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An Exploration on Inclusiveness within
Dutch National Museum Representation

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Old Territories, New Societies: An Exploration on Inclusiveness within Dutch National Museum Representation

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Abstract: Much museum and postcolonial literature is dedicated to unravelling the complexities that cultural institutions are faced with when representing double-edged histories such as colonialism and imperialism. Western societies are increasingly challenged to cope with issues such as polarisation, equal rights, and social inclusion. Therefore, museums as cultural and educational institutions are required to move toward the “postcolonial” museum that represents a multifaceted identity and narrates colonial and imperial stories that are reluctant to being compressed into a sole meaning-making and understanding. Though the need to move toward this postcolonial museum is pushed by society and government, museum exhibitions frequently remain depicting a unilateral and dominant perspective; hence they need to focus on creating a stronger inclusive exhibition. This article explores the inclusive nature of the permanent Dutch collection in the Rijksmuseum and the permanent exhibition “Netherlands East Indies” in the Tropenmuseum. Based on in-depth interviews with museum curators and/or exhibition makers, a qualitative survey with visitors, and a personal observation of the material display, it became evident that there is room for improvement toward stronger inclusiveness for both museums at various fronts. As both museums are in the process of (re)designing an exhibition around Dutch colonialism and slavery, this article seeks to advise on how to incorporate a stronger inclusive approach in the development of these exhibitions, as one of the fundamentals on which the postcolonial museum is built.

Keywords: Postcolonial Museum, Inclusiveness, Identity, Rijksmuseum, Tropenmuseum

A Challenging Notion of Culture and Identity

The first seventeen years of the new millennium were fiercely challenged by increasingly unstable societies, shifting imperial formations and conflicting beliefs and ideals about the present and future world. Think of the series of terrorist attacks that dominated our news headlines over the past decade. Terrorism in Europe and the West is not new to the twenty-first century. However, the nature of terrorism is moving particularly toward Islamic extremism that is centred around major European and Western cities and the Middle East (Roser, Nagdy, and Ritchie 2013). However, terrorism is not the only face of change. The past decade substantially challenged the concept of nation and identity through civil rights and equal rights movements, protests, and campaigns all over the world. Remember, for example, the Arab Spring, which preceded a series of peaceful and vicious protests and demonstrations against authorities in the Middle East (Simpson 2014). Or the increasing dissatisfaction of minority groups in the West that resulted in, for example, the Black Lives Matter movement and a global network that is fighting against narrow nationalism within the Black community and vouching for equal rights and treatment for marginalised peoples (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

Closer to home, think of the various demonstrations and protests over the past years within Europe in the wake of the growing refugee influx from the Middle East and Africa, or the upcoming support of extreme right-winged political parties (Davis and Deole 2017). Think of the contested nature of campaigns toward Brexit and the partition and dissatisfaction that this result has left its society. Also not to be forgotten is the vicious nature of the referendum in Catalonia that leaves Spain in political uncertainty.

Within the borders of this country, consider the increasing intensity of the *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete) discussion that revolves around the racist nature of the Dutch tradition *Sinterklaas*,

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the forthcoming of gender-neutral public services and facilities, or the expected increasing political and societal attention for Dutch slave trade, colonialism, and discrimination and polarisation (Triesscheijn 2016; Boutellier 2016).

Around the world, communities recurrently stood up against politicians, governments, and employers to defend their rights, beliefs, culture, and identity. Because of this changing environment, the nature of present-day discussions on culture and identity are predominantly connected to postcolonial products such as multiculturalism, migration, ethnic diversity, and xenophobia. Since the era in which Western democracy has become synonymous for “crisis of meaning,” minority groups within Western cultures gradually started to detach themselves from Western knowledge and power (Mignolo 2011). Consequently, these groups re-created their identity beyond the dominant and produced a sense of belonging within the multicultural society in which they reside. As a result, Western societies are increasingly challenged to cope with the complexities of culture, identity, and nation within their cultural and educational institutions.

In line with the words of Nettleback (2012), commemorating the national past has become a nationwide fixation in the first years of the twenty-first century. This is considerably stirred by the processes of decolonisation and the proliferating demographic variety in Western societies (Bhatia 2009). How have these changes, as stated by Bhatia, Mignolo, and Nettleback, affected the role of cultural institutions, such as museums, in dealing with national identity and collective memory?

Changing Times: Changing Roles for National Museums

Before European colonialism, museums predominantly served as cabinets of curiosity, representing a collection of objects and artefacts within aristocratic circles in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Aldrich 2009; Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014). Due to growing unequal power relations between nations and communities during European colonisation in the nineteenth century, European nations increasingly seized and collected vast numbers of objects and artefacts from their colonies. These objects and artefacts were put on display for the nation to learn about cultures and peoples overseas—the inception of the national museum.

