

Freie Universität Berlin
Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft
Fakultät Politik- und Sozialwissenschaft

Sara Dehkordi
Introduction into Postcolonial Theory and Critique

The Lion and the Hunter
The NiNsee institute and the Dutch cultural Archive

Gnatola ma no kpon sia, eyenabe adelan to kpo mi sena

“Until lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.”

(Ghanian proverb from Ewe-Mina)

The Lion and the Hunter¹

The NiNsee Institute and the Dutch Cultural Archive

In June of this year, the 2016 European Championship experienced its kick-off in France. For the first time in 32 years the national soccer team of the Netherlands did not participate. Reason enough for Dutch film studio BLIK film to publish *El Salvador – the incredible salvation of the Dutch*². This 5-minute video portrays Dutch citizens who are devastated that ‘their’ team does not attend the games. People stand in line for anti-depressants or decide to support the Belgian national team. Sitting in a desolated café, a bartender looks at a picture of Dutch football player Johan Crujff, sometimes named El Salvador. He then gets an idea: why not broadcast the matches of 1988, the only year the Dutch won a Football Cup final? With every match the bartender shows, the bigger his watching crowd becomes. Eventually, masses of people gather to watch the old Euro Cup finale, all in awe by the beauty and glory of their soccer team. Finally, when *Oranje*³ wins (again) all fans go out of their minds. The first disappointed bartender is now celebrated as the redeemer of the Dutch nation.

Although this video is clearly meant as a parody on Dutch football, it seems to underline a certain logic. Instead of commemorating the “tragedies” of losing the finals of the World Championship (such as 1974, 1978 and 2010), the protagonist presents a certain narrative. This narrative tends to memorize moments of joy, victory, or achievement and avoiding (and forgetting) those of trauma, tragedy and defeat. Unwilling to remember the “darker” pages of football history nor to acknowledge the current state of affairs, the Dutch football fans turn to the only place they feel comfortable, the safe haven of victory.

This logic seems to relate to the way Dutch national history in general is constructed. One important example for this claim is the closing down of the *National Institute of the Dutch History of Slavery and its Legacy Foundation* (NiNsee). The NiNsee was one of the main actors working to strengthen the country’s discourse on racism and slavery (Mitchell et al 2012). The cutting down of funds for this institute in 2012 almost forced this institute to close.

¹ This text has been edited and sent to several op-eds of national Dutch newspapers. Unfortunately, none of the newspapers decided to publish it. Reactions varied from “we prefer other entries” (NRC Handelsblad) and “we are not able to offer any substantive response” (Trouw) to “because of shortage of space we were not able to publish your piece” (Volkskrant).

² The clip can be seen here: <https://vimeo.com/169751521>

³ Literally meaning the colour orange, *oranje* is both the national colour of the Netherlands and the nickname of the Dutch national soccer team.

Once again, the ‘dark pages’ of Dutch slavery history, of repression, subjugation and domination seemed to become marginalized (Wekker 2016: 15). This not only contributes to the past as “a massive blind spot” but it also “barely hides a structure of superiority toward people or colour” (ibid.). It is this marginalization of knowledge about Dutch history that could foster the notion of an innocent Dutch nation with a glorious and bloodless history. In turn, this can lead to not knowing about exclusionary processes (ibid.). It is thus important to shed light on the dynamics of (re)producing knowledge and discourses. This paper analyses the almost closing of the NiNsee from the perspective of decolonial theory. Central to this analysis is the notion of the Archive of Edward Said, Jacques Derrida and Gloria Wekker. After this theoretical framework, the Research Method and Question will be presented. To execute this research, the qualitative method of a semi-structured interview will be used. This interview is conducted with Ronny Rens of the National Institute of Dutch Slavery and Heritage (NiNsee). This conversation is then used to archive the way the NiNsee Archive has been marginalized., in terms of its knowledge production, of its very existence and of its (re)location.

