

***The Dutch National Monument of the History of Slavery, a
visual enforcement of 'Eurocentric Cultural Memory'***

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Abstract

This thesis explores how *the Dutch National Monument of the History of Slavery's* visual presentation, combined with its commemorative function, conflicts with its intention of challenging Eurocentric ideology. It does so by first providing a theoretical background which integrates theory surrounding Eurocentrism, and theory surrounding historical remembrance and commemoration, into the notion of 'Eurocentric cultural memory'. This notion refers to how ideas of European, Western (and white) superiority, stemming from modern imperialism, are centralized using the support of a collective cultural memory which is cultivated through acts of historical remembrance and commemoration. Hereafter, a visual analysis of *the Dutch National Monument (...)* is provided in order to determine the monument's relation to the presence of Eurocentric cultural memory. This visual analysis is performed according to the academic tradition of semiology. The analysis first focusses on the monument's denotative signs. Secondly, the cultural and symbolic connotations of these denotative signs are discussed, where after the 'myth' emerging from these two prior levels of signification is described. It is argued that *the Dutch National Monument (...)*'s simplistic, dramatized and sensational design, combined with the chronological juxtaposition of its three pieces and the erasure of context, construct the myth of 'the ex-slave'. This myth defines the Dutch black individual through its 'former historical status of enslavement', representing the Dutch black individual as defined, scarred and crippled by its colonial past. Furthermore, this representation is inserted into the Dutch cultural memory due to the monument's commemorative function, and thus absorbed into the Dutch collective consciousness.

Introduction

On the 1st of July, 1863, the Kingdom of the Netherlands abolished slavery in Surinam and the rest of its colonies. Since then, this day is celebrated annually by the Surinamese-Dutch population as 'Keti Koti', which translates into "the breaking of chains". The celebrations were extra special in the year 2002, as it was on that day that a national monument, commemorating the Dutch abolition of slavery would be revealed by queen Beatrix in Amsterdam's Oosterpark. Since its reveal on July 1st 2002, the monument is known as *the Dutch National Monument of the History of Slavery*.

However, the ceremony surrounding the monument's reveal quickly turned into a site of public commotion and protest. Hundreds of people – mainly Dutch Antillianⁱ citizens – celebrating the festivities of Keti Koti were prohibited from attending the monument's reveal, as it was only reserved for a small, elite group of people. This infuriated the celebrators, as they believed this day, together with the reveal of the new monument, was about *them*. The celebrators felt ostracized and started to protest outside the gates separating them from the official ceremony of the monument. Later that day, the gates were opened and the general public was allowed to view the monument (Volkskrant 2002) (Trouw 2002).

Many scholars in the field of Postcolonial Studies are preoccupied with studying the complex presence of Eurocentrism in contemporary culture. This field of study is based on the assumption that in a time where formal imperialism and colonialism have ended, their underlying ideologies are still the foundation of cultural, social and political reality (McLeod 2000). A community's collective identity and culture is prominently determined by the way an image of the collective past is framed (Macdonald 2013), and it has come to my attention that Eurocentric ideology is ever so present in the social processes and cultural artefacts which facilitate this act of collective reflection. Thus, this thesis shall aim to address the Eurocentric presence in a commemorative artefact intending to reflect upon Dutch colonial history, in order to illuminate the Eurocentric nature of our cultural memory. *The Dutch National Monument (...)* is particularly fit for such an analysis, since it intends to problematize Dutch colonial history by commemorating the trauma of the victims of imperial slavery and their journey to liberation. The visual presentation of this monument however, inserts into our cultural

memory a particular representation which allows the contemporary presence of Eurocentrism to prosper. Thus, this causes the outrageous exclusion of the Dutch Antillian celebrators on July 1st 2002, to be accompanied by a less physical, but nevertheless problematic form of exclusion on the level of collective consciousness, identity and representation.

This research shall be conducted according to the following research question: “How does *The Dutch National Monument of the History of Slavery*’s visual presentation, combined with its commemorative function, conflict with its intention of challenging Eurocentric ideology?”. Firstly, a theoretical framework will be presented wherein the theoretical concept of ‘Eurocentric cultural memory’ will be articulated, as this concept is vital to understanding the ways in which this monument enforces Eurocentrism. This theoretical framework will answer the first sub-question of this thesis: “How can Eurocentric cultural memory be defined and understood?”. In the second chapter, the methodological framework, the method of semiology will be discussed in order to determine and justify the mode of analysis for *the Dutch National Monument (...)*. The third chapter will analyse *the Dutch National Monument (...)* in detail in three analytical steps, answering the second sub-question: “How do the visual signs present in the monument reinforce a Eurocentric cultural memory?”. This will be followed by a conclusion which will reflect upon the research, answer the main research question and discuss possible further options of research.

1. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis will mainly be concerned with exploring and connecting two strands of theory: on the one hand, theory surrounding the concept of Eurocentrism and on the other, theory surrounding collective remembrance, commemoration and identity. This will help to consolidate my own notion of 'Eurocentric cultural memory'.

As will become evident through the course of this chapter, Eurocentric cultural memory refers to the presence of a Eurocentric framework that is partially articulated, perpetuated and enforced by a collective cultural memory which is in turn constructed through social processes of remembrance and commemoration. Other theoretical components and ideas present in this idea of Eurocentric cultural memory will be discussed, as they enforce the main framework of Eurocentric cultural memory.

