

CHALLENGING *INNOCENT* HERITAGE NARRATIVES

An interview with Jennifer Tosch

Rosa te Velde

The most famous area in terms of architectural heritage in Amsterdam is the canal district (*grachtengordel*), which was officially inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage site in 2010. According to UNESCO, the canal ring in Amsterdam demonstrates 'Outstanding Universal Value': "The gabled facades are characteristic of this middle-class environment, and the dwellings bear witness both to the city's enrichment through maritime trade and the development of a humanist and tolerant culture linked to the Calvinist Reformation".¹ These qualifications echo and exemplify a broadly shared idea of what makes up 'Dutchness'.

During a festive conference in October 2013, celebrating 400 years of the *grachtengordel*, many speakers hailed the canal district's beauty and unique architecture. American author Russell Shorto (self-proclaimed spokesperson of Amsterdam to the outside world) took the opportunity to illustrate his claim that Amsterdam is "the most liberal city in the world" while mayor Eberhard van der Laan praised the canals as a home to "confident citizens" over centuries. Other, more scholarly contributions, discussed future challenges including the threat of tourism and the 'Disneyfication' of the area.²

The only speaker challenging these limited but omnipresent narratives of the Golden Age (during this symposium) was professor of Political History Susan Legêne, who reminded the public of the deep involvement of the Dutch traders living in the district with slavery. According to her, addressing the European imperial heritage of public spaces such as the canal district in Amsterdam can allow us to see the global history of colonial trade—instead of a fragmented history essentializing Dutchness. More importantly, she argued, cohesion among Amsterdammers will be improved. Parts of the heterogeneous population, in particular people of colour, will most likely feel a stronger sense of belonging or recognition if the city at least acknowledges its layered heritage.

In the same year of the festivities celebrating 400 years of the *grachtengordel*, Jennifer Tosch founded Black Heritage Tours. After visiting the Netherlands in 2012 to participate in the Black Europe Summer School,³ she became aware of the void in knowledge on colonial heritage in Amsterdam, in particular the erasure of the black presence and history during the 'Dutch Golden Age'. Jennifer stayed in Amsterdam, becoming enthralled with her research, and launched the tour in 2013. With her tours she aims to raise awareness of histories of black presence in Amsterdam, of the Netherlands' involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, and of the remnants thereof in the urban fabric. Starting from the Second World War monument at the Dam square, the tour continues through the Red Light District and by boat, along the canals. Tosch and her colleagues touch upon twenty of the many more sites of concealed heritage to be found in Amsterdam, many of which are located along the canal district. With these tours she seems to take up the challenge prompted by Legêne; to reframe traditional approaches to heritage and

¹ Accessed through: www.whc.unesco.org/en/decisions/4013, on 13 October 2016.

² *Amsterdam Canal District in Global Perspective, Past & Present*, 18 October 2013, De Duif, Amsterdam. Accessed through: www.uva.nl/nieuws-agenda/agenda/congressen-en-symposia/nav/keys/fmg/item/400th-anniversary-of-amsterdam-canal-district.html, on 13 October 2016.

³ See: www.dialogoglobal.com/amsterdam/.

to see other histories of Amsterdam. In an interview with Rosa te Velde (*Kunstlicht*), Tosch elaborates on black heritage in Amsterdam and on her experience as a heritage professional.

Rosa te Velde: When you started out with your research on heritage, what dominant identity narratives did you observe in the Netherlands? How are these constructed through architecture and public space in Amsterdam?

Jennifer Tosch: The dominant narrative is very much focused on the Golden Age, the construction of empire, expansion, sovereignty, and nation building. If you look at the Royal Palace on Dam square, which used to be Amsterdam's city hall, there are many symbols of the development of empire^(fig. 1). The city hall was built in 1648, when the Dutch were in the process of becoming an independent nation, and in this building you can see how the new nation uses race to construct and define itself and to situate itself in relation to the narratives of other European empires. The personification of the Netherlands is in the female body to which all subjects are looking up to. You can also see the colonial subjects and products that are associated with the nation: the tympan of this building shows a cog ship which symbolizes the Netherlands as a maritime power^(fig. 2). Another dominant narrative is that of the Dutch as traders. Many of the buildings have gable stones with symbols referring to the trade of their original owners, whether it was sugar or tobacco or trade in spices, or associations to the House of Orange. However, with trade I mean not only products but also the precarious trade in *human beings* as cargo. The heraldry in all these buildings have a lot to do with the way the Dutch construct their identity from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward. All these symbols have in the meantime been incorporated into the official state apparatus and can be seen, for example, in museums as well. These stories of Dutchness are a continuum that does not have an end. You can see where it began and how it is continued even today. It is echoed even in the twentieth century monuments like the Second World War monument on the Dam square, which has the same hierarchy of symbols as earlier buildings: the female personification of the nation, the European male as the intelligence, and the African male presenting the subaltern. The Second World War monument is also a display of symbols such as suffering, persecution and liberation^(fig. 3).

