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**The Art of Remembering:  
The negotiation of colonial memory in contemporary visual art by Dutch  
Caribbean Diasporic artists**

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis I research the creation of counter-memory and the workings of colonial forgetting and remembering in artworks by Deborah Jack and Avantia Damberg - artists from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora. As the debate on if and how to remember the negative effects of the role of the Netherlands in colonialism is growing in popularity, I argue that it is important to look at how this issue is negotiated in the Dutch Caribbean diaspora. I bring together insights from the fields of memory studies and postcolonial studies (fields that have historically lacked much mutual meaningful scholarly interaction) to understand the construction of canonical cultural memory related to colonialism in the Netherlands and to explore the ways in which processes of forgetting and remembering are an essential part of colonial oppression and thus of any anti-colonial effort (Rothberg 2013, 365). Using semiotics, this insight will allow me to analyse the artworks as artistic interventions that create counter-memories that challenge the canonical cultural memory on colonialism through a diasporic, marginal position by remembering (pre-)colonial memories and connecting these with contemporary colonial dynamics between the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean. Through exploring the concepts of diaspora and counter-memory and analysing to artworks that actively negotiate colonial memory and forgetting I identify diasporic as an important site from which counter-memory is created and canonical cultural memory related to colonialism can be contested.

Keywords: Dutch Caribbean, the Netherlands, counter-memory, colonialism, artistic practices, diasporic identity, Deborah Jack, Avantia Damberg.

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## Introduction

The earliest memory I have of the Dutch Caribbean entering my conscious mind was when I was about ten years old. I sat in a classroom in a rural village in the Netherlands learning about geography and history with my fellow white classmates and remember being surprised at the realisation that there are several Caribbean islands that are also part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>, while we learnt virtually nothing about their history, geography, culture or language. The times that the Dutch Caribbean did come up in our education was during history class as we discussed the 17th century – often referred to as the ‘Golden Age’ – in which the Dutch Republic is remembered to have become one of the most influential economic and political world powers<sup>2</sup>. While these history classes and the teachers that gave them acknowledged that some of the things that happened during the period of colonisation and slavery had a negative impact on many people, I remember there being a general sense that what happened had to happen for the Netherlands to become as rich as it is, and for us to live the lives that we live. The focus, thus, was not so much on the atrocities that happened at the hands of the VOC<sup>3</sup> and the WIC<sup>4</sup>, but on the success and riches they brought the Dutch Republic and, as a result, the Netherlands today.

Gloria Wekker, a professor emeritus specialised in the Dutch Caribbean, cultural anthropology and gender studies, expresses a similar experience in her book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016). She identifies a large discrepancy between centuries of Dutch imperialism ‘and its almost total absence in the Dutch educational curriculum, in self-image and self-representations such as monuments, literature, and debates

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<sup>1</sup> During this time, in around 2007, the islands Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten together constituted the Netherlands Antilles – a constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Aruba was a separate constituent country of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Today, Curaçao, Sint Maarten and Aruba are all separate constituent countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba are special municipalities of the Netherlands.

<sup>2</sup> The Netherlands has a three and a half centuries long history of colonialism. While colonial exploration started in the sixteenth century, the Dutch empire was at its largest during the seventeenth century. It was led by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC). These companies colonised many places in the world including Indonesia, Surinam, South Africa, Aruba, Bonaire, Curaçao, Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten, among others.

<sup>3</sup> VOC stands for ‘Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie’ or the ‘United East India Company’.

<sup>4</sup> WIC stands for ‘West-Indische Compagnie’ or the ‘Dutch West Indian Company’.

about Dutch identity' (Wekker 2016, 13). According to Wekker, the lack of knowledge on colonialism in the educational curriculum as well as in larger society is an important part of the construction of the Dutch Self-identification as innocent, as the position of innocence relies on both 'not-knowing' and 'not wanting to know' (2016, 17). This allows white Dutch people to claim innocence while benefitting from the racial hierarchy (Wekker 2016, 17). Considering Gloria Wekker's point one could further argue that racial and colonial hierarchies are indeed kept in place by complex workings of forgetting and remembering.

Over the past few years the topic of how to remember Dutch colonial history has started to take up a more and more prominent space in public debate. Inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement of the US, people in the Netherlands increasingly debated over the place of statues that honoured colonisers in public spaces, for example<sup>5</sup>. During the process of writing this thesis, both the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte and later king Willem Alexander have apologised for the historical role that the Netherlands played in slavery, but these big political events were not uncontroversial. While some Dutch Caribbean political leaders accepted the apologies, the speeches also received significant critique both from those in favour of the Netherlands expressing their apologies and from those against this initiative. For example, One SXM (an association that stands for the unity between Sint Maarten and St. Martin) criticised Rutte's apology for not including a promise for reparations and for not consulting people from Sint Maarten about these apologies (The Daily Herald 2022). On top of this, less than a year later Geert Wilders, the political leader of the biggest political party in the Netherlands (the PVV), stated in his election program that he plans on revoking these apologies. So, while the topic of acknowledging Dutch colonial history has taken up a larger space in public and political debate over the past decade, which in some cases has caused a renegotiation in favour of remembering the colonial past in a way that accounts for the negative effects of the Dutch participation in colonialism, I argue that the forgetting of these negative effects is still at play in the dominant Dutch historical narrative. This increasingly prominent debate about if and how to remember the negative effects of colonialism in the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean islands has inspired me to take a look at how this is negotiated within the Dutch Caribbean diaspora itself.

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<sup>5</sup> While many people protested the presence of statues honouring colonisers, especially that of Jan Pieterszoon Coen in Hoorn, no decision has been made about the future of this statue after four years since the debate grew (NOS 2024 & NOS 2020).

While the debate about the place of the negative effects of colonialism in the dominant Dutch historical narrative has been gaining popularity over the past few years, Chelsea Schields identifies a lack of scholarly work that has been done on anti-colonialism in the Dutch Caribbean. In “Eros Against Empire: Visions of Erotic Freedom in Archives of Decolonisation”, Schields argues that anti-colonial effort from the Dutch Caribbean is often overlooked in scholarship on post- and decoloniality (2019, 155). She attributes this in part to the fact that territorial independence is often equated with decolonisation and that because the Dutch Caribbean islands are still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to varying degrees, they do not fit into this framework as easily and are subsequently often overlooked (Schields 2019, 155). Schields encourages post- and decolonial scholars to use a broader definition of decolonisation so that we can recognise other forms of anti- or decolonial effort in the Dutch Caribbean archives (2019). Schields’ observation that scholarly work about anti- and decolonial effort often fails to recognise anti colonial effort in the Dutch Caribbean has inspired me to research the negotiation of colonial memory in the Dutch Caribbean diaspora. With this thesis I contribute to scholarly work that does acknowledge anti-colonial effort that is produced by the Dutch Caribbean diaspora in a context of continuing political and governmental ties between the former colonies and the former metropole.