Eurocentrism

As the ideological foundation underneath the notion of Eurocentric cultural memory, a definition of Eurocentrism itself is necessary. In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam define Eurocentrism as "(...) the procrustean forcing of cultural heterogeneity into a single paradigmatic perspective in which Europe is seen as the unique source of meaning, as the world's centre of gravity, as ontological "reality" to the rest of the world's shadow." (Shohat & Stam 2010, 2). Thus Eurocentrism should be understood as the centralization of European and Western ideas, values and culture as global, superior points of reference and comparison. Shohat and Stam distinguish Eurocentrism from colonialism, arguing that the latter refers to ideologies and practices directly facilitating colonial endeavours, while Eurocentrism itself stands for contemporary normalization of structures of power being directly derived from colonialism and Western imperial enterprises (Shohat & Stam 2010, 2). As we are living in a time where modern imperialism has formally come to an end due to global processes of decolonization of the 20th century, I shall approach Eurocentrism with regard to this contemporary context.

In order to address further manifestations of the presence of such an implicit, yet dominant ideology in our contemporary culture, insights from Fatima El-Tayeb's work

European Others will be briefly discussed. In her text, El-Tayeb addresses the Eurocentric framework in bringing attention to Europe's exclusionary forces based on ethnicity. These forces normalize and centralize 'whiteness' and place anything deviant from this category in the margins. One of the main problems rooting in Europe's continent today is the ideology of 'racelessness', which is a "process by which racial thinking and its effects are made invisible." (El-Tayeb 2011, xvii). El-Tayeb argues that there is a continental tendency of 'colorblindness' present in Europe which does not allow for any discourses on race to be present in Europe's collective consciousness. This idea of colorblindness believes the marginalizing effects of Eurocentrism to be absent, referring to the claim that Eurocentrism itself is longer present in Europe (El-Tayeb 2011, xvii).

Of course, at first glance it seems as if *the Dutch National Monument* (...) is directly battling this ideology of racelessness: it addresses the history of slavery and brings attention to the 'story' of black slaves, foregrounding Europe's colonial history which is structured around the Eurocentric articulation of racial discourses and the grave hierarchical divisions of power emanating from these discourses. However, I argue that the monument's visual presentation combined with its commemorative function sustains a form of racelessness which does not necessarily prohibit racial discourses, but one that implicitly produces a new form of contemporary racial representation. The implicitness of this representational production lies in the monument's intention and commemorative function.

As Shohat & Stam address Eurocentrism as a core ideology, and El-Tayeb studies racelessness as a contemporary manifestation of this core-ideology, Gloria Wekker explores how these Eurocentric ideas are 'stored' in our collective consciousness through the presence of what she refers to as 'the cultural archive'. Wekker paraphrases the original concept by Edward Said as "a storehouse of a particular knowledge and structures of attitude and reference (...)." (Wekker 2016, 2). According to Wekker, this storehouse constructs racial divisions and hierarchical formations. It is from the basis of this cultural archive that a collective norm or 'self' is fabricated, determining collective social reality and behaviour. Wekker goes on to show how the cultural archive is not to be thought of in physical or material terms; Rather, it is an intangible collective consciousness (Wekker 2016, 2, 19). Thus, the archive itself cannot be exposed, but the way it expresses itself in education, art, legislation or national commemoration *can* be. In

my thesis, I approach *The Dutch National Monument of Slavery* as such a manifestation of the Dutch cultural archive.

Let it be clear that, similar to El-Tayeb's application of racelessness, I am not looking to address the monument as an explicit and undeniable racist expression of the imperial cultural archive. It is a different kind of cultural expression that I aim to illuminate, one that is implicit and obscured yet it continuously creates contemporary social categories built on race. The previously discussed theory thus works to reveal Eurocentrism's presence inside the Dutch cultural archive, contemporarily manifesting itself as an ideology of racelessness, whereas the following theoretical discussion focuses on how historical remembrance and commemoration sustains this presence inside the national imaginary. Both of these components, will contextualize the monument as a manifestation of Eurocentric cultural memory.

Cultural Memory

Similar to many other scholars, Sharon Macdonald works to understand how the past is — either individually or collectively — approached and thought of in order to construct present identity. In *Memorylands: Heritage and Identity in Europe Today* Macdonald describes Europe as a 'memoryland': a continental landscape which is completely preoccupied with its past in order to consolidate a satisfying present identity (Macdonald 2013, 1). Her book is an analysis of the many ways in which this particular preoccupation manifests itself.

Amongst many things, Macdonald mentions the existence of a liberal approach to individual and collective memory. Across Europe, memory is thought of as a form of property, defining the present, and therefore, defining identity. This idea of memory as property works on the level of the nation-state as well: "Nations are thus conceptualised as possessive individuals, with heritage acting as the materialised rendition of their memory as property." (Macdonald 2013, 12). Should a collective's memory be thought of as its property — which means that it is an essential indicator of collective culture and value — then surely this property must be cultivated and maintained. In a nation, there are thus certain utilities and activities which help to cultivate and preserve a collective memory. *The Dutch National Monument* (...) is such a utility and thus helps to facilitate the preservation of a collective memory.