Decolonial theory and the Archive

This paper uses decolonial theory, also defined by others as postcolonialism, as a way to look at social reality⁴. Decolonial theory is an academic discipline which tries to analyse, explain and respond to the continuities of the heritage of colonial and imperial rule (Varela & Dhawan 2015). This school draws from postmodern thought in the sense that it analyses the politics of knowledge e.g. how knowledge of every form (social, cultural, economical) is created, controlled and reproduced. Decolonial theory is a form of constant resistance against colonial rule and its consequences (idem: 16). This resistance attacks the US-Eurocentrism within academic disciplines and everyday conceptions in opposition to the global South.

⁴ *Postcolonialism* emerged as an intellectual movement consolidating and developing around the ideas of Middle Eastern and South Asian authors such as Edward W. Said, Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri C. Spivak (Bhambra 2014: 115). In contrast, the *decoloniality* school emerged from the Latin-American work of, among others, Anibal Quijano, María Lugones, and Walter D. Mignolo (ibid.). While both traditions challenge US-Eurocentrism in all its possible manifestations, the term *postcolonialism* has raised confusion, because it suggests that this discipline was established after (*post*) the period of colonialism. The word *decolonial* is therefore seen as more fitting (Wekker 2016: 175), since it does not suggest such a certain ‘after’ period of colonialism, rather a necessary strive for ‘becoming lesser’ (*de*) of its continuities.

It thereby thematises the incomplete decolonisation of the world and demands a paradigm shift on a historical and political level (idem: 17). The tool to organize this paradigm shift is *intervention*; the intervening of dominant narratives and the related forgetting of history to transform hegemonic structures. This can happen in the discourse of every field of study such as history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, language, literature or gender studies. One of the works which gave birth to decolonial theory is the book *Orientalism* (1978) by Palestinian author Edward Said.

In this influential book, Said deconstructs the cultural representations, patronizing perceptions and fictional depictions of the East, in short *Orientalism*. This Orientalism was done in the course of hundreds of years by a Western tradition of both academic and artistic nature. This attitude towards Eastern societies was fused and justified Western rule over these countries. Orientalism, according to Said, was thus used for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient (Said 1978: 3). The central aim of Said is therefore to analyse and research the relation between the knowledge production of the discourse of Orientalism in relation to colonial rule. Or in Said's words: "ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their (...) configurations of power" (idem: 5).

In the sequel to *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said places the phenomenon of culture, especially the novel, in a discourse of imperialism because "the power to narrate or the power to block other narratives from emerging and forming is important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (xxi). Said's *cultural archive* constitutes the complete body of novels metropolitan authors produced during imperialism (Wekker 2016: 19). This is where the intellectual and aesthetic investments in overseas dominion are made (Said 1993: xxi).

Said's definition of the cultural archive, unfortunately, does not go beyond the domain of poetry and fiction. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Expression* (1995) by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, however, does investigate power and the archive in *general*. Derrida also stresses the importance of history and historiography. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida defines the archive as "there where things commence" and "there where authority, social order are exercised" (Derrida 1995: 9). The archive is thus a place where official documents are filed and therefore processes of remembering, archiving and historiography occur. Secondly, it is also the locus where certain people have power over these processes. Or as Derrida states in a footnote: "There is no political power without control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation." (idem: 11).

Here, Derrida seems to stake the claim of decolonial theory, namely that knowledge (of the past) and political power are interwoven. The one who thus has the power over the archive not only has the power to create memory, but also to destroy it. This destruction is what Derrida calls, in psycho-analytical terms, the *death drive*. This drive is the “aggression and destruction that incites forgetfulness, amnesia and the annihilation of memory” (Vosloo 2005: 5). According to Derrida, there is always a battle between archive destroying (the death drive) and archive conserving (idem: 6). This points to the vulnerability of memory and the reality that processes of remembering and commemorating can be disrupted or even destroyed.