What is striking when analyzing the public space in the Netherlands, and in Europe and in the US, is the dominance of commemorating the Second World War and the holocaust. We are told to 'never forget'. The state spends an enormous amount of money on remembering that heritage compared to remembering the colonial past. I have to be very careful how to frame this, because commemorating the Second World War is untouchable and sacred. But why remember that history while we are told to distance ourselves from the colonial past? These memories are not competing, but they are intersecting: there is a close connection in histories of genocide. We need to acknowledge that there have been many other types of genocides, which is what Michael Rothberg argues in his book *Multidirectional Memories*.⁴

RtV: To whom do these symbols, that refer to notions of Dutch nation-building and power, speak?

JT: First of all, most people do not recognize the symbols for what they are. They are 'hidden in plain sight'. These symbols are visible but you really have to be looking for them, or 'guided' to see them.

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Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memories: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.



fig. 2 The tympa of the eastern facade of the Royal Palace was designed by Artus Quellinus. It exhibits several references to the Netherlands' colonial power. In the middle of the tympa, the personification of Amsterdam's City Virgyn is visible, elevated above her subjects and protecting the treasures received from Europe and Africa on the left side and from Asia and America on the right side.* Accessed through: www.flickr.com, photo: Dennis Jarvis.



fig. 1 The Royal Palace of Amsterdam in 2012. The edifice was built by Jacob van Campen between 1648-65 and is decorated with references to the seventeenth century globalizing power of the Netherlands. The building was originally built as the town hall of Amsterdam. As the city of Amsterdam was a joint owner of Surinam, the 'Society of Surinam' (1683-1795) held its meetings in one of the chambers of the town hall.* Accessed through: commons.wikimedia.org, photo: Arnov1987.