The increased focus on if and how to remember the negative effects of Dutch colonialism as well as the underrepresentation of scholarly work on anti-colonial effort in the Dutch Caribbean, in combination with the rich and diverse artworks that I have come across during my research (specifically artworks by Kevin Osepa) have inspired me to look into the way in which Dutch Caribbean diasporic artists have negotiated colonial memory in their artworks. Therefore, the main question of my research is ‘How do artists from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora create a diasporic identity and negotiate colonial memory in their artworks?’. To answer this question I bring together insights from the fields of memory studies and postcolonial studies (fields that have historically lacked much mutual meaningful scholarly interaction) to show that processes of remembering and forgetting are intentional instead of neutral or innocent (Hannoum 2019, 369). Not only will this insight help me understand the construction of canonical cultural memory related to colonialism in the Netherlands<sup>6</sup>, it will also help me explore the ways in which processes of forgetting and remembering are an

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<sup>6</sup> I use the term ‘canonical cultural memory’ in relation to colonialism in the Netherlands to refer to the dominant way of remembering and forgetting the (negative) effects of their role in colonialism. I elaborate more on this in the theoretical framework.

essential part of colonial oppression (think of the erasure of language and cultural practices during colonisation) and thus of any anti-colonial effort (Rothberg 2013, 365). As the two artworks that I analyse in this thesis both take active part in the process of remembering and forgetting colonial history, these insights will allow me to analyse the artworks as diasporic counter-memories that contest the canonical cultural memory on colonialism in the Netherlands. By exploring and connecting the concepts of diaspora, identity and counter-memory I argue that processes of remembering that are produced from this diasporic, subaltern position of communities that have dealt (and continue to deal with) with displacement and disruptions by different kinds of colonial subjugation (Rothberg 2013, 365) are especially well suited to produce these counter-memories that challenge canonical cultural memory because of their hybrid and fluid character. As I explore the transformative potential of diasporic knowledges in creating diasporic identities and memories based on fluidity and hybridity that challenge canonical cultural memory in relation to the role of the Netherlands in colonialism, I argue that art, because of its transformative, subversive and theoretical potential, is an important site in which cultural memory is constructed and therefore also contested. In order to discuss my main question I have selected two artworks that deal with colonial memory and use memory to work through contemporary social situations on the islands and the (past and current) relationship between the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean in different ways. Exploring these two artworks in relation to the concepts I discuss in my theoretical framework will form my analysis.

The first artwork I will discuss is *Shore* by Deborah Jack<sup>7</sup>. Deborah Jack (1970-) is a poet and visual artist from St. Maarten that uses video/sound installation, photography, painting, and text to address topics like colonialism, slavery, memory, ecology and climate change. Two big elements she uses in her art are salt (as the salt industry in St. Maarten was a big part of the colonial endeavours of the Dutch colonizers) and the visual of hurricanes, which she sees as natural and recurring memorials for the enslaved people that passed away during the middle passage. *Shore* is an installation of three large projected videos, a few tonnes of salt and a reflecting pool in a room.

The second artwork I have chosen to analyse in my thesis is the installation *Curaçaoe lagen* (2022, *Curaçao Layers*) by Avandia Damberg (1977-). Damberg is a visual artist based in Curaçao. She is the founder of SKOR Kòrsou, a foundation for art in public spaces. She creates collages, animations, installations, documentaries, public art, street art and land art and deals

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<sup>7</sup> Watch a video of the installation at “Shore installation view” (Jack 2016) to be found in the bibliography.



with themes of identity, memory, colonialism and contemporary life on Curaçao. *Curaçaose lagen* is a few meters high ceiling installation made of ceramics, fabric and wood that references the Caiquetíos (the inhabitants of Curaçao before it was colonized by the Spaniards and the Dutch WIC), the abolition of slavery and manumissions, and the national anthem. It is on display at the *Wereldmuseum Amsterdam* as part of the semipermanent exhibition 'Our Colonial Inheritance'.

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

### Artistic Practices of Memory and Forgetting at the Intersection of Postcolonial Studies and Memory Studies

In this theoretical framework I will explore the fields of memory and postcolonial studies and bring together the concepts of canonical cultural memory, counter-memory and diaspora to foreground why people from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora are important producers of cultural memory that challenges Dutch canonical cultural memory related to the negative effects of Dutch colonialism.

#### *At the intersection of postcolonial studies and memory studies*

According to Ania Loomba, the term postcolonialism is a highly debated term that is used in many different ways (Loomba [1998] 2005, 12). In an exploration of this highly debated term and field in *Beginning Postcolonialism* ([2000] 2010), John McLeod explains that

‘postcolonialism’ recognises both historical *continuity* and *change*. On the one hand, it acknowledges that the material realities and modes of representation common to colonialism are still very much with us today, even if the political map of the world has changed through decolonisation. But on the other hand, it asserts the promise, the possibility, and the continuing necessity of change, while also recognising that important challenges and changes have already been achieved. (McLeod [2000] 2010, 33)

Loomba concludes her contemplation of the term postcolonialism with the conviction that the term is ‘useful only if we use it with caution and qualifications’ and as a ‘generalisation’ that addresses a disengagement from the many kinds of manifestations of colonialism and its legacies which have shaped many worlds (Loomba [1998] 2005, 21). In line with these arguments by McLeod and Loomba I argue that the term postcolonialism is useful for addressing the continuity and change of the colonial dynamic that is present in the relationship between the Dutch Caribbean and the Netherlands.

In this thesis I will connect the field of postcolonial studies with the field of memory studies, because memory is an important tool to be able to account for the colonial past (&

present) and understand the construction of diasporic Dutch Caribbean identities. In *Remembering Back: Cultural Memory, Colonial Legacies, and Postcolonial Studies*, Michael Rothberg explains that scholars of postcolonial theory have often overlooked the scholarly work of memory studies and vice versa (2013, 361). He shows how the combination of the two fields can be fruitful for ‘a new understanding of how violence fundamentally shapes the temporality of modern memory and how regimes of memory help propagate and potentially resist violence through the creation of unexpected solidarities’ (Rothberg 2013, 361).