On a cultural level, one the most vital aspects of European colonisation was to create and document information and material from lands and peoples from the colonies (Loomba 2005). This information was regarded as factual and produced distinctive conceptions and language of “us” (Europe) and “them” (the colony) (Mignolo 2011). The conceptions and language created from this information are still recognisable in today’s societies (i.e.: nationalism, race, and identity) (Loomba 2005; Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014). It is widely proposed in scholarly work (i.e.: Macdonald 2003; Aldrich 2009; Mignolo 2011; Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014) that national museums are direct creations of European colonialism. The museum traditionally serves the purpose of representing a national identity and sense of belonging, wealth, and power (Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014) and seeks to foster society through the preservation of material display (The Museum Association 2013). They are strong catalysts of colonial ideologies and beliefs, representing interpretations and perceptions of objects and artefacts from a Western viewpoint (Aldrich 2009; Black 2011; Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014).

On a societal level, McLeod (2007) argues that European colonialism has formed and organised the lives of the peoples today. Due to the disparate power structures during colonisation, new cultural identities and cross-cultural relationships were shaped and rooted in Western beliefs on racial differences and inequality. Sociocultural issues such as inequality, identity, and oppression are unsolved in today’s societies, as European colonialism has left deep traces in current society and its museum representation (McLeod 2007; Tythacott and Arvanitis 2014).

The purpose and role of museums progressed over the years. As claimed by the American Association of Museum back in 1992, national museums started to play a greater role in tackling societal issues and in provoking dialogue on culture, identity, and social taboos that rest within

society. Because of increasing societal changes, national museums are now expected to encourage their audiences to live in a cross-cultural and multiethnic society with understanding and respect. They started to foster active exploration of display, accentuate learning and critical thinking, and stimulate dialogue between divergent audiences.

National museum collections have become initiators and facilitators of dialogue, which are stirred by user-generated contents that connect audiences with the display in numerous ways (i.e.: multimedia, multisensory). Through active interaction with the objects and artefacts, visitors move away from the traditional passive observation of the collection. The changed role of the museum shaped stronger “places of differences” (Lord 2006). This implies that museums increasingly address the difference between the objects and the context relevant for interpretation. It also suggests that “the museum does not only represent objects that are different from another, but that it represents objects in their difference from the conceptual orders in which those objects would normally be understood” (Lord 2006, 5). In other words, it addresses the difference between the objects and the concepts relevant for the interpretation of the collection. This indicates that collections of museums are increasingly less interpreted through the display of objects (Black 2011), but through the relationship between the object and the context in which it is represented. For European museums narrating colonialism, this statement particularly suggests importance to tie the colonial past (i.e. the historic object or narrative) with the postcolonial present (i.e. current societal issues) (Thomas 2009).

Toward the Postcolonial Museum

The postcolonial present does not carry a strong sense of origin to a specific geographic environment. For decades, small- and large-sized events of decolonisation took place in which victory and defeat stood hand in hand. Every single event, irrespective of their scope, shaped societies as they currently exist (Childs and Williams 1997). One of the legacies of European colonialism in Western societies is the existence of multiculturalism and diaspora (Lomba 2005). Various communities within such societies share different memories of the colonial experience. The history and cultural memory of minority groups living in Western societies are rooted in European colonisation and human exploitation, which contradicts the collective memory of the dominant culture. For centuries, the dominant cultures represent and showcase aspects of their produced culture to their nation and the world, in which our meaning-making is still embedded. To challenge this, new insights and approaches are essential to break with dominant understanding and interpretation (Mignolo 2011). This is suggested for the postcolonial museum.

The postcolonial museum connects audiences to current cultural and societal matters by using the collection for contemplation purposes and by stirring thoughts and feelings on current societal conditions. It invites audiences to exchange and share these thoughts and feelings by means of dialogue and interaction. The Museums Association (2013) claims that the most competent and effective museums of this era draw attention to sociocultural issues such as inequality and intolerance and focus on realising mutual understanding and respect—a characteristic of the postcolonial museum. No longer can museums in contemporary Western society simply portray unilateral perspectives, the dominant perspective, on histories. There should be space for audiences to create their own beliefs on the subject matter and draw their own conclusions respectively, resulting in vital discussions (Museums Association 2013).

Macdonald (2003) described this shifting focus a decade earlier when she emphasised that museums should focus on a contemporary multifaceted identity instead of what was supposed to depict the dominant national identity. Yet, museums are still frequently charged with shaping and conveying a utopian vision of society, for which the collection is deployed as instruments of power (Macdonald 2003). Sandell (2007) goes further by stating that museums recurrently stick to such museological practises that are likely to promote instead of battle sociocultural biases over the identity and memory that are represented. Taking these claims in mind, museums

occasionally still fuel conflict and segregation between communities instead of serving as a sociocultural bridge that connects audiences through awareness and dialogue.