This disruption and destruction relates to the openness of the archive to the future, because it is always possible to re-interpret and (re)configure the archive (Derrida 1995: 27). The archive can thus never be closed (Vosloo 2005: 9). At this point, Derrida confronts us with the ethical and political responsibility of history writing. The term *Archive Fever* does not point to suffer from sickness. “It is to burn with a passion” (Derrida 1995: 57). A passion for the past in the fight for responsible history writing. A battle against “the wilful denial of many horrific episodes in the history of humankind and the erasure of the stories of the vulnerable and the victimised” (Vosloo 2005: 10). In other words, a passion to challenge the hegemony of the constructed past, which privileges the victors.

In her book *White Innocence* (2016) Gloria Wekker employs the (cultural) archive to challenge such hegemony. This hegemony in her eyes is *white innocence*, the image of the Netherlands as a country in which racism and sexism have never taken root. Wekker wants to falsify this claim. White innocence, according to her, is a phenomenon, “part of a dominant Dutch way of being in the world” (idem: 17). It means not knowing as well as not *wanting* to know racial matters in Dutch society⁵. Wekker locates white innocence in the *cultural archive*, defined by her as “repository of memory” (idem: 19). This repository is situated in the “hearts and minds of people” but also in “policies”, “organizational rules”, “popular and sexual cultures” and “common-sense everyday knowledge” (ibid.). The repository of most Dutch citizens does not contain any knowledge about the colonial past of the Netherlands. This lack of knowledge can be exposed by reading back “imperial continuities into a variety of popular cultural and organizational phenomena” (idem: 20). According to Wekker, the most important continuity is the stark contradiction between the Dutch imperial presence in the past and the underrepresentation of this history “in the Dutch educational curriculum, in self-image

⁵ Here, ‘white’ does not mean a fixed biological state of being, but rather a social construct evolving over time and constantly changing in different contexts (Wekker 2016: 24).

and self-representations, such as monuments, literature, and debates about Dutch identity (...)” (2016: 13). This means that the painful and darker pages of Dutch history (such as slavery and colonialism) have systematically and continuously been left out in the cultural archive of the Dutch. Hence, the (cultural) archive is exactly the place where the hegemonic image of an innocent self can either be (re)produced or disrupted.

The (cultural) archive will be understood here as a combination of all three definitions mentioned above. It points to the relation between power and knowledge (Said). The archive forms a physical place where not only knowledge is stored, but those controlling knowledge possess the political power to control, destroy or (re)produce knowledge (Derrida). In the Dutch context, the cultural archive is also a psychological and social phenomenon which also fuses white innocence and manifests itself on an organisational level (Wekker).

Research Question and Method

Decolonial theory and the concept of the archive have now been mapped out. This theoretical framework has shown that the production or destruction of knowledge (especially about history) is inextricably linked with political power. Because I follow the argumentation of Said, Derrida and Wekker, I am interested in the dynamics between power and knowledge, especially in the Dutch context. When one closely studies the Netherlands and historiography, the case of the NiNsee directly draws attention. This research institute has been a central place where discourses on the history of Dutch slavery and colonialism have been greatly strengthened (Mitchell et al 2012). However, several authors who write critically about the silence surrounding Dutch colonial history do not shed light on the process by which the NiNsee was marginalized (van Stipriaan 2005, Oostindie 2010, Wekker 2016). Why and how was it founded? Why was it almost completely shut down and how was this made clear by the government? Which policies and organizational rules led to its near demise? In short, this paper tries to fill this gap, by archiving the way in which the Dutch cultural archive of the NiNsee has been marginalized. The research question is thus as follows: *how does the marginalisation process of the NiNsee archive (from 2002 up till now) look like?*

This question will be answered by first using literature on the topic. Subsequently and more important, a qualitative method by interviewing will be used. This qualitative interview method consists of the interviewer using an interview guide with several questions. The interviewer is not fully bounded to this structure of questions; the interviewer can ask not included questions as he/she picks up on issues mentioned by the interviewee.