The way this preservation takes place is explored in *Performing the Past* (2010). This is a collection of various scholarly essays, examining how ‘performances’ⁱⁱ in contemporary Europe reference, rehearse or interpret a vision of the past in order to consolidate a certain collective identity. Jay Winter, one of the editors of this title, stresses the influence ‘historical remembrance’ has on the construction of collective identity. The societal act of historical remembrance mixes memory (an interpretation of the past based on emotion) with history (an interpretation of the past based on an institutionalized academic discipline drawing upon data or documents) to construct a collective narrative of a shared past for the sake of having a coherent and collective present identity (Tilmans 2010, 1-15). These processes of historical remembrance in turn produce something understandable as ‘cultural memory’.

According to Peter Burke, another researcher whose work is presented in *Performing the Past*, ‘cultural memory’ is to be understood as a “repertoire of symbols, images, and stereotypes which members of a given culture draw upon or re-activate whenever required.” (Tilmans 2010, 103-116) This action of reactivation constitutes a new, artificial interpretation of the past, which Burke calls ‘prosthetic memory’. This prosthetic memory is in turn essential in the construction of collective identity. As a parallel concept, the notion of ‘social memory’ refers to a dimension of authority or dominance. Social memory connects these prosthetic memories to a dominant power framework which presents this prosthetic memory as anything but prosthetic or artificial. This authoritative power framework forces the ‘truthfulness’ of the cultural memory upon the individuals located inside its reach and upholds the narrative of this prosthetic, by centralizing this particular instance of commemoration (Tilmans 2010, 103-116). *The Dutch National Monument (...)* is enforced and presented by the state as *the* central artefact of the nation when it comes to the commemoration of the Dutch history of slavery.

To summarize then: a nation’s collective identity is built upon its collective memory, which is thought of as a possession. This collective, or cultural memory is cultivated and preserved through acts of historical remembrance and commemoration, and these activities surrounding cultural artefacts like monuments emanate artificial and subjective interpretations of the past. Consecutively, these artificial interpretations are nationally centralized and transmitted through the nation’s subjects by national commemorative events supported by governmental media attention.

Eurocentric Cultural Memory

Now that the theoretical concepts which are foundational to the understanding of Eurocentric cultural memory have been discussed, it is possible to provide a more detailed and nuanced definition of Eurocentric cultural memory. This will answer the first subquestion of this thesis: 'How can Eurocentric cultural memory be defined and understood?'.

Eurocentric cultural memory refers to how ideas of European, Western (and white) superiority, stemming from modern imperialism, are centralized using the support of a collective cultural memory which is cultivated through acts of historical remembrance and commemoration. This collective cultural memory transmits Eurocentric ideology, drawing from a cultural archive which has been centralized by imperialist ideology. This Eurocentric cultural memory expresses itself in more subtle ways than typical racial binary representations. Eurocentric cultural memory produces a racial representation which is more acceptable, but still racial in essence. The way this Eurocentric cultural memory is cultivated, through historical remembrance and commemoration, plays a big part in the normalization and obscurity of these racial representations.

Before moving on to the next chapter, I would like to acknowledge the immense scale accompanying the term of Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism is a vast and complex ideology. It manifests itself in for instance the media, governmental policies and digital realityⁱⁱⁱ, and these manifestations are of high relevance to the way Eurocentrism is shaped and in turn how it is to be understood. In this thesis however, I focus on *that* part of Eurocentrism which is sustained by the cultivation of a collective cultural memory, hypothetically separating Eurocentrism — which in reality would not be possible — from the many other ways in which it is sustained and possibly even deconstructed. I do not live under the impression that conducting this research will result in a holistic understanding of Eurocentrism. I simply aim to provide a further contribution to the understanding of Eurocentrism and its presence in our contemporary day and age.

2. Methodological Framework

The methodological framework of this thesis will be concerned with introducing and exploring the method of semiology. This method will be central to the research analysis, determining how *The Dutch National Monument* (...) is embedded in the framework of Eurocentric cultural memory. After discussing the broad connections between visual culture and ideology, different semiological concepts will be discussed, together with the way they will be applied in the research analysis.

Visual culture and ideology

In the introduction to their handbook, *Practices of Looking*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright argue that images serve as key indicators for the presence of dominant ideologies, which naturalize a collective set of values and beliefs. Moreover, going beyond the idea of images as mere indicators, reflections or representations of ideologies, images themselves should be seen as key factors in the (re)production of ideology; images are co-responsible for the articulation, momentum and dynamics of ideology (Sturken & Cartwright 2001, 23). This implies that an image should be thought of as negotiating, or speaking ideology, making the images actors, rather than mere indicators.

This thesis approaches *the Dutch National Monument* (...) as such a negotiating actor, fit for visual analysis. Such a visual analysis will thus facilitate a critical awareness of how this visual monument positions itself within the articulation of a Eurocentric ideology which constructs various forms of social difference and inequality. More importantly, the analysis aims to evaluate the monument's visual presentation *as a mode of commemoration* in order to assess the ways in which this monument contributes to the reproduction of a Eurocentric cultural memory. The visual method of semiology, the study of visual signs (Rose 2001), will prove to be most suitable for such an assessment in the sense that *the Dutch National Monument* (...)’s visual composition is a collection of various signs which produce meanings on multiple levels of signification. Before addressing those semiological concepts which are of most importance to this research, I will first touch upon key semiologist Roland Barthes and his concept of ‘myth’, considering the importance of this concept to the analytical goal of this thesis.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes argues that

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes 1972, 143)

Barthes's view on semiology is built upon the idea that images express these myths. Evident from these words is that the notion of myth operates through processes of simplification, not taking into account the complexity and ambivalence of history. It has a universalizing effect, rendering the image's connotations as objective and given. (Sturken & Cartwright 2000, 20).