While the postcolonial museum focuses on difference and aims at fostering social change and mutual respect, much criticism is received on ways museums still represent a hierarchy in the display. Macdonald (2003) confirms this criticism as she believes that collections are frequently charged with shaping and conveying an ideal image of society. In doing so, museums use their collections as instruments of power to pursue this ideal image and dominate certain knowledge and values that shape and sustain the dominant (Western) national identity. In this vain, Thomas (2009) points out that the objects and narratives representing colonial expansion need to be reconceptualised in the journey to move beyond the traditional national museum. This is a requirement in order to aim for community building and cross-cultural understanding in Western postcolonial societies—especially for museums that represent European colonialism.

Despite the changed role and focus of museums, audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds remain excluded and underexposed in the museum's narrative. Hence the need to create an exhibition of stronger inclusive nature, as a fundament of the postcolonial museum, is essential (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Sandell 2007).

The Fundament of Inclusiveness

In its broadest sense, an inclusive museum recovers disregarded or misinterpreted knowledge, dignifies the underrepresented voices, and acts responsively and answerably to the various audiences (Maleuvre 2012). Finding its roots in the concept of exclusion whereby minority groups were segregated from mainstream society (Shepherd 2009), a fundamental focus of inclusiveness is to improve accessibility of the museum collection and to encourage education and understanding of the display through various interpretations. This article approaches inclusiveness from a postcolonial perspective that gazes at the multicultural and sociocultural components of representation. Inclusiveness from a postcolonial lens focuses on the relationship between multicultural and sociocultural aspects of contemporary society and its shared history as the context in which a national identity should be represented. In line with the objective of the postcolonial museum, inclusiveness is understood as a practise to signify a contemporary national identity that honours plural voices and includes multiple layers of society and history.

The need for stronger inclusive representation in museums resides in contemporary societal changes that are characterised by postcolonial issues such as diversity, equality, globalisation, and multiculturalism. National identities as traditionally represented by museums are by no means a mirror of present nations. For museums to represent a stronger inclusive national identity, the need to consider the nation's shared history and colonial memory in the development of the exhibition is imperative. This could imply that, in the making of an exhibition, museums need to work more intensively with communities and people from diverse sociocultural backgrounds to obtain a more cohesive and holistic understanding of the display. Through discussions and interactions, potential misinterpretations, misrepresentations, and misunderstanding are eliminated. Curators should not carry the sole authority to impose one perspective on visitors. Hence, as confirmed by Maleuvre (2012), an approach to achieve a stronger inclusive display is to consult with various groups of sociocultural identities on the profile and contents of the objects and artefacts that will be on display. Input from these communities through discussions, feedback, and other forms of interaction serve a *cocreational* dimension of the postcolonial museum in representing multiple layers of contemporary national identity.

Despite an absence of discussion in scholarly work (i.e.: Macdonald 2003; Thomas 2009; Sheppard 2009; Maleuvre 2012), I believe that deliberate exclusiveness potentially serves the aim of the postcolonial museum as well. Approaching a narrative from a biased perspective as a deliberate practise has the potential to contribute to this “place of difference.” For example, choosing one perspective in a colonial narrative or only showcasing the glories of a particular

historic event. Such approaches require an acknowledgement of the bias in the display, as this is vital to the awareness and understanding of the audience. I argue that intended exclusiveness that features open-mindedness and transparency to the audience could therefore support the objective of the postcolonial museum. By portraying a viewpoint that respects other viewpoints in a nonjudgemental and transparent manner, a stronger awareness can be realised. This awareness could provoke dialogue to create different understanding of the narrative. This is, in turn, in line again with the purpose of a postcolonial museum to create understanding and respect through dialogue.

Many museums in Western society still serve the traditional purpose of personal enrichment and education. This is often realised through showcasing objectives that present meaning-making through a colonising lens. An example of this is the *Diorama van een Slavendans* (Diorama of a Slave Dance) by Gerrit Schouten (1830), which is on display in the Rijksmuseum. The diorama shows a wooden house on a plantation where eleven half-naked enslaved African people in Surinam dance, play instruments, and interact. The information label shortly describes what the diorama shows and what the people are doing according to the designer of the object. It further explains the joy that Europeans had of seeing such folklore, and it describes the usage of such objects as souvenirs (Rijksmuseum 2018). Information about this event from the dancers' perspective and the context in which this diorama was created are absent.

To make exhibitions more inclusive, it is crucial that plural perspectives of shared and conflicting history are represented. This counts particularly for narratives of colonisation in Western societies that are often accused (i.e.: by the government, media, marginalised groups) of intentionally leaving uncomfortable sides in oblivion, such as slavery and the downsides of colonial expansion. Despite the increasingly recognised need for stronger inclusiveness among governments, minority groups, and museum professionals, museums are still frequently called into question for their inability to represent multiple perspectives in exhibitions. Consequently, society and policy-makers urge museums to practise inclusiveness to promote a stronger inclusive national identity and to foster intercultural comprehension (Lloyd 2014).