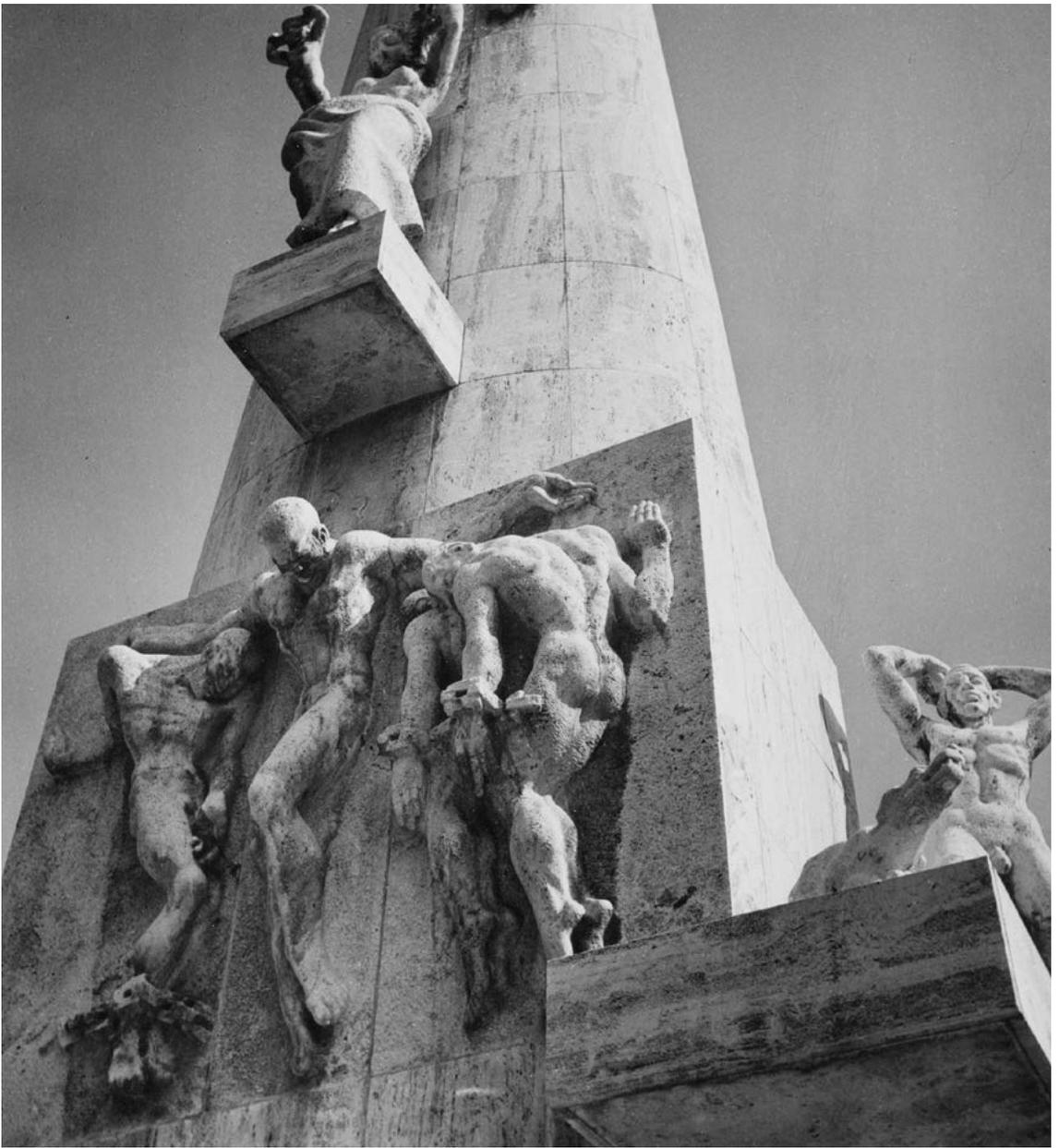


fig. 3 The National Monument, Dam Square, Amsterdam. The monument was designed by Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud in 1956, commemorating the Second World War. The monument shows a female figure with a child, symbolizing hope and a bright future. On the right side, a male figure with full lips and a muscular body is depicted, intended to represent wartime resistance by the working class. However, the depiction of the lower, working class in reference to what seems to be an African male calls into question the concealed connection between specific phenotypical characteristics and their societal status as constructed during the 1950s. Photo: Collectie Stadsarchief Amsterdam.

Education plays a major role in constructing our collective cultural archive. However, education in the Netherlands but also abroad is still a very one-sided, imperialist and westernized construct. So you literally have to actively go outside of that dominant discourse and search for more information and knowledge that may not be in the cultural archive. Gloria Wekker's concept of the cultural archive, taken up from Edward Said and others, denotes our material and immaterial storehouse of values and ideas which are build into various layers of society: not only through education, but also into, for example, family histories, oral history, newspaper articles, children's

television programmes as well as the physical space surrounding us.⁵ The cultural archive is embedded in everything. You have to go outside, to the peripheral, and get that knowledge from the global south or from the subaltern to get a sense of what identity means to those who are not considered native. It was in 2007 that the Dutch government created a history canon that serves as a frame of reference in education for children aged between 8–14 and for immigrants coming to the Netherlands who want to become Dutch.⁶ We could argue that it is since then that the history of slavery and of the West Indies Company is gradually becoming incorporated into the Dutch educational system. However, the major part of this history canon is still dedicated to the VOC, Calvinism and Catholicism and the Golden Age.

What is important to realize is that the buildings that we see today, particularly those in the Golden Bend [*de Gouden Bocht*, Herengracht, between Leidsestraat and Vijzelstraat] area of the canal district, were built for the elite of society, not for the working class poor, nor for the middle class as suggested by UNESCO. This architecture wasn't meant for them; it was meant to bolster a sense of power and status among the elite, the burghers and the ruling class, and families that were pivotal in constructing Dutch identity. This points towards the obvious conclusion that both heritage and the official Dutch history canon — what we tend to preserve and deem important — is always extremely selective and representative of power structures.

RtV: Could you elaborate on the way the physical environment and architecture impacts us?