Such *semi-structured interviews* put great emphasis on the interviewee's point of view (Bryman 2008: 470). Interviewers can thus depart from any point that is being used, enabling the interview to respond to the direction in which the interviewees take the interview. This can perhaps adjust the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of interviews (ibid.). Because this paper wants to depart from the clear focus of the founding and closing of the NiNsee, semi-structured interviews are thus most suitable.

The National Institute of Dutch Slavery and Heritage (NiNsee)

There were two major political events leading up to the establishment of the *The National Institute of Dutch Slavery and Heritage past and present*, in short *NiNsee*. First of all, during the late 90's, several grassroots organizations demanded recognition of slavery history. This need was first articulated by Afro-European woman's movement in The Hague called *Sophiedela*. They offered a petition to the Dutch parliament in 1998. This petition not only asked for recognition and remembrance, but also for a *monument* about the history of slavery. This monument was to be both dynamic and static; the static monument was to be the *National Slavery Monument*, the dynamic one the knowledge centre which became the NiNsee (Mitchell et al 2012).

Second of all, the actual establishment could be realised because of expressions of remorse by the Dutch government at the United Nations' 2001 Durban Review Conference in South Africa. The national monument was established in 2002. The NiNsee opened its doors on the 1st of July, 2003 in Amsterdam. It was upon this day that slavery was abolished 140 years earlier. The main focus of the institutes consisted of four areas: to document (creating a library), research (scientific literature), exhibit (museum expositions) and educate about the history and heritage of slavery. Both the museum and the education part of the NiNsee can be seen as *redistribution* and *implementation* of the archive into the public realm. The library as well as the scientific research are seen here as the actual *archive* of the NiNsee, since it is here where knowledge about the slavery past commences and authority is exercised.

To acquire more in-depth information about the NiNsee and her activities I interviewed Ronny Rens, Financial Manager and only regular employee of the NiNsee. I met him in the very building which houses the institute, *the Bazel*, to ask him about his personal experiences with the NiNsee under Dutch authority. Rens, clearly stated that he experienced the exercising of economic authority under the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) as negative.

“We had to aim much more towards science and education, otherwise our request for funding would have been denied. Exhibitions and documentations were of much lesser importance, we had to live up to certain criteria” (Rens 2016). This led to the fact that only 8 or 10 people could be hired and the focus of the institute was decided from the start.

Eight years later, in 2012, the subsidized status of the NiNsee was ended by the same Ministry, under the liberal-conservative cabinet Rutte-I (2010-2012). One year before the 150th anniversary of the Dutch abolition of slavery, Rens received the announcement that the government funding of the institute would be totally cut off. “In the days up to the announcement, we spoke with several staff members of the government, but we were constantly redirected with the message that they would come up with a plan, that we had to await that. Eventually, in the midst of June 2011, I just got a simple email saying that the funding would be put to a stop, (...) the entire cutting was a complete shock for us.” Afterwards, there were several conversations with the government in which the ministry apologized for the way the cuts were communicated. For the NiNsee, the cuts meant its death blow. “We had to dismantle all our exhibitions and fire all our employees. Then we officially closed our doors in August of 2012” (Rens 2016).

Rens was still involved in projects of the former NiNsee with the social-democratic City Council of Amsterdam. The most important one was the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery on the 1st of July, 2013. After all the attention the commemoration received, the critical report *We want to know more about slavery* was published (van Stipriaan 2014). This report criticised the discrepancy between the commemoration and the absence of slavery history in the city of Amsterdam. It suggested several improvements, such as education programmes, a national Commemoration Day and a transparent and accessible NiNsee (idem: 34). The Council, instead of the Dutch government, decided to annually fund the NiNsee with 150,000 euros. Once again, implications arose. The subsidy was not granted, said Rens: “Our subsidy is only incidental, which means that you have to request it every year. Our existence is not granted on the long-term. Many people think we were able to re-launch the institute, but we only got subsidies for projects, there was no viability, no assurance.”

Secondly, the NiNsee was under control of the Education department of the Council of Amsterdam. This meant that “we do not research or document anymore. In fact, we focus solely on two things: commemoration and education. Within the education program, we changed our focus. We try to reach out to teachers instead of directly approaching the students, which is an entire other set-up, also because we got no exhibition program anymore” (Rens 2016).