An example of this urge is the inception of the upcoming exhibition on Dutch slavery that tackles the dark sides of Dutch colonisation in the Rijksmuseum. The Dutch government plays a role in the existence of this exhibition. They indicated in their coalition agreement in October 2017 that sharing knowledge on Dutch colonial history through cultural institutions is still highly significant (Regeerakkoord 2017). What is more, the introduction of a new director in 2013 played a role in the existence of this new exhibition as well. He shifted the museum's focus from showcasing the treasures of the Netherlands to showcasing how the Dutch obtained these treasures (Van Zeil and Beukers 2017). Another example is the Tropenmuseum's permanent exhibition on the Dutch role in the East Indies during colonisation. This permanent exhibition is over a decade old and receives much criticism from minority groups on the sole depiction of the white Dutch perspective on their colonies in the East Indies. Therefore, this exhibition is currently under construction due to current societal issues and criticism from diverse audiences. Both examples illustrate the underexposure of multiple perspectives on Dutch colonial history. Subsequently, by creating exhibitions that represent underexposed perspectives in the narrative and material display, the move toward the representation of a postcolonial national identity for these museums is becoming more apparent.

Rijksmuseum and Tropenmuseum Under Analysis

The inclusive nature of the Rijksmuseum's permanent art collection and the Tropenmuseum's permanent exhibition is under analysis. The reason for using the Rijksmuseum and Tropenmuseum as a case study is twofold. Firstly, both museums are renowned Dutch national and ethnographic museums and reside in a large multicultural city that exhibits objects and narratives of Dutch colonisation. Secondly, the exhibition and collection of these museums increasingly received requests from the government and the public to display Dutch colonialism

that moves away from the dominant perspective (Personal communication, May, June 2017). Therefore, both museums are currently (re)designing an exhibition that aims to do so. Hence, the absence or presence of the dominant perspective within their current collection and exhibition is being explored to create advice for these upcoming exhibitions.

The Rijksmuseum is a Dutch national museum that is committed to depicting an overview of Dutch art throughout the centuries (Rijksmuseum 2017). It holds a wide range of Dutch masterpieces such as Rembrandt's *Night Watch* and Pieman's *Battle of Waterloo* in the collection. The Rijksmuseum is in the process of creating an exhibition that deals with the dark sides of Dutch colonialism and will be open to the public in 2020. The Tropenmuseum is a smaller Dutch ethnographic, governmentally funded, museum that focuses on "people through objects and stories" (Tropenmuseum 2017). The Tropenmuseum's permanent exhibition *Netherlands East Indies* depicts the history of Dutch presence on the colonised islands of the former East Indies. The exhibition is currently being redesigned. It hosts a temporary exhibition related to Dutch colonialism (*Afterlives of Slavery*), which precedes the new permanent exhibition on contemporary legacies of Dutch slavery and colonialism. This exhibition will open its doors as a replacement for the current permanent exhibition in 2021.

As both museums are in the process of (re)creating an exhibition on Dutch colonisation, this article seeks to address the inclusive nature of the current collection and exhibition. Based on the outcomes, advice for museum professionals on how museums can move toward becoming a postcolonial museum is provided. To achieve this, the current nature of the inclusiveness of the permanent exhibition and collection is explored through in-depth interviews with museum curators and/or exhibition makers, an observation of the current material display, and a qualitative survey with visitors.

The in-depth interviews aim to reveal the process of exhibition-making from a museum's perspective. As part of the fundament of inclusiveness, these interviews address the consideration of multiple perspectives and knowledge in the creation of the narrative and display as currently depicted. The interviews were conducted in June 2017. The personal observation of the material displayed by the researcher will indicate the level of absence or presence of underexposed voices and knowledge of the narrative. An analysis of the material displays as a whole and individual objects selected by the curators and visitors for their presumed significance in relation to the narrative seeks to address this absence or presence. The personal observation took place in May, November, and December 2017. The qualitative survey with visitors illuminates the perception and meaning-making of the narrative and display by audiences. This is important to explore the extent to which the museums are able to represent a contemporary national identity as required by a postcolonial museum. A total of forty-five qualitative surveys were conducted with Dutch visitors from mixed cultural backgrounds in May and June 2017.

Reflections—The Curator

To start with the current processes of exhibition-making, the Rijksmuseum intends to narrate a story of the Netherlands overseas through art in its simplicity (personal communication, 2 and 16 June 2017) and create a narrative based on an existing and accessible collection. This means that the narrative is designed around existing objects and artefacts of the collection of the museum (the existing collection), as well as borrowed and purchased objects and artefacts (the accessible collection) as depicted in the collection. This practise indicates a collection-based approach (personal communication, 2 and 16 June 2017). This implies that, despite the importance of the textual contributions, the narrative serves to support the enjoyment of objects and artefacts as their leading practise of exhibition-making (personal communication, 2 and 16 June 2017). This collection-based approach ensures a spectacular and timeless display that is based on personal selections of the curator and the available objects (personal communication, 2 and 16 June 2017).