As will become evident in the next chapters, Barthes' idea of myth refers to a 'higher' level of signification, situated above other, more literal and visible levels. The next chapter's research analysis will work from the lower semiological levels of denotation and connotation upwards to the level of myth. Only with analytical attention to these lower levels — whose theoretical bases will be explored in more detail further on — can the Eurocentric myth conveyed by *the Dutch National Monument* (...) be shifted from a normalized, barely visible background, to a more explicit foreground. It will become apparent that the denotative meanings present in the monument's imagery work together with their connotations in order to collectively construct a myth which is unconsciously transported into the public sphere.

Semiology

Semiology revolves around the understanding that signs produce analysable meanings. Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's most important distinction between signifier and signified is essential to this understanding, since the connection between these two components produces a sign's meaning. A signified is to be understood as a concept or idea that a sign is referring to, while the signifier is the visual material, written or spoken word connected to that concept. Together, the signifier and signified construct a sign (Rose 2001, 74). Applied to *The Dutch National Monument* (...), one must understand the bronze material particularly shaped by the artist as the signifier, while the ideas they are referring to (people, ropes, gates) as their signifieds.

The literal level of meaning production by signs is also explored by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce when speaking of 'iconic' signs. According to Peirce, iconic signs are signs which work through a visual similarity between the signifier and its signified. Similarly, Barthes theorizes what he calls the first level of signification when speaking of 'denotation', referring to the literal meaning of signs, isolated from any further form of cultural association or implication. The sum of all the literal meanings in an image are to be understood as an image's 'diegesis' (Rose 2001, 78, 79, 82). It must be understood that the establishment of the diegesis, this literal level of signification as theorized by both Peirce and Barthes — resting upon De Saussure's idea of signifier and signified — will be the first step in visually analysing *the Dutch National Monument* (...). This will concretely be applied to the monument by zooming in on each of the three parts of the monument: the group of figures on the left, the figure passing the gate in the centre, and the prominent womanly figure on the right. By looking at them, the denotative meanings will be described devoid from any further associations. In contrast to further steps in the analysis, this first denotative part will be solely visual, not yet connected to this thesis's theoretical implications. This is necessary since it is through these simple appearances that the monument's myth is mediated, thus an isolated description is necessary to connect this myth to its mediators.

Barthes argued that denotative signs, through their literal meanings, pave the way to a second level of signification called connotation. Connotations are 'higher', culturally specific meanings. Peirce's idea of symbolic signs very much aligns with the notion of connotative meaning, in the sense that symbolic signs produce meaning through arbitrary social convention: the signifier and its signified have no logical relationship, but are only connected because our culture has socially conditioned us to recognize this connection (Rose 2001, 78 79). These ideas will be put into practice in the second step of the research analysis. This analytical phase will revisit the components of *the Dutch National Monument* (...) denotatively analysed in step one, in order to describe their connotations and symbols. Again, zooming in on each of the three components of the overall sculpture will be necessary here, since it is in each of these sections that the connotation's prerequisite, the denotative meaning, exists. Features of detail present inside each of the sections like for instance the figures' skin texture, are scanned for their connotations, where after each of the three pieces as a whole is described as a more explicit symbol.

As discussed before, these two levels of signification work together to pave the way for the next level of signification, the sculpture's myth. It is in this third analytical phase that the sculpture will be interpreted as a manifestation of the Eurocentric cultural memory. Attention to the sculpture's overall composition is necessary for the description of its myth, since it is the way these symbols and connotations work together as a whole that enables the emergence of a certain ideological narrative, the myth. The idea of 'syntagma' in semiology will prove to be useful here: according to Rose, syntagma explains how in images or visual structures, the meaning of signs is not solely defined by the signs themselves, but that their juxtaposition towards one another is just as important for the way meaning is individually constructed by each sign (Rose 2001, 78). Amongst other components, the connotative and symbolic meaning of the three separate sculptures *in relation* to one another, will be discussed so that they can no longer be thought of separately, but are seen in the context of myth construction.

It should be noted that Barthes himself does not explicitly separate the level of myth from the second level of connotation. In his text "The Rhetoric of the Image", Barthes analyses an advertisement for Panzani (see figure 1).^{iv} In doing so, he describes how the image's denotative meanings facilitate certain connotations of 'Italianicity', a stereotypical idea of Italian culture which in this particular case, is directed at a French audience. The half open net connotes the idea of returning from the market, the raw products contrasted to the packaged ones connote culinary expertise and the composition of the overall image reminds one of a still life, connoting an idea of Italian romance. Barthes stresses how the image's denotations, naturalize the image's connotations because of the fact that they appear to be 'just there'. Therefore, it is as if the idea of Italianicity (the image's myth) becomes denotative and literal (Barthes 1977, 273). However, I analyse *the Dutch National Monument* (...) by approaching the image's myth as a level of signification distanced from the second level of connotation and symbolism. This way, the myth can be connected to



Figure 1

the image's connotations in the same way Barthes connects the image's connotations to its denotations. In reality, these levels of signification cannot be separated from one another as they are all interpreted by the viewer almost simultaneously.