The field of memory studies is a field that mainly researches ‘the cultural mediation of temporality’ (Rothberg 2013, 361) and looks at the connection between memory and culture (Erll 2008, 1). As an interdisciplinary field intersecting at the fields of cultural studies, literary studies, history, sociology, psychology and neuroscience, memory studies has gained popularity over the past few decades (Erll 2008, 1). Within the growing amount of scholarly work there have been many debates about the reach and limits of the field’s knowledge production, as well as over the key concepts and their definitions as they are often used in differing ways (Erll 2008, 1). One of the earliest and main concepts that belongs to and shaped the field of memory studies is the concept of ‘collective memory’ coined by Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945). According to Halbwachs memory is mediated by social frameworks that shape how one interprets one’s past (Rothberg 2013, 362). Halbwachs explains collective memory as memory that is mediated by and shared within certain interconnected groups of people or communities (Rothberg 2013, 362). In his conceptualisation of collective memory, Halbwachs acknowledges that people are always part of more than one group and in turn are part of several realms of collective memory (Rothberg 2013, 362). However according to Rothberg, Halbwachs’ understanding of groups as relatively homogenous closed entities limits its use for postcolonial contexts in which the organic formation of groups has been disrupted (Rothberg 2013, 362). Think of the ways in which colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade displaced groups of people, for example.

Two other important scholars Rothberg discusses are modern memory scholars Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, as they have attempted to define and categorise popular concepts such as ‘cultural’, ‘collective’, ‘communicative’, ‘canonical’ and ‘social’ memory in many of their writings (see A. Assmann, 2006; A. Assmann 2008; J. Assmann 2008; J. Assmann 2010). Aleida and Jan Assmann divide the concept of collective memory into three categories:

communicative memory, cultural memory and political memory (J. Assmann 2010, 122)<sup>8</sup>. Communicative memory pertains knowledge that results from socialisation and communication, like language learning and the shaping of our consciousness, and spans about 80-100 years (J. Assman 2010, 122). J. Assmann explains political memory as a top-down dynamic that is both externalised and symbolical, which is imposed by a political institution (2010, 122). J. Assmann explains cultural memory as ‘an externalization and objectivation of memory,’ which is ‘evident in symbols such as texts, images, rituals, landmarks and other “lieux de mémoire”’<sup>9</sup> (2010, 122) and spans a much longer time than communicative memory, namely about 3000 years (2010, 122). In an introduction to *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook* (2008), Astrid Erll provides a broad definition of the term ‘cultural memory’, saying that it stands for ‘the interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts’ (Erll 2008, 2) which allows for the inclusion of different kinds of remembering (both intentional and unintentional) that construct identities at different sizes of groups or communities.<sup>10</sup> Cultural memory, according to her, can be divided into three analytical dimensions; social, material and mental (Erll 2008, 4). These dimensions often overlap when analysing cultural memory. In my thesis I will be focussing on the intersection of the social and material dimensions of cultural memory.

While terms as ‘collective’ and ‘cultural’ memory can be ambiguous and difficult to define exactly, they are useful in that they allow us to look at the relationship between memory

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<sup>8</sup> In an earlier paper Jan Assmann categorises the concept of collective memory differently. He proposes that we name the concept that Halbwachs referred to as ‘collective memory’ instead by ‘communicative memory’ (J. Assmann 2008, 111). Collective memory, then, would be an umbrella term for both ‘communicative memory’ and ‘cultural memory’ (J. Assmann 2008, 110). Note that here, J. Assmann does not name ‘political memory’ as an element of ‘collective memory’. In yet another text Aleida Assmann argues that memory consists of four formats, namely ‘individual’, ‘social’, ‘political’ and ‘cultural’ (A. Assmann 2006). This shows that while I choose to use the concepts in the way that I do, they are not so clearly defined. This does not, however, signal that the concepts are meaningless. Rather, it is a reflection of how the material reality of memory that these scholars attempt to capture in these concepts overlaps.

<sup>9</sup> Memory scholar Pierre Nora theorised on how modernity has caused a change in the way in which communities are formed on the basis of ‘lieux de mémoire’ instead of the organic groups formations that Halbwachs discusses (Rothberg 2013, 362). He explains ‘lieux de mémoire’ as ‘sites of memory’, like artefacts, memorials, art, texts, objects, etc. instead of the organic groups formations that Halbwachs discusses (Rothberg 2013, 362). His positive focus on the French nation and the forgetting of imperial history, however, is what makes his theorisation on collective memory less suited for postcolonial contexts according to Rothberg (2013, 362).

<sup>10</sup> According to Rothberg, Aleida and Jan Assmann’s definition of cultural memory could also be seen as ‘canonical memory’, as it discusses cultural forms that are generally seen as constructive of a community identity (2013, 363).

and culture and how they mediate each other. I will use the term ‘canonical cultural memory’ to describe the widely accepted way of remembering through canonised symbols, objects, texts and other ‘lieux de memoire’ (Rothberg 2013, 363) by the dominant group in society. In the context of the (post)colonial relationship between the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean that widely accepted way of remembering by the dominant group in society is the dominant way of remembering colonialism as constructed by white, Dutch people. As I use this understanding of ‘canonical cultural memory’, I want to acknowledge and underline that this is not a homogenous, monolithic group, as there are many white, Dutch people working to change hegemonic ways of remembering colonial history and its legacies. I will, however, use that concept to address the dominant way of dealing with issues of colonialism as I have explained in the introduction of this thesis. While I choose to use the term of ‘canonical cultural memory’, I argue that this general stance towards colonial power operates not only on the level of cultural memory, but rather on all three levels of collective memory; communicative, cultural and political memory, as it is imbedded in and constructed by the language we speak, the symbols and cultural objects we deem valuable, and the political organisation in power. Keeping this in mind, I do choose to work with the specific concept of ‘cultural memory’ because I will focus on how cultural objects and symbols can construct certain popular mentalities and, more importantly, how people can create counter-memories through redefining the past in the present through cultural production from marginalised, diasporic standpoints (Rothberg 2013, 368). Counter-memory is a concept that was originally coined by Foucault in relation to philosophy, but today is used by many memory studies scholars, among which Rothberg and myself, in a more political sense to refer to practices of remembering that contest hegemonic collective memory<sup>11</sup>. Now that I have explained some of the main concepts from the field of memory studies and the ways in which the field has generally lacked interaction with insights from postcolonial studies, let us take a look at how the concept of memory could be relevant to the studies of postcolonial studies.

*Forgetting and remembering: two sides of the same coin*

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<sup>11</sup> This is not to say that counter memory is something individual – the anti-colonial movement for example is anything but individual, small or single – but rather that, while grounded in a larger movement and not always all the way in the margins, it is something that is not dominant or accepted as part of the dominant way of remembering or the canon.