Despite the selective storytelling, the Rijksmuseum welcomes a versatile audience and claims to invite diverse interpretations of their collection. The universal power of their display

encourages the feeling of nationalism, nation building, belonging, and citizenship through visual arts and objects with simple limited textual information—maximum sixty words per object (personal communication, 2 and 16 June 2017). Though the museum is aware that collection-centred choices and biased storytelling is an exclusive approach, they aim to encourage the “other” with multimedia (i.e.: colonial media tour) and with the upcoming exhibition on the dark sides of Dutch colonisation against the successful productions of Dutch colonisation as currently showed in their collection (personal communication, 2 and 16 June 2017). The present Dutch art collection is embedded in a top-down approach with respect to exhibition-making. This indicates that the museum works on the basis of existing or accessible material display and develops the textual display around the object, as they aim to show the collection as “pure” as possible. (personal communication, 2 and 16 June 2017).

The Tropenmuseum—currently in the process of redesigning their permanent exhibition on the role of the Dutch in the East Indies through people and stories (personal communication, 20 June 2017)—creates an exhibition from a people- and story-based approach. This implies that the objects and artefacts in the exhibition serve the stories of the peoples narrated in the exhibition as a leading practise for their exhibition-making. This reflects a bottom-up approach for which the Tropenmuseum is in discussion with communities on the shape and content of the exhibition to ensure a reflection of multiple perspectives. This people- and story-based approach argues the display from the object and the story. It strives to promote world citizenship, respect, and understanding of the *other*. The upcoming exhibition, therefore, serves as a place of difference in which all different memories and understandings come together “without rejecting each other” (personal communication, 16 June 2017). To achieve this, contemporary interpretation techniques and storytelling will be employed (i.e.: multimedia and multisensory) to create authenticity and immerse visitors through narration of the “first voices.” By stepping away from permanent exhibitions and introducing temporary exhibitions that are cocurated by different communities, the Tropenmuseum seeks to expose multiple perspectives of their display. This results in a more accurate representation of current national identity and shared memory (personal communication, 16 June 2017).

Reflections—The Visitor

Visitors to the Rijksmuseum perceived the art collection as “spectacular, interesting, unique, and powerful,” as it clearly narrates Dutch history of wealth through art (personal communication, 30 May 2017). Visitors were predominantly impressed with the masterpieces of Rembrandt van Rijn, the famous work of other Dutch painters, and the Golden Age-related pieces. The visitors indicated that this collection plays a role in the creation of their Dutch national identity and gives a sense of nationalism and belonging. It evoked a feeling of pride and awareness for Dutch national history, which is believed to be significant to the representation of the Dutch identity. Though the visitors enjoyed this “grand” art collection, some indicated they missed a more inclusive representation by showcasing the less glorious sides of the Dutch Golden Age. Other visitors were satisfied with the current display in the representation of the Dutch national identity. There are a few remarkable aspects in the perceptions of the visitors. Despite the need, for some visitors, to showcase a more inclusive representation of the story, the majority indicated that they were satisfied with the uniqueness of the collections that created a strong sense of nationalism. Nevertheless, personal remarks about the collection clearly addressed the unilateral side of the collection, since the majority indicated that there was a strong focus on the rich side of The Netherlands. A few remarks such as “most of the paintings show wealthy Dutch men” (anonymous, 30 May 2017), “it shows the history of the wealthy” (anonymous, 30 May 2017), and “especially the beautiful and good aspects of our history is exposed” (anonymous, 30 May 2017) illustrate this perception.

Visitors of the Tropenmuseum had mixed perceptions on the current permanent exhibition *Netherlands East Indies*. While some visitors experienced the exhibition as interesting,

impressive, and interactive, others found it to be a special, yet confronting, exhibition that mainly showcases Dutch and Western colonial history in the East Indies and Asia. The visitors were mostly impressed with the various personal artefacts on display and the wax mannequins. Next to these perceptions, visitors had mixed feelings around the narrative and display. They appreciated the exhibition for its ability to create awareness on the Dutch role and history overseas, yet were disgusted and embarrassed in this awareness. Despite the mostly positive emotions toward the exhibition, the majority of the visitors indicated an overexposure of the colonising Dutch perspective within the exhibition. “The big success of the Netherlands with a *black* side can be more exposed” (anonymous, 31 May 2017) or “more attention to Dutch interference in Indonesia” (anonymous, 31 May 2017) are just a few remarks of visitors who indicated the need to expose the “first voices” (personal communication, 16 June 2017) and the Indonesian perspective. Visitors perceived this exhibition as a significant contributor to the contemporary public memory, heritage of multiculturalism, identity, and awareness creation. Hence, to achieve a more inclusive representation of the Dutch national identity that includes the underexposed perspective as well, a stronger focus and exposure of the “first voices” is required in the development of the narrative and display.