Before proceeding to the actual semiological analysis of this thesis, it is important to acknowledge some potential drawbacks accompanied by the semiological tradition. A first methodological complication has to do with its analytical goal of unveiling and addressing ideological formations. Referring to the insights of semiologists Hodge and Kress, Rose writes how analytical results produced by semiology, aimed at revealing ideological formations, must not themselves be understood as devoid from ideological values. Like the images they are studying, semiological analyses are cultural expressions defined by- and at play with ideology (Rose 2001, 71-72). This is of course consequential to the geopolitical situatedness of the semiologist, which is ironically also the reason behind the strength of semiological research. As the meanings of signs are culturally contextualized, my own situatedness in the framework of Eurocentric cultural memory allows me to interpret and reveal its visual presence in a monument like this one.

Secondly, since the way signs produce meanings both individually and in combination with each other is quite complex, semiology offers a wide range of analytical tools, exceeding the ones discussed here. Although this paves the way for analytical precision, it is also the reason for different semiological approaches to potentially be at conflict with one another, obstructing analytical cohesion (Rose 2001, 72). Therefore a limited set of semiological concepts and tools has been selected here, appropriate for the level of analytical detail of a thesis of this size. These tools allow for a cohesive semiological analysis of *the National Dutch Monument (...)*, zooming out from the small, literal and innocent level of diegesis to the larger, cultural and ideological level of mythology.

3. Research Analysis

This chapter entails the semiological analysis of *the Dutch National Monument of the History of Slavery*. First, a diegesis of the monument's visual structure will be presented, paying attention to its denotations and iconic signs. Additionally, the signs of this diegesis will be extended to the area of the monument's symbols and connotations, where after these connotations and symbols will be connected to ideology by formulating the Eurocentric myth emerging from this monument's visuality. Altogether, this analysis should provide an answer to this thesis's second sub-question: "How do the visual signs present in the monument reinforce a Eurocentric cultural memory?". This answer will be presented in the last section of this analysis, where the monument's Eurocentric myth is integrated with the theoretical framework. This will shed light upon how the monument is interpretable as an example of a commemorative reinforcement of Eurocentrism. The first two levels of analysis — those of denotation and connotation — will seem to be rather descriptive. However, these descriptive levels are invaluable to a semiological analysis since this approach addresses the presence of the ideological *inside* the literal.

Before starting the analysis, however, a reflexive note is necessary. In contrast to a two dimensional image, the monument can be viewed from a variety of angles. This results in changing visual focal points and juxtapositions, influencing the meanings emanating from the structure's signs. Since this research is too small to take into account these different interpretations, I will not be performing a proper spatial analysis of the three dimensional structure, but rather a visual analysis. This means that a few viewing angles and visual details have been highlighted through photographic presentation. As I myself took these photographs while viewing the actual monument, there are processes of subjective visual framing at play. However, as my interpretation of the monument is based upon the theory presented in the theoretical framework, the produced insights will be of a subjective *and* academic analytical nature.

Diegesis of denotations and iconic signs



Figure 2

The overall composition of the monument is constructed out of three spatially separated parts, collectively placed on an ascending concrete platform (see figure 2).^vThe bronze material creates the monument's signifiers, representing visually recognizable figures as its signifieds. The level of signification addressed here is what Pierce called iconic symbols, and what Barthes described as the denotative level of signification. As discussed before, this level entails the literal meaning of signs.

The left piece of the composition (should figure 2 be considered the forefront of the image), consists of a group of eleven thin humanly figures (see figure 3). The group is tied together with rope and the individuals are holding each other as they are travelling towards the right side of the overall composition. Some of them are missing limbs, and the heavily robust character of the material they are shaped out of makes them seem disfigured and even mutilated. Some of their heads and faces are heavily



Figure 3



Figure 4

disfigured or damaged, ridding them of recognizable faces (figure 4). Looking closely, it is apparent that the figures have buttocks which seem to be out of proportion compared to their thin body-structures (figure 5). A last mentionable component is the figure of a little girl with two ponytails distanced from the group (figure 6).

The central piece (figure 7) visualizes a gate of some kind, looking very rough as it appears to be structured out of wood and stone, or industrial debris. One part of the gate appears to be burning. A figure of a man is passing underneath the gate as he stretches out his arms, exaggeratedly arching his back and tilting his head backwards. This figure displays healthier bodily muscles and shapes, compared to the previous group. However, the surface of his skin is still somewhat disfigured and uneven, especially considering the gauge in his chest, indicating a grave wound (figure 8)

The right and final piece of the structure (figure 9) is the visual focal point of the monument, as the viewer's eyes are drawn to it immediately when confronted with the structure due to its large size. It is an abstract figure of a woman, diving off the platform. Her back is arched backward in a way that is impossible to achieve for actual human beings. Her arms are reaching for the space behind her, while her bald head

