonised, like someone identified as being of Surinamese, Dutch Caribbean, or Indonesian descent. For us, then, using “*Our*” was a provocation towards a necessary shift, an acknowledgement that *we lived in a world that slavery and colonialism made*. We wanted to join the scholars and activists that were saying that while different individuals or groups may be differently subjected to their workings in the present, we are all implicated in and inheritors of slavery and colonialism. We wanted to invite visitors to reflect on the fact that the *political arithmetic* and the *racial calculus* that were the afterlives of slavery, worked in systemic ways to serve some, while devastating others¹¹. How do they relate to this history, and to its afterlives in the present?

And yet, “*Our*” also had a different, a more institutionally reflexive meaning for us. It was intended as an acknowledgment of our own complicity in the Dutch colonial infrastructure. If slavery and colonialism have shaped the world we live in today, then we, as the former Colonial Museum, as the Tropenmuseum, and now the Wereldmuseum Amsterdam – one of Europe’s largest ethnographic museums – have played an important role in colonialism’s intellectual, representational, and technological logic. For example, if race was part of the fiction, the lie that colonisers created and

told themselves and the world, to justify their violent subjugation of colonised peoples and territories, then the Colonial Museum, with its physical anthropology department, was an important tool in this fiction. Moreover, if colonialism was based in an extractive and dispossessive regime, then the trade department was the display case of what could be extracted, educating Dutch publics in how to take from, and even to destroy the planet, in the name of “cultivating”. Moreover, it was in the ethnographic museum department that we could see objects that were *taken* from colonised peoples, and organised according to a logic that reinforced the fantasy of Europe’s superiority, of Europe as civilised, and as having the right to civilise the colonised.

Together, these different uses of the word “*Our*” was a way to show the complex entanglement of colonialism with its different institutions, and colonialism as both ideology and infrastructure.

It is also in the use of “*inheritance*” that we hoped to proffer our most urgent questioning. The Dutch title for the display with which we started, was *Onze koloniale erfenis*. In Dutch, *erfenis* is often translated to legacies. When associated with history or heritage, and especially when paired with the word colonial, the word has become a common way to describe what remains from the colonial past in the present, both tangible and intangible. While there is a growing acknowledgement that heritage can be awkward, or contested, it is a word that still conjures positive feelings. For us, however, inheritance was intended to do another kind of work. If legacies refer to what is left behind, the remains themselves, inheritance opened, at least this was our hope, the possibility to ask questions of inheritors, *about beneficiaries*, as Bruce Robbins¹² would suggest, of the (terrible) pasts of colonialism and slavery. In this meaning, “inheritance” is less about what remains and more about our relationship with what remains.

To be sure, as Rolando Vázquez argues (in this volume), both these terms are burdened with the logic of possession and dispossession, with possessive individualism, with the logic of property and ownership. These were the foundational logics upon which

colonial projects were based. And still we believe it is important to ask how to deal with such inheritances. As we developed the exhibition, the distinction between legacies and inheritances surfaced in a number of spaces. We recall a presentation on colonialism in Rotterdam several years ago when two activist repeated the statement, “Not in my name”.¹³ Referring to the ongoing denial of the Dutch state’s complicity in the colonial past, but also the insistence by many across Europe of the importance of colonial monuments. With this statement, these activists chose a rhetoric and a practice of refusal. As citizens they wanted to refuse the state making them complicit in any celebration of colonialism. Ariella Azoulay makes a similar point, when she questions what it means to be complicit in acts of state violence. She suggests, for example, that those working in museums or in universities may go on strike, as part of this act of refusing the long histories of silently inheriting complicity in an ongoing colonial project.