Reflections—The Material Display

According to the Rijksmuseum (2017), an overview of Dutch art throughout the centuries is depicted, with an apparent strong emphasis on wealth and the Netherlands overseas. It is a collection-based display, showcasing the “heavy weight” artefacts and objects of Dutch history with simplified stories. All objects and paintings are equipped with small textual storytelling (maximum of sixty words per object) explaining a short context and its importance, purpose, and/or role within Dutch history—created by a team of curators (personal communication, 20 June 2017). The representation of wealth is recognisable in the whole permanent art collection of the museum and is endorsed by heavy-weight artworks. Objects such as Rembrandt’s *Night Watch*, a model of a Dutch war ship (Figure 1), portraits and home environments of affluent Dutch characters, and treasures from former colonies (Figure 2) contribute to the depiction of wealth that the Netherlands managed to create throughout the ages. These objects are centrally placed within the museum halls and are inevitable on the visitor’s route. Such objects were indicated by visitors as striking contributors to the narrative of the museum and fuelled their motivation for visitation. The museum ensures enjoyment of these objects by placing them in and around the *Eregallery* (Gallery of Honour), a selection of the collection that showcases Dutch masterpieces. A somewhat smaller section of the display is committed to portraying the history of Dutch colonial presence overseas. Remarkable within this collection is that several objects on display were looted or stolen by Dutch powers as trophies and celebrations of colonialism (Rijksmuseum 2017). Consequently, the artefacts and dioramas, though not necessarily looted or stolen, are displayed and narrated in the way the Dutch gave meaning to them. Storytelling revolves around the context, importance, purpose, and/or role that the objects served to Dutch colonial powers. An example of this is the textual display of Gerrit Schouten’s *Diorama of a Slave Dance*.



Figure 1: Model of Dutch war ship wood, brass, iron, glass, rope, textile, and paint.
Photo: Van Slooten



Figure 2: The Lombok Treasure Indonesia, before 1894. Gold, silver, and precious stones.
Photo: Van Slooten

Taking place in the tent is a *du*, a type of entertainment with music and dance that was performed at plantations. Both the performance and the audience were slaves. The lead role was played by the *afrankeri*, the narrator (the woman at far left). The man in the red outfit on the right plays the king. The Europeans in Suriname loved this kind of folklore. They bought Schouten's dioramas as souvenirs. (Rijksmuseum, observation, 25 November 2017)

According to the Tropenmuseum (2017), the permanent exhibition *Netherlands East Indies* displays a history of Dutch presence on the islands of the East Indies (currently: Indonesia). The exhibition presents life at the East Indies during colonisation from a Dutch colonising perspective. This becomes evident in the design of the exhibition and the nature of the display. The exhibition is designed in segments that present different sections of life at the colonies. A strong focus of this representation is a depiction of life at the colonies from a European lens (i.e.: showcasing photography and art on the islands [Figure 3] and showcasing objects related to science, trade, and entrepreneurship). Next to the colonial theatre, in which real-life mannequins (Figure 4) narrate life from the perspective of the mannequin, other units of the display are

committed to depicting education in the East Indies, home situations at the East Indies, commerce, discovery, and a presentation of the East Indies (Tropenmuseum 2017). Despite the versatile nature of the display, including various (personal) objects, (ethnographic) artefacts, and paintings, the narrative of the display is strongly approached from the Dutch colonising perspective merely showcasing life of colonisers on the islands. The narrative is supposed to depict life at the colonies (Tropenmuseum 2017), which suggests *all* life at the colonies, including native inhabitants. Only a small section of the display is committed to portraying the life of the native inhabitants, which is again approached from a colonising perspective. Hence the narrative shown in the display is highly selective and underexposing the *other*.



Figure 3: Showcasing photography in the colony.
Photo: Van Slooten



Figure 4: Real-life Mannequins Colonial Theatre.
Photo: Van Slooten

A temporary exhibition about the *Afterlives of Slavery* (Figure 5) has recently opened its doors to the public, which showcases the contemporary and postcolonial legacies of the Dutch colonial past in a renewed manner. This multimedia exhibition depicts a shared past from multiple perspectives and aims to replace the current permanent exhibition in 2021. Though in the early process of transition, the permanent and temporary exhibitions significantly contrast in material display and storytelling. The temporary exhibition is a multimedia display, focusing on visitors' engagement through participation (i.e.: discussion platforms) and education through personal storytelling (i.e.: video footages and pictures). Whereas the current permanent display depicts mostly historic objects and artefacts supporting narratives from a Dutch colonising

perspective, the temporary exhibition displays historic and present-day artefacts that support contemporary debates.