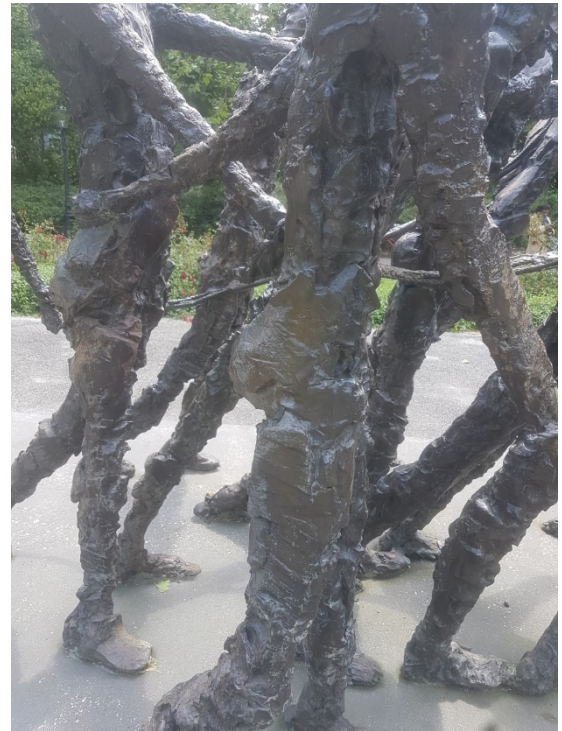


Figure 5

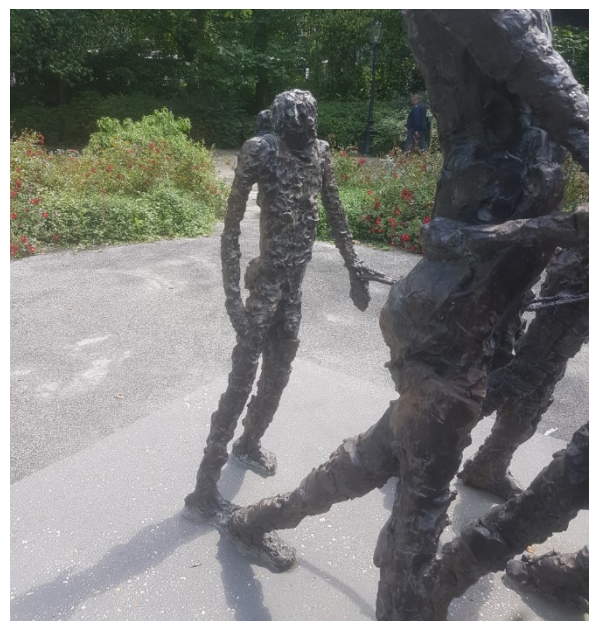


Figure 6



Figure 7

is tilted backward similarly to the figure of the man moving through the gate. The figure's skin texture is made up out of what appears to be scrap metal or industrial parts, strongly resembling the texture of the previously discussed structure of the gate (see figure 10 and 11).



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

Symbolic signs and connotations

The second, cultural level of meaning is that of connotation and symbolism. As discussed in the previous chapter of the methodological framework, connotations and symbols build upon the literal and denotative meanings of signs in order to signify something less universal and more contextually and culturally specific. Therefore, the denotative signs discussed in the first analytical step will be revisited in this section in order to address their connotations and describe the three symbols out of which this monument is constructed.

It is arguable that the group of figures on the left symbolizes collective oppression and captivity of a violent nature, most explicitly connoted by the presence of the rope. Other denotative signs provide this idea of oppression with more detail: their fragile, thin bodies, the mutilation and disfigurement of their skin, and the absence of some limbs refer to a most brutal and violent kind of oppression. Of course, these characteristics function to illuminate the brutal conditions of slavery during the times of imperialism. The fact that this is a group of eleven people supports the scale of this oppression in terms of the high quantity of its victims. The highly disfigured and unrecognizable faces of the figures convey a combination of violent brutality and anonymity. The figure of the girl in the back provides the image with an element of innocence. Also, the enlarged buttocks of the figures provide the figures with a sexual, primitive character^{vi}.

As touched upon just now, the central piece of the structure is readable as a symbol for liberation from the oppressive conditions of slavery. The fact that the figure is *passing* something, indicates change: the gate represents the riddance of oppression. This is also supported by how the figure's body shape quite strongly contrasts its enslaved predecessors. His muscles are much more visible, and his skin is significantly less disfigured compared to that of his predecessors. This connotes a sense of strength, vitality or even victory. However, the figure's skin texture reminds the viewer of the figure's brutal and oppressive past. It is as if now the skin consists of scars rather than active wounds, of which the huge gauge in the man's chest is most foregrounding (see figure 8). These rather rough signs of the gate and the man's scars intervene with the symbol of liberation by providing it with characteristics of roughness and brutality.

As the first two pieces consecutively symbolize oppression and liberation, it makes sense that the last piece of the monumental structure symbolizes a state of freedom. The

figure of the large woman, captured as she is diving off platform, embodies a great sense of joy. Her arched back and stretched out arms connote a deep sense of celebration and victory, similarly to the figure displayed in the monument's central piece. The woman's sense of joy is significantly stronger however, since her extremely overarched back and stretched out arms make her seem airborne. Once again, the figure's skin texture is particularly eye-catching, as it appears to be formed out of rough parts of scrap metal bearing great resemblance to the texture of the gate (see figure 10 and 11). This resemblance can be understood as a sinister touch to the figure's symbolization of freedom, since it connects this symbolic sign to the roughly constructed gate and simultaneously to the deeply contrasting oppressive and brutal circumstances of slavery.