Postcolonial studies scholars discuss processes of forgetting and remembering in their daily research practice, but they often do not refer to the concept of ‘memory’ explicitly (Rothberg 2013, 365). The main reason for this, Rothberg suggests, could be the ways in which scholarship within memory studies has not taken colonialism into account in its theorisations (2013, 365). Postcolonial scholars do still work with issues of forgetting and remembering, because ‘the struggle against colonialism involves, in part, a struggle over collective memory’ (Rothberg 2013, 365). This is because in addition to a displacement of existing groups of people, replacing them with foreign settlers and exploiting the land and people economically, colonialism involved a violent erasure of the colonial subject’s ‘intergenerational communicative memory’ and forced a different, metropolitan cultural memory onto the colonised group (Rothberg 2013, 365). Think, for example, of Curaçaoan creole spirituality which people were forced to practice in private, away from slave owners, because of the many rules against ‘disorderly conduct’ during times of slavery (Allen 2023, 40) and the introduction of Roman Catholicism on the island, or of the death of the Caiquetios language due to the displacement of the native Caiquetios from Curaçao by the Spanish and Dutch, the devaluation of the creole language Papiamentu (which was only recognised as an official language as recently as 2007) and the imposition of Dutch as the language used in education during most of the 1900s (Rutgers 1996, 136). This means that memory is an essential part of colonisation and in turn, of any anti-colonial effort.

Memory, in its essence, entails both remembering and forgetting (A. Assmann 2008, 97). According to Aleida Assmann, forgetting is a normal part of social life due to the neurological, psychological and cultural constraints of the human brain (2008, 97). To be able to remember something requires forgetting other things, which applies to personal memory as well as collective memory and the related formation of group identity<sup>12</sup> (A. Assmann 2008, 97). A. Assmann divides cultural forgetting into ‘passive’ forgetting, which ‘is related to non-intentional acts such as losing, hiding, dispersing, neglect-ing, abandoning, or leaving something behind’ (2008, 98) and ‘active’ forgetting, which refers to ‘intentional acts such as trashing and destroying’ (2008, 97). A. Assmann briefly acknowledges that 1) the human brain is culturally biased (which influences what is remembered and what is forgotten), that 2) while cultural forgetting is a normal and inevitable part of social transformation, the imposition of

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<sup>12</sup> According to Jan Assmann, humans are able to form an identity through (individual and collective) memory (2008, 109). It allows us to form groups, and the groups we live in allow us to form memories (Assmann 2008, 109).

forgetting on a different or persecuted group is ‘violently destructive’ (A. Assmann 2008, 97), and that 3) archives are partial, as they ‘have their own structural mechanisms of exclusion in terms of class, race, and gender’ (A. Assmann 2008, 106). However, I argue that distinguishing between the categories of ‘active’ and ‘passive’ forgetting wrongly suggests that forgetting, even in its forms of neglect, losing or hiding, is non-intentional, neutral or innocent.

This sentiment is shared by Abdelmajid Hannoum. In his theorisation on forgetting in relation to citizenship and the nation, Hannoum argues that memory - and its dimensions of remembering and forgetting - is anything but innocent or accidental (2019, 369). Hannoum describes forgetting as something that can be seen as a non-innocent way of reorganising memory, which shapes the experience of contemporary society, events and meaning-making processes and, among other things, creates an ‘illusion of national cohesion’ (2019, 369). So, while forgetting might be an inevitable and even natural thing I argue that it is harmful to see it as passive, especially in creating a collective memory<sup>13</sup>. I argue this because there is a level of intent in what and how a group wants to remember (and forget) and in how they create their collective identity based on this interplay of forgetting and remembering. I argue that this intentional way of reorganising memory through the (re-)production of memory and forgetting is also relevant to the construction of racial and (post-)colonial hierarchies between the Dutch Caribbean and the Netherlands. However, the construction of a canonical cultural memory through intentional, non-innocent processes of remembering and forgetting is not fixed. It is constantly being constructed, reproduced and contested. It is these instances in which canonical cultural memory is contested that I am especially interested in. In the next section I will discuss the concepts of diaspora and identity to explore the unique transformative potential of diasporic knowledges in creating counter-memory that contests Dutch canonical cultural memory on colonialism.

#### *Diasporic identities and counter-memory*

In “Diaspora Identities”, John McLeod shows how the concept of diaspora has shaped several postcolonial studies scholars’ conceptualisation of identity. According to Robin Cohen, diaspora is a concept that describes groups of people who live far away from their (imagined) birthland, while they ‘acknowledge that “the old country” – a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions’

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<sup>13</sup> This goes for individual memory too, as forgetting and remembering at this level also involves bias (Assmann 2008, 97).

(Cohen [1997] 2001, ix). While the concept of diaspora is closely connected to the concept of migration, not all people who are part of a diaspora have experienced migration themselves (McLeod [2000] 2010, 238). While members of a diasporic group might feel and construct a sense of commonality based on this shared history of migration, language, traditions, etc., they are not a monolith, but instead are a contested, heterogeneous group (McLeod [2000] 2010, 238). Because I will discuss the negotiation of colonial memory from the standpoint of Dutch Caribbean diasporic artists, I want to briefly discuss what the term diaspora means in relation to this Dutch Caribbean diasporic context. In “The Diaspora of a Diaspora: the Case of the Caribbean”, Cohen explores in what ways migrants from the Caribbean can and cannot be seen as a diaspora. He argues that in the original, biblical use of the term, diaspora was used to describe the forced dispersal of the original population (Cohen 1992, 159). While migrants from the Caribbean are not indigenous to the Caribbean<sup>14</sup>, do not necessarily want to move back (either to Africa or the Caribbean) and were not forcibly dispersed by a shared trauma in the Caribbean, Cohen argues that they can be seen as a diaspora, as they do share a collective trauma in Africa through slavery which plays an important role in their consciousness and they do have a religious, political and cultural link with Africa, which (among other ways) presents itself through anti-colonial and return movements (Cohen 1992, 168). In this sense, people that are from the Caribbean but have migrated elsewhere, people that travel between the Caribbean and other places and people who live outside of the Caribbean but have a Caribbean background can be seen as being part of a diaspora of a diaspora because they are connected to both the Caribbean and Africa in the ways I have explained above<sup>15</sup>.

Next to the fact that diaspora can be a word that broadly describes the dispersion of groups of people throughout the world, the concept of diaspora can also be approached as theory, or as a new way of being in the world (McLeod [2000] 2010, 237). It can inspire new kinds of knowledge that can form alternatives to fixed notions of belonging, rootedness and

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<sup>14</sup> Virtually none of the indigenous people from the Caribbean islands survived the arrival of the European colonisers (Cohen 1992, 160). This means that the current population is made up of people who originally come from West Africa (through slavery), Europe (as colonisers) and Asia (through the indentureship) (Cohen 1992, 160).