Figure 5: Cover of *Afterlives of Slavery* exhibition.
Image: Website Tropenmuseum

Discussion

In the wake of decolonisation processes and multiculturalism, postcolonial Western societies are increasingly challenged to cope with the complexities of culture, identity, and nation within their cultural and educational institutions (Nettleback 2012; Mignolo 2011; Bhatia 2009). As “new identities” (Macdonald 2003) arise as communities in multicultural societies move away from the dominant national identity, museums are required to represent such identities in a more inclusive manner in current museum displays. As part of the objective, contemporary museum displays need to incorporate an “ambition to act as places of pluralism and inclusion that give voice to the disenfranchised, the oppressed and the silenced” (Black 2011, 415). In line with Black’s claim, several aspects of improvement can be addressed for the Rijksmuseum and Tropenmuseum in their journey to create a stronger inclusive museum display.

On a curatorial and material display level, both museums contain a strikingly different approach in their creation of display. Where the Rijksmuseum develops a narrative based on available collection, the Tropenmuseum creates visual display based on people and storytelling. The Rijksmuseum carries the finest, unique and “heavy weight” pieces of art (personal communication, 20 June 2017) of the country, which clearly represent one side of the national identity. Though the focus on showing the *other* has become more evident through multimedia and upcoming exhibitions, their collection is a traditional representation of a segment of the Dutch population. The current permanent exhibition *Netherlands East Indies* in the Tropenmuseum is clearly narrated from a Dutch white colonising perspective as most of the display is representing the life of Dutch colonisers on the islands. This confirms the belief of Black (2011) regarding the need for contemporary museum displays to showcase plural perspectives. For the Rijksmuseum and Tropenmuseum, the dominant perspective is still given priority.

Through traditional interpretation techniques, the Tropenmuseum provides a biased version of Dutch colonial history, leaving the voices of the descendants (“first voices”) in oblivion. Since it is indispensable that exhibitions are shaped within contemporary cultural and societal context to achieve mutual awareness and cultural understanding (Thomas 2009), both museums need to collaborate more intensely with these other perspectives in the course of the development of their forthcoming exhibitions. These other perspectives (i.e.: local communities of Surinamese-Dutch, Caribbean-Dutch, or Indonesian-Dutch descent, experts, artists, visitors, citizens) should represent the currently underexposed without making claims to guilt or shame.

As widely suggested (Macdonald 2003; Aldrich 2009; Thomas 2009; Maleuvre 2012; The Museum Association 2013), it is essential to involve underexposed views in the representation of a national identity to become more inclusive. Despite the increasing devotion of both museums to show the other side of the coin (i.e.: involving peoples from different sociocultural backgrounds beyond the museum team), a stronger bottom-up approach in the creation of the display is advised. A bottom-up approach does not only imply that underexposed perspectives should be involved in the creation of the exhibition (Black 2011). But the developers need to work more closely and continuously together in the creation of the exhibition with local communities, experts from assorted backgrounds, and diverse visitors as well (Maleuvre 2012). This can be achieved by, for example, regular discussion, interactions, focus group panels, etc., which will contribute to a stronger mutual understanding of the display. This process does not end when the doors are open for public, but continues to exist to safeguard the objectives of inclusiveness. As the museums should not carry the sole authority to impose a version of history to the diverse audiences, they need to consult with these various groups on the meaning and contents of the objects that are put on display.

Furthermore, it is recommended that the Rijksmuseum moves away from their collection-based approach. Dutch history simply cannot only be represented through high-quality, well-skilled, and unique paintings and objects from Dutch artists. This represents a utopian vision on society (Macdonald 2003) and has the potential to promote instead of battling sociocultural biases within society (Sandell 2007). Instead, art and objects should be displayed in connection to the context of the narrative, as suggested by Thomas (2009). Given that the Dutch, for centuries, were in a privileged position to create and preserve art, surely the collection of such objects reflects this position in its narrative. Thus, the nature and design of the material display should not exist out of what is available or accessible to support a historic narrative. Instead, historic objects should contribute to a narrative that allows interpretation in a contemporary context. This is in line with Thomas's (2009) claim regarding the need to reconceptualise objects and narratives as a requirement to aim for community building and mutual understanding in contemporary societies.

The forthcoming exhibition of the Tropenmuseum is significantly more bottom-up approached. This exhibition is more narrative-based and will depict multiple perspectives through cocreation with local communities and artists. It aims to facilitate mutual awareness and create a "place of difference" through personal storytelling, discussions, visitor involvement, and the implementation of various interactive interpretation techniques. By doing so, they move away from traditional curatorial practises of their current exhibition, which is strikingly more collection-based, exclusive, and one of the triggers for change (personal communication, June 2017).