Myth

Looking at the total image, it becomes evident that the structure represents a chronological timeline. The monument reads as a sequence of images. Reminding one of a cartoon, the sequence constructs a narrative: the three main signs acquire their syntagmatic meaning due to how they relate to one another. The first chapter of this narrative is the oppressed group of slaves, walking towards the direction of the central piece. The central piece, the man passing the gate, travels toward the last symbol, the woman on the right representing a state of freedom. It is as if each piece of the monument chronologically transforms into the next one constructing an animation of evolution.

This 'cartoon-like' visual presentation of the monument confirms Barthes' understanding of myth. The literal visualization of this historical narrative produces what Barthes describes as the "simplicity of essences" and "blissful clarity" (Barthes 1972, 143), meaning that the literalness of the image does away with contextualization and nuance. Through very simple, yet dramatic visual methods, the monument straightforwardly tells a story of enslaved black people, exposed to tremendous suffering, who became liberated, and are now free. It is the combination between this simplicity and dramatization and the erasure of context which constructs the myth of the 'ex-slave'. The 'ex-slave' myth works to draw attention to the intense struggle of black colonial slaves, their quest for liberation and their state of freedom, consecutively representing the contemporary Dutch black individual as an ex-slave, crippled by their past. The manner in which this myth is articulated by the monument shall now be explored in more detail, revisiting both the

previous descriptions of the analysis and the theory presented in the theoretical framework.

The simplicity lies in the literal, iconic visualisation of the monument, as it displays human figures who represent a certain group of people present in contemporary society. In the case of this monument, this simplicity is combined with dramatization and sensationalism which upholds the myth of the ex-slave. Simplicity, dramatization and sensationalism are present in all facets of the monument, but let us for now focus on the left piece of the monument where it is most present (see figure 3). The highly disfigured skin, and the mutilation of the slaves' tied up bodies puts the suffering of black slaves on display in dramatized manner. Moreover, their enlarged buttocks uphold a racial stereotype of black individuals; one that represents them as primitive and mostly driven by instinct and sexuality (see figure 5). Also, the anonymity of the figures (as their faces are unrecognizable due to heavy and seemingly violent disfiguration), enlarges their representational power in terms of quantity (see figure 4). It is as if each body represents thousands of others, sharing the same fate.

This thesis approaches *The Dutch National Monument* (...) as a manifestation of the Dutch cultural archive, and the simple and dramatized display of these slaves confirms this. Wekker argues that the cultural archive is a collective consciousness, or storehouse based on Eurocentric ideology, and that it is from this consciousness that a collective self or norm is formulated (Wekker 2016, 2). As these thin, disfigured, mutilated, black slaves are denotatively put on display in the midst of their suffering and hardship, a similar articulation between the societal Self and Other^{vii} is put in effect. The suffering of slaves is looked at by the Dutch, common citizen, and therefore a division between the watcher and the watched is created. Also, a sensationalist artistic approach — the raw and heavy mutilation and disfiguration, the little girl who is left behind (see figure 6) — creates a perverse voyeurism through which these objects are being watched by the viewer.

This display of the left piece of the monument, provides the idea of the history of slavery with a focus on the suffering of black slaves in conditions of oppression. This focus on black pain, suffering and oppression seems to challenge El-Tayeb's idea of racelessness, which profiles the continent's nations as colour-blind, denying the presence of racial categories and their differentiating social statuses (El-Tayeb 2011, xvii). After all, the monument brings attention to black people's history of slavery, and therefore

acknowledges differences in lived experiences and histories. However, there is more to it, as this monument does not simply acknowledge black people's history of slavery, but represents it as inescapable to their existence, even in contemporary conditions of freedom. The way the three pieces in the monument chronologically relate to one another in terms of symbolization (oppression, liberation and freedom) is key in rendering this inescapability. During the stage of liberation, the man passing the gate bears great scars and disfigurements, directly linking him to his past conditions of oppression (see figure 8). During the state of freedom, the woman's skin texture consists out of what appears to be rough scrap metal: it is as if the wounds are covered up or burned shut (see figure 10). This emanates the idea that the black individuals are inevitably scarred by their colonial past.

Thus, these elements of inescapability of- and definition by a history of slavery in fact produce racial categorizations in Dutch society, namely a categorization based on historical trauma and marginalization. It is the obscurity of this racial representation via moral intentions of raising awareness to colonial history, which makes me argue that this monument contributes to a new, implicit form of racelessness. This form of racelessness produces racial categorizations which are simplistic and harmful in essence — since they depict black individuals as a traumatized 'Other' in Dutch society — , yet they are softened through a rhetoric of ethics and morality.