<sup>15</sup> While Cohen’s main focus is on Dutch Caribbean people with African ancestry, he does not mention the presence of Asian indentured workers on the Dutch Caribbean islands. They did not come to the Dutch Caribbean through the transatlantic slave trade but through the system of indentureship, which replaced enslaved workers after the abolition of slavery in 1863. I argue that the same could be said for their community – that through their experience of a shared trauma of migration from Asia into indentureship they can be said to form a diaspora of a diaspora.



home, as these concepts fail to address the contemporary world (specifically contexts of migration) and are therefore harmful and exclusionary (McLeod [2000] 2010, 244). Instead of using these static kind of concepts, the ‘in-between-ness’ of a migrant or diasporic position can show us that all positions (and the knowledges that are created from those positions) are partial, plural, incomplete, fluid and hybrid (McLeod [2000] 2010, 248). One important scholar that follows this line of thinking is Homi K. Bhabha. In *On the Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha argues that thinking from ‘in-between’ spaces, like the border, creates possibilities for creating new identities and subverting binary notions of identity and subjectivity (McLeod [2000] 2010, 252). He believes that identity is not something that is essential or has a fixed origin, but that it is discursively produced through performance and hybridisation (McLeod [2000] 2010, 253). Another postcolonial scholar that works with the concept of hybridisation and discusses the theoretical potential of the concept of diaspora in relation to the politics of identity and subjectivity is Paul Gilroy. Gilroy argues firmly against ethnic absolutism and what he calls ‘cultural insiderism’, which he defines as an ‘absolute sense of ethnic difference’ and in which the nation is constructed as an ethnically homogeneous entity (1993, 3). Gilroy locates this absolute sense of ethnic and national difference in both popular discourse and some of the work of (black) scholars that take an ontological essentialist framework in which they approach cultural expressions that are hybrid and fluid as having ‘racial authenticity’ (Gilroy 1993, 34). Instead of this absolute sense of ethnic and national difference Gilroy argues that the concept of diaspora (through cultural expressions like music) and the Black Atlantic have allowed the formation of new ways of identification (1995, 24). The concept of the Black Atlantic refers to the hybridisation of (black) culture as a result of the transatlantic slave trade, which can be used as an analytical framework for cultural scholars that creates a ‘transnational and intercultural perspective’ (Gilroy 1993, 15). In this texts, he argues for a shift in the politics of identity from fixity and *roots* to fluidity, hybridity and *routes* (Gilroy 1995) and uses the image of the ship to signify the oppression of black people through the middle passage, but also the possibilities of movement, routes and circulation of cultural practices and knowledge as a more suitable way of thinking about black identities (McLeod [2000] 2010, 266). I argue that the work by diasporic Dutch Caribbean artists on colonial memory as part of an anti-colonial project (co-)creates a diasporic identity that also counters ethnically absolutist and homogeneous ideas of the nation which are created by canonical cultural memory on colonialism in the Netherlands.

Similarly, Hannoum also seems to locate a transformative potential in the migrant, diasporic or ‘subaltern’ position. He explains that the nation is constantly working to (re-)produce an understanding of national history and memory through what he calls a ‘regime of

remembrance' (a corpus of knowledge, texts, images and memories about history that is shared by many institutions, media and schools) and a 'regime of forgetting' (knowledge, texts, images and memories that have been repressed by the nation) (Hannoum 2019, 370). However, despite of this constant (re)production of a regime of remembrance and forgetting, the repressed memories cannot be fully contained (Hannoum 2019, 370). They are remembered and shared among communities that fight for their recognition and inclusion within dominant narratives through what he calls 'subaltern memory' (Hannoum 2019, 369 & 370). In the context of French colonial history Hannoum acknowledges that these counter-memories are occasionally also articulated by certain academics, but he seems to locate the potential for contesting memories in subaltern communities whose background connects them to the historical events of colonialism (2019, 374 & 375). These subaltern communities are excluded from the metropolitan imagined community because they do not share the same official memory and forgetting (2019, 369). Rather than sharing the same official memory as the dominant imagined community, these groups often contest the dominant narratives of the official memory on colonialism by 'uncovering' parts of the colonial past. This does not mean that they have unmediated, original access to an authentic (pre-)colonial past, however, or that rethinking identity through the lens of diaspora automatically solves material inequalities based on 'race', gender, etcetera (McLeod [2000] 2010, 239). Instead, they reimagine this past in the present, thereby creating diasporic identities and transforming cultural memory through their diasporic remembering – 'a "return" not to some essential identity but to a historical itinerary that colonialism displaced without fully erasing' as Rothberg puts it (2013, 365).

So, as we have seen the concept of diaspora can transform our understanding of identity as something that is hybrid and fluid. The knowledges and memories that are created from diasporic standpoints, in their hybridity, fluidity and acknowledgement of the fact that all knowledges are partial, can contest fixed and homogenous ideas of (national) identity as well as canonical cultural memory that creates and is created by this idea of identity. In line with Hannoum, who seems to locate a significant potential for memory contestation in communities who have been negatively affected by the realities of colonialism that are repressed in the construction of the official memory, I argue that the diaspora forms a productive place for the construction of counter-memory that challenges canonical cultural memory that often forgets or represses the negative effects of Dutch colonialism. Now that we have looked at the transformative potential of the concept of diaspora in relation to identity and counter-memory, let us take a look at what role artistic practices can play in remembering colonial history and creating counter-memories.

### *Artistic Practices*

While there are several sites from which one can criticise canonical cultural memory, I argue that art is an important site from which people can remember, make sense of and re-imagine the colonial past. Through an explanation of feminist semiotics, Rosemarie Buikema argues that art (as a language) does not create an authentic reflection of our world, but rather that it produces certain notions, meanings and concepts (Buikema 2017, 90). Rosi Braidotti is one of the scholars that argues for the theoretical and transformative power of the arts. She says that ‘the creative spirits have a head start over the masters of meta discourse and especially those of deconstructive meta discourse’ (1996, 352), arguing that the arts often are more suited to address our current world than theory.

In her text “Remaking Memory and the Agency of the Aesthetic” (2021) Ann Rigney writes about ‘the power of artistically constructed narratives to disrupt habits of memory and create new sites of memorability’ (2021, 17). While she acknowledges that one artwork cannot completely change collective memory, she argues that small changes can help bring about systemic change:

Remaking collective memory begins with the disruption of old habits in the micropolitics of reading, viewing and reacting, with repeated small movements gradually acquiring larger-scale consequences. If new sites of memorability begin to emerge in the singularity of particular narratives, that memorability only becomes mainstream thanks to the gradual build-up of resonance (Rigney 2021, 18)

Because a change in collective memory is brought about by many smaller memory contestations it is worth researching how several artists from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora negotiate colonial memory in their artworks and how this might counter dominant ways of remembering colonialism in the Netherlands. Focusing on countering these dominant ways of remembering, this research analyses artistic practices that produce memories that counter Dutch canonical cultural memory and the Dutch, White, innocent Self-image as explained in my introduction. Through this, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which the canonical cultural memory on colonialism in the Netherlands is contested from the margins.