On a visitor level, both museums showed clear similarities in the perceptions of the visitors. Given the contrasting character and nature of the museums and exhibitions, this was a remarkable outcome. However, given the comparable nature of the subject and design of both displays and interpretation techniques, this does not come to a surprise. Visitors from the Rijksmuseum indicated that the magnificent objects and paintings contributed significantly to their feeling of nationalism and belonging. Despite their enjoyment of this "grand" collection, visitors perceived the narrative of Dutch wealth that excludes the "darker" side of the Dutch Golden Age. This confirms the statement of Lord (2006) that objects are not simply enjoyed for their aesthetic value anymore, but are interpreted in relation to the contemporary context. This contemporary context features an increasing awareness among visitors of the counter sides of Dutch colonisation. It challenges the Rijksmuseum to consider this in their permanent collection, as it is merely perceived by visitors as a showcase of success and glorification of the Dutch Golden Age.

In terms of identity creation, the current collection was believed to contribute to the creation of national identity. However, this identity is strongly exclusive, emphasising only a segment of

the current Dutch nation. By excluding the less comfortable sides of Dutch colonial history, or depicting an acknowledgement of this, suggests that the representation of Dutch colonial history and memory is not inclusive. To support the representation of “new identities” as suggested by MacDonald (2003) that reflect identities beyond the dominant, the collection needs to display objects that incorporate narratives of less convenient nature and from a former subservient cultural perspective that is reflected in current Dutch society (i.e.: Surinam, Dutch Caribbean, East Indies).

The Tropenmuseum deals with similar perceptions and meaning-making of the subject. Visitors of the Tropenmuseum appreciated the way the exhibitions enabled awareness of the role of the Dutch overseas during colonial times. Yet, an overexposure of the Dutch colonising perspective was believed to create an exclusive representation of this history. Whereas the visitors of the Rijksmuseum missed the *other* perspective in the collection’s narrative, the visitors from the Tropenmuseum indicated missing the storytelling of the *other*—the native inhabitants of the islands during Dutch occupation. As mentioned in the analysis, a more inclusive representation needs to be achieved through stronger personal storytelling that showcases the counter sides of Dutch colonisation or through a different lens. This ensures a more inclusive representation of the role of the Dutch in the former East Indies. It further stimulates a more contemporary identity representation of the current Dutch nation, of which more than 2 percent (over 350,000 people) find their roots in the former East Indies (Butter 2017).

Concluding Suggestions for Inclusiveness

As discussed by Bathia (2009), Mignolo (2011), and Nettleback (2012) in the introduction of this article, changing sociocultural structures affect the role of museums in today’s society. These changes are strongly featured by postcolonial issues such as multiculturalism, diversity, and diaspora as a direct product of European colonialism. Whereas museums are frequently centred around the meaning-making and understanding of the dominant culture, the postcolonial museum seeks to move away from this perspective through new insights and approaches, such as inclusiveness. The postcolonial museum maintains an inclusive approach in the development and interpretation of the material display, connects different audiences to current cultural and societal matters, and promotes mutual understanding through dialogue, interaction, and exchange. It seeks to narrate and display a complex history through a shared perspective and meaning-making and draws connections between this history and contemporary society.

Aldrich (2009, 154) states, “the tasks for the inheritors of the colonial museums are to awaken and satisfy the curiosity about the present-day world but without denying the colonial conditions and complex history behind the marvels on display.” This article explored the ability of the Rijksmuseum and Tropenmuseum to awaken and satisfy this curiosity without denying colonial conditions. As both museums are in the process of (re)designing an exhibition around Dutch colonial memory, the question is how they can break away from dominant meaning-making and understanding to reach stronger inclusiveness?

The three-level exploration (museum, visitor, material display) on the inclusive nature of the current collection and exhibition of the Rijksmuseum and Tropenmuseum has the following implications for their forthcoming exhibitions. It is advised for both museums to employ a stronger bottom-up approach in the development of their exhibitions by involving multiple perspectives in the design of their material display and narrative. By consulting with more voices and through personal storytelling, a potential underexposure of the other perspective will be limited and multiple meaning-making will be ensured. The objects and narrative will thus break away from the perception and meaning-making from the dominant culture, which is currently the case. This implies that the exhibitions should be strongly narrative based in which the material display serves to support the narrative and allows an interpretation from a postcolonial context.

The exploration on inclusiveness of the current displays of the Rijksmuseum and the Tropenmuseum shows that through a stronger consideration of a contemporary context in the

narrative and material display, a stronger emphasis on multiple understanding and a more diverse representation of the current Dutch nation is realised. In doing so, their upcoming exhibitions, due to open their doors in 2020 and 2021, become of stronger inclusive nature; one step closer to the postcolonial museum.

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