JT: The hierarchy of symbols preserved in the physical landscape is constructed in a top-down level in different ways. It was those in power who constructed them, but then physically, the position of these significant symbols are above everyone, which ensures that you have to literally be looking up at them in order notice to them. They are not at eye level. This gives the sense of superiority — you have to raise your head in order to acknowledge their presence. At the time when these buildings were built, there was far less density in these public spaces, so they were more visible than today.

One of my colleagues has a very interesting narrative that he uses when we go through the Golden Bend, which is considered to be the most prestigious part of the canal ring. If you look at the two or three lot houses on the Herengracht, you can see that the stairs are at such a height that it looks like you have 'to climb to heaven'. In contrast, the servants' entrances are really too low for any average-sized person, even of that time, thus servants literally had to bend down to enter (fig. 4). It's evident by the way people designed their houses that they were competing to be among the wealthiest. Just look at the height of the stairs, size of the windows, and images used on the facades; they are all symbols that we can still see today. Also, many of these houses had huge inner gardens, which separated the servants and the horses together on one side, and the families on the other side. This separation was deliberately thought through, exemplifying how architecture physically has contributed to *build* categories and create hierarchies.

RtV: What kind of people take the Black Heritage Tour?

According to you, how do 'outsiders' experience Amsterdam when they take your tour?

JT: Our guests are very diverse. In the first few years it was mostly Dutch locals, black empowerment organizations (such

⁵ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

⁶ Instigated by the Dutch government, this history canon was established in 2007 by a committee lead by historian Frits van Oosterom. See: www.entoen.nu.



fig. 4 Herengracht 446 is one of the houses located on Amsterdam's prestigious Golden Bend. Beneath the grand entrance for the owners, a small entrance for servants is situated. Accessed through: commons.wikimedia.org, photo: Taks.

as New Urban Collective (NUC) and Strong Mindz), students of history, anthropology and sociology, and high schools taking the tour. There was curiosity among the white Dutch people. Later on foundations, NGOs and the municipality also became interested.

In the beginning there were not too many local people of colour taking the tour. I was often told, "Dutch people are not going to allow you to say these things about their history". There was a sense of fear of reprisal, but this has gradually changed. And then of course now there is an ongoing and growing number of international travellers who take the tour, who are interested in experiencing a more 'multi-layered' story of Amsterdam.

People come to Amsterdam and other 'historic' cities thinking that 'all the buildings are really frozen in time'. Amsterdam is one of the places you come to get a sense of *time travelling*. The notion of the authentic is central to these expectations, while in fact many of the buildings are reconstructions, or have been altered from their original state in order to give this sense of historicity. I was shocked myself when I learned from a fellow UvA Master's student who specializes in architectural history, how many of these buildings are reconstructions or fabricated to look like seventeenth century buildings. The notion of the 'historic city' is therefore very much constructed,

deliberately orchestrated, and the marketing points to that. I think what is really surprising for people are the hidden layers of that construct. Because while architecture is changed, reconstructed and redeveloped, it still is the same location where a part of history happened. So to me, what makes it authentic is the memory of what occurred during a particular moment of time, and allowing people to use their own visual imagination, reconstructing their own collective or individual memories to be able to realize what happened there and then. For example, as historian and city archivist Mark Ponte has shown, there was a free community of people of colour in the sixteenth or seventeenth century living in the Jewish Quarter, near what we now know as the Rembrandthuis. You have to create a new memory or visualize it; what was their lived experience, what was their heritage, whether intangible, or tangible? How do we locate that? How do we come in contact with that? Then you have something that is tangible and that people can grab a hold of. And to me, the city is more interesting when it has more than just one static narrative.

During one of the tours there was a group of South African artists. After being on the boat in the canals for a while, what was beautiful about many of their reactions was how it brought to life the unease that they had felt during their visit to the Netherlands before but couldn't ever really understand and identify. But because of the tour they understood that it was not in their imagination, but it pointed to, as poet Toni Stuart called it, 'a visual literacy of prejudice'. It became very clear to them that through this landscape, through these spaces, race, gender, and sexuality have been constructed in a very deliberate way. The 'visual literacy of prejudice' was built into these monuments and buildings. And that's how Dutchness and whiteness becomes very tangible; in order to justify the idea of what whiteness or Dutchness means, you have to have an other, an inferior other. And the exaggeration of the phenotypes of the others: the African having the full lips, muscular bodies, usually naked, looking very submissive or innocent. And then you have the white subject surrounded by all these other objects of power and conquest; a weapon in the hand or a sword or a canon. Someone paid to have those images created. And if you tie that together with Wekker's concept of the cultural archive, that is what creates identity, a collective sense of who we are. And this cultural archive is embedded in everything. Thus it becomes really normalized and difficult to deconstruct, especially when you have not been given an opportunity to do so through education.