As we have seen, the fields of memory and postcolonial studies have a strong potential to enrich each other’s theorisations according to Rothberg. Connecting these fields in the context of colonial violence can help us get a ‘new understanding of how violence

fundamentally shapes the temporality of modern memory and how regimes of memory help propagate and potentially resist violence through the creation of unexpected solidarities' (Rothberg 2013, 361). (Collective) identity, shaped by memory and its non-innocent mechanisms of forgetting and remembering, can be reconfigured through a diasporic lens to allow for hybridity, fluidity and the acknowledgement that all knowledge that is created is partial. By constructing memories from this marginalised diasporic standpoint, the person remembering constructs and transforms a notion of collective diasporic identity and has the potential to counter canonical cultural memory in which the past and lasting impact of colonialism is often forgotten. Art, because of its transformative, subversive and theoretical potential, is an important site in which cultural memory is constructed and therefore also contested. Before I move on to analyse the process of remembering and the construction of diasporic counter-memory in the two artworks by Jack and Damberg, I discuss the methods I use to execute this analysis.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

I will analyse the artwork *Shore* (2024) by Deborah Jack and the artwork *Curaçaoise Lagen* (2022) by Avantia Damberg by using critical visual methodology, specifically semiotics, as my methodology. In her book *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (2001), Gillian Rose explains critical visual methodology as an approach that takes into account the cultural and social context, as well as the power dynamics that are at play within and in relation to the visual image (3). She identifies three criteria for a critical approach to visual images: a critical approach 1) ‘takes images seriously’ (Rose 2001, 15); 2) ‘thinks about the social conditions and effects of visual objects’ (Rose 2001, 15); and 3) ‘considers your own way of looking at images’ (Rose 2001, 16). One of the approaches she discusses and which seems to meet these criteria is the method of semiotics. She explains semiotics as ‘the study of signs’, which is concerned with the way images make meaning (Rose 2001, 69). Within the field of semiotics, Barthes identified two levels at which meaning is made (Hall [1997] 2013, 23). First comes the level of denotation, which is the descriptive level that is widely agreed upon. The second level is the level of connotation, here the meaning is connected to and constructed by ‘broader themes and meanings’ (Hall [1997] 2013, 23). Looking at the denotative and connotative layers of the two artworks I have chosen to analyse will help me understand how these artworks make meaning through the signs that are present in them and the way they relate to other signs and the current social and political context.

Rose also discusses social semiotics (as theorized by Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress in *Social Semiotics* (1988) and how it accounts for how differently constructed social identities have different ways of encoding and therefore interpreting visual images and the world (2001, 96). While I will reflect on how my interpretation of the artworks is partial and situated, I will not delve into the polysemy<sup>16</sup> of the artworks in great detail. Instead, I will reflect on the cultural context that the artworks refer to, look at how meaning is created in relation to these contexts, and which perspective influences my interpretation of the images.

Researchers that conduct semiotic research of certain visuals often pick a few images as their case studies (Rose 2001, 73). According to Rose, they seem to choose these images based on ‘how conceptually interesting they are’ (Rose 2001, 73), and not so much based on how representative they are of a larger group of images. This is exactly what I will do, as that fits the scope of this thesis best. I started the process of selecting two artworks by taking a generous

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<sup>16</sup> Rose explains that ‘a sign is polysemic when it has more than one meaning’ (Rose 2001, 92).

amount of time to make a long list of different kinds of contemporary artists from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora that deal with colonialism in their work. I listed the artist and some information about them, the themes they dealt with in their work and sometimes a work that spoke to me specifically accompanied by some information about that work. While I acknowledge that it is not the same to have been born on one of the Dutch Caribbean islands and to have lived there one's entire life versus having been born there but having moved away to the US or the European Netherlands during one's studies for example, it is the diasporic character of the Dutch Caribbean as I have discussed in my theoretical framework that has led me to centre 'diaspora' in my selection of artists. This list consisted of artists that either 1) have been born and raised on one of the Dutch Caribbean islands, 2) have lived or live on one or more of the Dutch Caribbean islands, 3) continuously travel (and live) between the Dutch Caribbean and another place, 4) have parents that came from the Dutch Caribbean islands but that have migrated to a different place but still identify as (part) Caribbean, or a combination of these options. It would not be fitting to limit the kind of artists I choose to analyse to only artists that have been born in and lived in the Dutch Caribbean for all of their lives, as much of the Caribbean is defined by movement (Cozier & Flores 2011, 7). Many artists from the Dutch Caribbean study in the European Netherlands or the US and build an art practice that is based both in the Dutch Caribbean and the European Netherlands or the US, or are born in the European Netherlands to Dutch Caribbean parents and later move to the Dutch Caribbean, or experience other forms of movement between these places.

After making this list I chose two artworks; *Shore* (2004) by Deborah Jack and *Curaçaoise Lagen* (2022) by Avantia Damberg. I chose these artworks based on a few reasons: because 1) the artwork was conceptually interesting and related to colonial memory in a way; 2) there was sufficient information available about the context and intended meaning of the artwork. I felt that the last point was important because I do not have a Dutch Caribbean background myself and therefore do not share the same frame of reference as the artists I discuss in this thesis. Because of this, I might overlook some meanings the signs could produce. I think interviews and other published material about these artworks can help guide my interpretation of the artworks and the effects they could have on the world. Another aspect that influenced the way I selected the two artworks I discuss is the diversity of artforms. I wanted to make sure I chose artworks that have different artforms and that used different mediums, to show the multiplicity and variety of the work that is created by artists related to the Dutch Caribbean diaspora. Let us now move on to explore the negotiation of colonial remembering and forgetting in the installation artwork *Shore* (2004) by Deborah Jack.