At last, this section will explore the implications of the monument's commemorative function for the constructed myth. As contemporary Europe is preoccupied with grasping its collective identity through creating an image of its collective past (Macdonald 2013, 12), *the National Monument (...)* is to be thought of as a mode of cultivation of this collective past. This monument facilitates social processes of commemoration and remembrance which construct an artificial, subjective view of the past, also understandable as a prosthetic memory (Burke in Tilmans 2010). The simplistic, denotative, dramatic and sensationalist manner in which this monument visually presents itself combined with the absence of context, produces a prosthetic memory which depicts the black slave and their journey into 'freedom' as the very essence and focal point of imperialism. It is the chronological presentation of these three symbols that is responsible for generating a prosthetic memory which seems to transgress the past, reaching into the present as the womanly figure diving off the monument's platform.

The connotative meanings of the skin texture used in all of the figures projects (predominantly through the right piece of freedom) an idea of the black contemporary individual as free yet crippled and scarred by their colonial past. This subjective interpretation of the past and its object of focus (the black ex-slave) generates a collective identity (or norm) in the present which distances itself from the black person and observes it in terms of specific historical trauma, defining the black person in terms of their former colonial status of enslavement. Additionally, this particular interpretation is nationally confirmed by the Dutch government in treating *the Dutch National Monument* (...) as the central artefact of commemoration for the annual celebration of the national abolition of slavery on the 1st of July.

In conclusion, this research analysis has studied the three levels of signification present in the monument semiology: denotation and iconic signs, connotations and symbols and the myth. The descriptive efforts in the first two levels have paved the way for the conceptual discussion of the monument's myth in the last section, as this myth is encoded in the monument's denotative visualisation and its connotative and cultural implications in terms of symbols. This has enabled the articulation of the myth of the 'ex-slave', causing the black contemporary Dutch individual to be represented as scarred and defined by their history of slavery. In short, the cartoon-like, chronological and narratological presentation of the monument, combined with literal visual methods, erasure of context, and a sensationalist visual approach, facilitates the myth of the ex-slave, which in turn causes processes of 'Othering' of Dutch black individuals. Thus, the visual presentation of *The Dutch National Monument* (...) reinforces a Eurocentric cultural memory, in the sense that this monument inserts this idea of the 'ex-slave' — putting black people on display in Dutch society as traumatized victims defined by colonialism — into the Dutch cultural memory through its commemorative function.

Conclusion

In conducting a semiological approach, this thesis has explored how *the Dutch National Monument of the History of Slavery*, through its visual presentation and commemorative function, conflicts with its intention of challenging Eurocentric ideology. It has become clear that through different levels of signification, the monument has visually produced the myth of the ex-slave. Due to how the monument is simplistically and dramatically visualized, the subject of the black colonial slave has been brought into extreme focus, putting it on sensational display in the Dutch public sphere. Together with the chronological juxtaposition of the three pieces of the monument, and especially the foregrounding of the monument's focal piece (the woman diving off the platform), this sensational display has rendered the Dutch black individual as defined, scarred and crippled by its history of colonialism. Moreover, as a central artefact of national commemoration, this representation has been inserted into the Dutch cultural memory, which in effect normalizes this particular representation, obscuring its problematic effects.

As this research primarily focusses on how *the Dutch National Monument (...)*'s visual presentation transmits a certain Eurocentric ideology, little attention is paid to the various political domains of representation. As this monument contributes to the representation of the black individual of Dutch society, it would be interesting if further research would explore the consequences of the particular representation of 'the ex-slave'. In this regard, an ethnographic research would be useful, in the sense that this would be able to bring to light the experiences of the Dutch black population which would in turn address the extent to which this particular representation of 'the ex-slave' is an actual part of social reality.

Also, since this research's main argument is concerned with critically evaluating the problematics of how *the Dutch National Monument (...)* is so denotatively presented, a semiological comparison could be made between commemorative monuments that are abstract in terms of visibility. This would be able to test the relation between denotative presentation and enforcement of a Eurocentric cultural memory, under the hypothesis that a visual monument's broadness of interpretation softens the emergence of problematic representation.

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Appendix

ⁱ Antillian' refers to the collection of the Dutch former colonies in the Caribbean, a collections of islands known as the Dutch 'Antilles'.

ⁱⁱ Performance here refers to the performativity of social reality. Thus in this context, the performance of the past refers to a broad set of activities, including national memorials, but also museum exhibitions or concerts.

ⁱⁱⁱ An example would be how the government prioritizes Western history in the school's curriculum, or the adaptation of North-American beauty standards in non-Western countries and its propagation by cosmetic companies through the media.

^{iv} Reproduction of the image presented in Barthes text, "Rhetoric of the Image" in "Image Music Text" (see bibliography).

^v All photographs of the monument are taken by myself.

^{vi} This reading stems from the colonial stigmatization of the black subject as primitive, irrational, and sexual, as opposed to the Western white subject as culturally developed and rational. In colonial times, this was enforced by 'scientific' descriptions of particularly the black female subject which strongly emphasized the size of reproductive organs as evidence for the black subject's high sexual nature. This even led to exhibitions of black subjects and their reproductive organs, of which the historical subject known as 'Sara Baartman' is the best known example (Qureshi 2004).

^{vii} The term 'Other' refers to a theory in cultural studies known as 'Othering'. 'Othering' can be defined by a process where a certain group of people is represented in such a way that this group is distanced from the 'Self' (the party conducting the process of 'Othering'. This way, a hierarchical binary opposition comes into place in favour of the 'Self', who wields the power of knowledge production surrounding this 'Other' (Hall 1997).