RtV: What is the most shocking part of the tour to most people from the Netherlands?

JT: In general the most shocking fact for many of the people who take the tour is how visible the sense of empire is in the landscape, while hidden in plain sight. The biggest surprise for many people is the mural at the Rijksmuseum, which depicts a white lady nursing a white and a black baby, and it is titled 'self-sacrifice' [*zelfopoffering*]. This mural generates a strong sense of anger, shame, guilt or grief. There is this moment when people comprehend how deeply embedded this idea of supremacy is in our system and they realize: 'I wasn't given all the information'. That is the moment when you can start deconstructing the whole system. And for me, what still surprises me, is people's surprise. For many people, the construct of whiteness is still very foreign. What does it mean to be white? There is a difference between the Dutch term '*blank*' and '*wit*'. I find it very remarkable how people use these two terms differently. What is that, *blank*? It's indicative of this neutral position. The term 'white innocence' as coined by Wekker denotes this neutrality, as well as the paradox of being a tolerant nation while not really wanting to dismantle its dark history

and current racism.⁷ The legacy of the social experiment or 'the colonial project' is still in effect. What does it mean to be white in terms of power and privilege? Deconstructing whiteness is a process: to understand that position of superiority. How do I not ask the question "Am I a racist?". That is not a question we should be asking, as racism is inherently a problem of whiteness. Instead, we need to ask ourselves "How do I deconstruct whiteness? How do I become aware that that is part of me and how do I deal with that?" Feelings of guilt precede awareness. That comes at the end. That is where you can start looking at reconciliation. If we have even a percentage of society that recognized the importance of that process, then we could see some changes of filling in these gaps of inequality. Now that you are aware, what do you do with that? Do you speak up or do you remain silent? It's your silence that makes you complicit. If you remain silent, that is a form of violence that you are reproducing.

RtV: In light of all this, how do you see your own role as a heritage professional in Amsterdam?

JT: Being a heritage professional is an opportunity to be on the frontline of decolonizing history with other activists. For me it is important to expand existing ideas and definitions in heritage, such as UNESCO's approach to heritage and their claims of 'preserving heritage of *universal value*'. The notion of universality implies that these values are shared by *everyone*. Is that the case and is that ever possible? Shouldn't we ask ourselves, "What does it mean to preserve heritage and for whom are we preserving it for?". It's very powerful to be at the centre of this shift. But, it's also a tremendous responsibility; I also have to constantly check my own cultural archive, to make sure that I'm not imposing my personal bias onto a narrative, which can happen. And to make sure I am not reading a script or repeating myself. That's why the interaction is so important. I want to hear from you, I want to see what you see. It's an on-going dialogue. And I am always aware that I, too, am coming from a position.

For the future I hope that something like the Black Heritage Tour is not an anomaly and that colonial histories are not distanced, disavowed, and denied as they are now. My strategy is a grassroots approach by reaching out to people in a non-traditional way. But ultimately I would like this knowledge to be mainstreamed. I am not arguing that we should erase, alter, or destroy any of these symbols, but we should continue to contextualize the cultural archive so that it is inclusive of everyone — not only people of colour — but other marginalized groups as well.

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Op. cit. (note 5).

Jennifer Tosch is a Surinamese-African American born in New York City to Surinamese, South American parents. Her divergent experiences at the Black Europe Summer School in Amsterdam (2012) and a semester at Utrecht University inspired her to found the Black Heritage Tours in Amsterdam. In 2014 she co-authored the *Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide*, and launched Black Heritage Tours in New York State in 2016. Tosch is a student at the University of Amsterdam earning a dual-Masters in Heritage and Memory Studies. For more information on the Black Heritage Tour, see: www.blackheritagetours.com.

* The image captions of fig. 1 and 2 were written in reference to the *Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide*, co-authored by Tosch. See: Dienke Hondius, Nancy Jouwe et al., *Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide*, Amsterdam: Ef & Ef Media, 2014.