## Chapter 3: Deborah Jack: Colonial Memory and the Natural Memorial

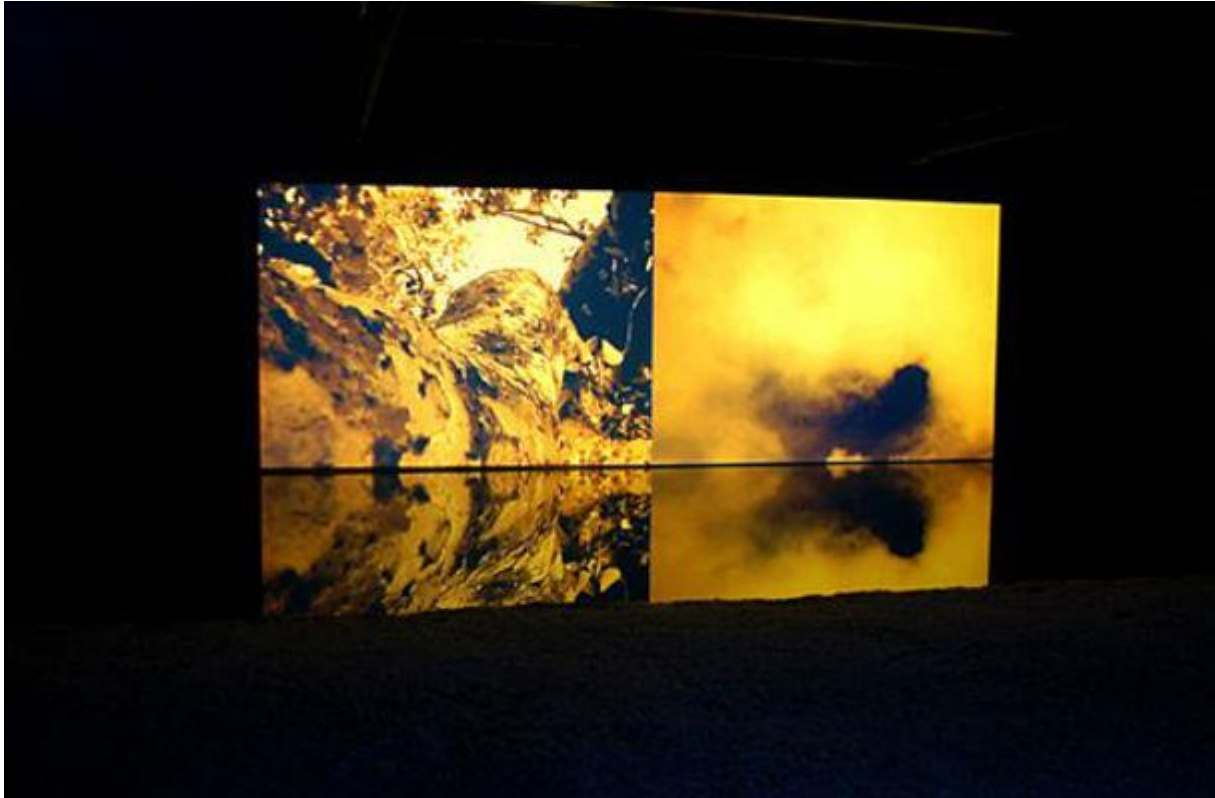


Figure 1. Still from *Shore* (Jack 2004).

Sounds of crashing waves, creaking wood and dripping water meet you as you step into the dark room onto a floor covered with rock salt. As the salt creaks beneath your feet and the faint smell of salt enters your nose, you see two large projections of videos directly next to each other. The two projections show alternating videos of the wake of a boat in open water, a small bay with two mountains or hills on either side filmed from the vantage point of the sea, a close-up of a ship's mast with its attached ropes and folded sails that pans upwards, the open sea with a cloudy sky, different close-ups following along thick ropes, a cloudy sky, waves crashing onto the beach filmed upside down, crashing waves filmed from behind big rocks laying on the beach, satellite footage of a hurricane and a close-up that follows the bark of a tortuous tree that grows on the beach. All these videos are stripped of their original colour and have a yellow hue, except for the satellite footage of the hurricane which has a cobalt blue colour. In front of these two projections, you see a wide, shallow, built-in pool filled with water that reflects the two projections. When you turn to the right, you see three quadrilateral pieces of fabric hanging

from the ceiling onto which the footage of several consecutive videos is projected. It shows videos of a ship's mast, ropes, folded sails and a flag, several close-ups of a piece of rope, all in a yellow hue, and cobalt blue satellite footage of a hurricane. On the right side of the three fabric panels hanging from the ceiling is a smaller luminous box attached to the wall that is filled with salt rocks and lets through an orangey light.

This is the denotative description of the installation artwork *Shore* (2004) by Deborah Jack at Big Orbit Gallery in Buffalo (New York, the United States). Deborah Jack (1970-) is a poet and visual artist based in St. Maarten and New Jersey City (the United States)<sup>17</sup>. She uses video and sound installation, photography, painting, and poetry to address topics like colonialism, slavery, cultural memory, ecology and climate change. She is associate professor in art photography at New Jersey City University. If we take a closer look at the signs in this artwork, we can construct a possible connotative meaning<sup>18</sup> and explore how Jack might negotiate colonial memory in this piece.

One big element in *Shore* is the use of salt. While salt could refer to many things in different contexts, in relation to the other signs present in this artwork - like the ship's mast, its sails, the pool of water and images of the sea - the viewer is likely to think about the salty sea and the ocean. Together with the knowledge that Deborah Jack calls St. Maarten her home, this connotation might narrow from a broader notion of the ocean to more specific notions of the Caribbean Sea, the Atlantic Ocean and even more specifically the colonial exploitation of the island of St. Maarten for its large quantities of salt by the Dutch WIC.

Sint Maarten has a 188 hectare salt lake called Great Salt Pond. In 1630, the Dutch WIC seized the island of Sint Maarten for economic reasons<sup>19</sup>. The Dutch required a lot of salt to keep meat fresh during long journeys at sea and for their large herring industry. After the loss of the largest 'Dutch' salt pan in Venezuela to the Spanish, they started to retrieve salt from other islands, like Bonaire and Sint Maarten (Dalhuisen et al. 1997, 44). Part of the people working to pick salt at the Great Salt Pond on Sint Maarten were enslaved Africans (Smeulders

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<sup>17</sup> Jack was born in Rotterdam and grew up on St. Maarten (McKee 2019).

<sup>18</sup> I recognise that this is one of many possible interpretations of her work, as people with different frames of reference might have different connotations with the signs present in Jack's work. For example, Jack talks about the feedback she got from viewers, saying that some experienced the installation as almost meditative and relaxing, while some felt the unease that might come with the traumatic dimensions in *Shore* (Jack 2022).

<sup>19</sup> After this, the island was conquered several times by the Spanish, French and Dutch, even after the Treaty of Concordia of 1648, which divided the island between the Kingdom of France and the Dutch Republic.



2016, 47) that were sold on Curaçao<sup>20</sup>. Working in these salt pans was arduous work, as people had to work in the hot sun while standing in the salt pond with their bare feet, exposing them to the corrosive salt for hours at a time. During the dry and warm months, water would evaporate from the salt pan and leave salt crystals, like the ones we see covering the floor in *Shore*. By combining all of these signs, Jack seems to construct salt as a material that connotes the colonial history of St. Maarten. She reminds us of the exploitation of the enslaved Africans and the island's resources for the financial gain of the Dutch (as well as the French and for shorter periods of time the Spanish). The connotation with colonial exploitation and domination is supported by the signs of thick ropes, the ship's dark wooden mast with a flag at the top, the folded sails, the creaking sounds of wood and the three fabric panels hanging from the ceiling, which remind one of an old wooden ship. In relation to the video footage of the sea and the knowledge that Jack is from St. Maarten – an island that has a history of Dutch colonisation and slavery – the sign of the old ship and the accompanying signs connote slave ships and the Middle Passage, during which millions of people from Africa were enslaved and transported over the Atlantic Ocean to North-America, South-America and the Caribbean.