Thus it becomes clear that, as under the ministry, the NiNsee archive is not only in terms of economics, but also in terms of content dependent from a higher authority.

This last point is not covered by Dutch media; a quick research of the online archives of three larger newspapers showed that the NiNsee is only mentioned in 29 (NRC Handelsblad), 31 (Parool) or 41 articles (de Volkskrant)⁶. Of these articles the NiNsee was the main topic of only 2 (both NRC Handelsblad and Parool) articles or just 1 article (de Volkskrant). When the NiNsee is the main topic, only the cuts are briefly discussed, the other policies by the Dutch government are completely left out.

Another result of the policies of the Dutch authorities is the inability of the NiNsee to discuss racism and discrimination in Dutch society, in short the *heritage* which it carries in its title. Asked about the fact that the NiNsee is sometimes criticized for its lack of emancipation in Dutch society, Rens responded: “For example, activist groups yearn for support, for back-up in societal debates. With protest only, they do make any progress. But in the situation we are in now, we can’t handle that. We simply don’t have the resources and manpower for it. Some time ago, I had some conversations with Black Lives Matter, about the death of Mitch Henriquez⁷. I told them we did not have any capacity at all for research or a media campaign.”

The NiNsee Archive

The NiNsee archive seems to have been marginalized in three ways; in terms of its *knowledge production*, in terms of its *existence* as an archive and in terms of its *relocation*. First, the power controlling the archive consisted mainly of an economic authority coming from subsidies. This authority did not only create the archive as such, but also its form and function. The ministry of Education, Culture and Research and the Educational Board of Amsterdam clearly left their mark on the institute by demanding its focus points. The NiNsee could simply not choose what it wanted to undertake, because of its economic position. Or as Rens has put it more concise: “Beggars can’t be choosers” (2016).

⁶ Of these newspapers, De Volkskrant ranks the highest with 270.000 printed copies per day, followed by the NRC Handelsblad with 200.000 and Het Parool with 60.000.

⁷ In June of 2015, 42-year-old native of the Dutch Caribbean island of Aruba, Mitch Henriquez, was arrested in The Hague which resulted in the men’s death. The event caused outrage among the Dutch public, prompting mass protests outside police headquarters and weeks of civil unrest in The Hague. Two Dutch police officers present at the scene have been charged with manslaughter, three others have been suspended from service.

This economic authority enabled the Dutch authorities to design the archive: it demanded its *redistribution* and *implementation* of knowledge over its *production*. The knowledge production was then fully abolished after the cuts; no academic research or documentation was organised since 2011. In addition, because of its deplorable financial situation, the archive has also been unable to produce knowledge about the current state of racial and discriminatory affairs in Dutch society. Or as Rens stated: “there is a pattern of expectations coming from the society which we cannot live up to” (2016).

Secondly, the NiNsee experienced a marginalisation in terms of its very existence as an archive. In line with Derrida’s theory of the Archive, the history of the NiNsee can roughly be divided into three periods. First, the *archive conserving period* (2002-2010) when attention of slavery and colonialism experienced a high-rise after the petition of Sophiedela and the remorse of the Dutch government⁸. Second, the *archive destroying period* (2010-2013) in which cuts by a liberal-conservative government paralyzed the institute. These cuts must be seen in a broader context of archive destroying during which the Dutch parliament decided to save 200 million euros on all cultural institutions in the Netherlands. Third, the period after 2013 was a *combination* of archive conserving and archive destroying. The archive was conserved because the City Council of Amsterdam decided to fund the institute. It was partially destroyed because the NiNsee went from 10 employees to only 1 and received only 10 percent of its previous subsidies. It is not sure whether the institute gets funding every next year.