In this exhibition then, with the use of the term “inheritance”, we wanted to ask what it means, as citizens, to be the inheritors of colonial collections in our national museums. How do we develop a critical practice that responds to questions of inheriting citizenship, to inheriting a passport that gives us certain rights, for example the right to travel, to movement, when such rights are denied to so many others? How might we deal with the structures of power and privilege that we have inherited as a result of the colonial past, and what might it mean to deny such inheritances? And what do we need to do to change the fact that for many of the places and peoples formerly colonised by Europe, their inheritances may be apprehended by the ongoing structures of inequality, of reduced life chances, and environmental precarity that colonialism has left in its wake.

The exhibition’s intention was not just to see colonial inheritances through the lens of victimiser and victimhood. To take colonialism as foundational to the world we live in today is to take seriously the resilience, creativity and hope of colonised peoples. It is to take seriously the new languages, music, foodways, religious and spiritual traditions that have emerged in these communities. It is

to acknowledge that through their practices of resistance and of refusal, they were able to survive and to flourish. These too are the inheritances of the slavery and the colonial pasts that we engage with in the exhibition and in this publication. For if slavery was an attempt to break the world of the colonised, their resistance and resilience were practices in worldmaking.

The Structure: Exhibition and Publication

This publication is organised to loosely follow the structure and principles of the exhibition with which it shares its name and its inquiry. All the authors were invited to reflect on what it means to inherit the (infra)structures of the colonial past, its categories, its relations and even its objects, and how we deal with such bequests in the present. Like the exhibition itself, we engage with the catastrophic effects of colonialism and slavery on colonised peoples but also on the planet. Here the authors, like the exhibition, engage with the *world breaking* force of Europe's colonial projects. In this first section, authors explore colonialism as conquest, as extraction, as accumulation.

In the second major theme of the exhibition and publication, we explore the ideological underpinnings of colonialism. Here we wanted to underscore the complex entanglement between European scientific/intellectual traditions and colonialism; we want to acknowledge that it is impossible to see colonialism as separate from our traditions in philosophy, in anthropology, in law. Nor is it possible to see the history of these disciplines as something that emerged separately from colonialism. In fact, disciplines like philosophy, like law, and anthropology, were used to justify and bolster the colonial enterprise. Thus, we are especially interested to explore questions of race and racism - and the now discredited beliefs in racial science - as foundational to the colonial project.

If slavery and colonialism were world breaking, we also wanted to account for the fact that we now inhabit worlds that colonialism made. This is in part what we explore in section three and

throughout the exhibition. Worlds were destroyed, as were languages and religious practices, but also more-than-human was life pushed to (near) extinction. Out of this catastrophe other worlds, other relations were created, other languages, other religious practices, other cultural forms. Saying this in no way rehearses the repugnant idea that colonialism had a good side (a suggestion made in the Netherlands with the phrase, “*Het was niet alleen slecht, toch?*”). Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the survival of the enslaved and colonised. In fact, embedded in the configuration of the exhibition, like in this publication, we explore colonialism not just as structure, as catastrophe, but also the ingenuity with which colonised peoples made new worlds, new forms of life. It is these new forms of being and becoming that section three explores, not just as practices of decolonial joy, which we also explore, but also as part of contemporary political struggles to live in the world that colonialism has made.

We explore these practices of resistance and refusal, practices of worldmaking, through the objects that colonised peoples made, but also through contemporary art. It was an important strategy of the exhibition to work with contemporary artists, all of whom invite us to not just reflect on the past, but on how this past lives on into the present. These artists are pushing us to imagine, like the enslaved and colonised before them, different, more radical ideas about freedom and of liberty.

Section one of the publication opens with an essay by Ananya Kabir, in which she reflects on her journey through the exhibition, focusing on the stories of some of the women of Indian descent that she encounters in the display. In her reflection, Kabir explores the entangled inheritance, her inheritance, between the British and the Dutch, and India, Britain, and the Netherlands.

Mimi Sheller examines the remains of the globally-connected systems of exploitation and extraction in which we live through reflections on past and current holidays, both personal ones as well as large-scale tourism. She shows how the tourist appeal of islands today often hide the brutal patterns of global extractive