Thirdly, the NiNsee has been marginalized in terms of its relocation. After the cuts, the NiNsee has been relocated to the Amsterdam City Archives, the largest municipal archive in the world. The building of the archives, *De Bazel*, formed the headquarters of the Netherlands Trading Society, a 19th century trading society. This private company worked for the Dutch government, which became known for its colonial measures in the Dutch-Indies, modern day Indonesia⁹.

⁸ In fact, 2002 was not only the year that a National Moment for the Commemoration of Slavery was erected (Balkenhol 2016). Also, a historical cannon for public schools was established in 2006, which offered more information and in-depth history about slavery and colonialism to students than ever before (Wekker 2016: 13). Third, the amount of research on slavery and colonialism was substantially rising (van Stipriaan 2011: 2).

⁹ In 1999, the New York Times published a long-read titled *Best Story; The Book That Killed Colonialism*. This book review was about *Max Havelaar, or the Coffee Auctions of the Dutch Trading Company*, a novel by Eduard Douwes Dekker, a Dutchman. The book recounts the experiences of one Max Havelaar, an idealistic Dutch colonial official in Java. In the story, Havelaar encounters and then rebels against the system of forced cultivation imposed on

Slavery and suppression are logically not the same thing, but are sides of the same colonial coin. It is at the least noteworthy that an institute aimed at researching slavery and its heritage is housed in a building from where colonial rule was organised. This painful fact is not made clear in any sense, not in the building itself nor on its website, nowhere.

Additionally, the institute has been hidden from the public eye. When one wants to pay the NiNsee a visit, one does not come across it that easy. At first, I thought I had mistaken the institute for something else, when I did not see any nameplates or other signs assuring me I was at the right place. Once inside the Amsterdam City Archives, I asked the receptionist where I could find the institute. With great suspicion, she made a few phone calls and eventually told me where I had to go. It turned out that the NiNsee was located somewhere on the third floor in the back of the building, where almost all the doors were locked and no one was in sight. It is only when one visits the institute, that the image of it as truly marginalized becomes reality.

These three marginalizations relate to Wekker's *white innocence*. They contribute to the stark juxtaposition between the colonial presence of the Netherlands in the past and its underrepresentation in modern day Dutch society. The marginalization of the NiNsee denies the history of trauma, of pain, of blood, of tragedy, in short, of *guilt*. It paves the way for a history of joy, achievement and victory, in short, of *innocence*. With closing of the NiNsee the hegemonic discourse of immaculate history, a construction of the past of the victor, is one step closer. The Dutch authorities have turned away from the cruel heritage of their predecessors, hundreds of years of illegal trade in people. This can make it more difficult for the Dutch authorities to fully grasp the current state of affairs in Dutch society, for colonialism and slavery have clear marked modern day society (Wekker 2016).

Conclusion

This paper has tried to “archive” the way The National Institute of Dutch Slavery and Heritage (NiNsee) has been marginalised. The NiNsee has experienced periods of archive conserving (2002-2010) and archive destroying (2010-2013). Subsequently, it has experienced a combination of the two in 2013. It was in that year during which the archive was saved from oblivion, but had to continue on a much smaller scale. However, the NiNsee archive has been subjected to authority based on subsidies of the central and local Dutch authorities.

Indonesia's peasants by the Dutch Government (Toer 1999). As a result, tens of thousands of peasants died of hunger.

These subsidies (especially their absence) have institutionalized the marginalization of the NiNsee archive in terms of its *knowledge production*, of its *existence as an archive* and of its *relocation*.

By exposing the archive of the marginalization process of the NiNsee, this paper has tried to show the utter need for interventions of the constructed past. This need is best described by the Ghanaian proverb *until lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter*. Although the heraldic symbol of the Netherlands has been the lion for centuries, the Dutch authorities have truly proven to be the hunter. The marginalizing of the NiNsee is nothing more than a point-blank shot. It is thus high time for the Hunter to finally stop hunting, to listen to the suffering of the Lion and battle against the wilful denial of many horrific episodes in the history of humankind, against the erasure of the stories of the vulnerable and the victimised. In short, the Hunter needs to come down with Archive Fever.

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