As she remembers slavery and colonialism by the WIC on St. Maarten through the presence of salt and the references to slave ships, her artwork also seems to refer to a sense of diasporic fluidity. By focussing on the shore as a kind of liminal space that holds the tension between arrival and departure and connects the land to the larger Caribbean and the routes of the Black Atlantic as Paul Gilroy conceptualised, Jack shows how this diasporic identity, while routed through St. Maarten, is defined by movement and fluidity.

### *Remembering Trauma and Slavery*

While Jack invokes a history of slavery and colonialism through the use of salt and images of the sea and an old wooden ship, it is noteworthy that she does this without visually representing human subjects or direct images of suffering. In a lecture at The College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts at San Diego State University, Jack mentions that this is an intentional move, as she seeks 'to articulate this sort of historical and cultural injury in a way that tries to avoid and subvert images of suffering and victimhood that can be used as sort of "visual hot buttons"' (Jack 2022, 0:27:01). This sentiment is shared by Cozier and Flores, as they argue that the literal representation of trauma and violence can result in trivialisation (2011, 21).

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<sup>20</sup> Next to working on the salt pans, enslaved African people also worked on tens of sugarcane, cotton and water plantations on Sint Maarten (Dalhuisen et al. 1997, 55).

Over the last few decades it has become easier and easier to share knowledge and images of racial injustice against Black people and Black suffering through the internet (Brown 2021, 1171), like images of police violence that inspired the #BlackLivesMatter movement in the US. While making visible images and experiences of Black suffering that can be experienced as re-traumatising by Black people is crucial in education that aims to address antiblackness according to Keffrelyn Brown, Brown explores how educators can do so in a way that is not only re-traumatising but most of all transformative. While I do agree that it is impossible to fully ‘account for racial injustice without a deep witnessing of Black pain’ within the context of education (Brown 2021, 1176), I argue that there is a difference between the context of traditional education and an art museum, even though the latter definitely serves an educational purpose as well. The context of a classroom gives the opportunity for a distinction between ‘bearing witness’ and ‘voyeuristic gazing’ (Brown 2021, 1174), between the real experience of ‘Black pain’ and ‘blackpain’ that shows ‘visual or verbal representations of Black bodies in pain, circulated in popular culture and literature, and symbolizes reflections of racial injustice. blackpain is devoid the full scope of Black humanity, including living, joy, laughter, suffering, and love’ (Brown 2021, 1176). In the context of an art museum it is not possible to fully account for the audience’s positionalities and their personal experiences of racial injustice in a way that is possible in the context of a classroom. While an art museum does serve an educational purpose and artists create knowledge through their artworks and exhibitions, art museums are also widely used for entertainment purposes – think of people going for a fun day out on their holiday, or a couple going on a date. Therefore, visual representations of Black suffering in the context of an art museum can run the risk of falling into the category of ‘voyeuristic gazing’ (Brown 2021, 1174) that fails to end but rather sensationalises Black suffering.

Not only does the context of the museum play a role in how representations of suffering make meaning, but the fact that this museum exhibit is located in the US and likely will be seen by many white people or people that do not share this history of being colonised influences what effect the visualisation of suffering has and, most likely, what strategy of representation the artist might choose to remember these violent memories. For example, Jack expresses that some viewers told her that they experienced the installation as almost meditative and relaxing, while some felt the unease that might come with the traumatic dimensions present in *Shore* (Jack 2022). In this sense, the way that different visitors experience this artwork exposes the workings of regimes of forgetting and the way that some communities, most likely those connected to a history of colonial oppression, are especially well suited to remember these forgotten or suppressed memories.

So, instead of reproducing images of black suffering and trauma, thereby possibly re-traumatising Black people without directly changing the reality of racial injustice, Jack processes the trauma of slavery and colonial rule by creating a multi-sensory and immersive experience that indirectly invokes memories of colonial rule and exploitation. By bringing to light colonial memory in an indirect manner – without a literal visualisation of Black suffering – Jack shows the importance of remembering colonial history in the present, but emphasises the importance of remembering colonial exploitation without reproducing visual regimes that confirm and continue the dehumanisation of Black people in the art realm.

### *Rejecting the Tourist Gaze*

The choice to use imagery of the beach and sea to remember colonialism is an interesting one in the context of the Caribbean, because over the last century much of the Caribbean has been visually represented by images of deserted, white, sandy beaches, blue seas, tropical plants and sunny weather (DeLoughrey & Flores 2020, 135; Cozier & Flores 2011, 17). This is far from a neutral representation but instead is an imagery that is highly influenced by and geared towards Western tourism (DeLoughrey & Flores 2020, 135). While DeLoughrey, Flores and Cozier address the larger Caribbean, it is definitely true for the case of Sint Maarten as well, as tourism is the main source of income on this island and a quick search on Google will show tens of images of turquoise seas, white beaches and palm trees. Mimi Sheller explains contemporary tourism and its influence on the way the Caribbean is often represented by the West as something that is based on ‘romantic imperialism’, in which Western people found the embodied experience of the ‘untamed, tropical nature’ of the Caribbean as a new way to exploit the natural resources of this area after the abolition of slavery (Sheller 2003, 38). Through looking at the development of tourism in the Caribbean over time, Sheller is able to show how contemporary tourism and, I argue, the visual regime that Western tourism has constructed of the Caribbean, can be seen as a continuation of colonial, unequal power dynamics between Europe and its former colonies.

At first glance, Jack using imagery of the beach, the salty water and sounds of crashing waves, especially in combination with the absence of people in her artwork, could be seen as affirming this stereotypical representation of the Caribbean as a tropical blank canvas that bypasses the historical and cultural specificities of the location depicted, and treats it as interchangeable (DeLoughrey & Flores 2020, 135; Cozier & Flores 2011, 17). However, although there is a risk of affirming stereotypical representations of the Caribbean, DeLoughrey and Flores argue that ‘the sea is for many a site of historical (and contemporary) trauma and

drives much artistic work recuperating the trace of lost bodies of history' (2020, 135). Through saying this, DeLoughrey and Flores identify the sea as a site of remembrance of and for recovering from historical trauma. I argue that this is also how Jack deploys the image of the sea to remember the Middle Passage, colonialism and the people that passed away due to slavery.

While the images and sounds of an old wooden ship and the tonnes of rock salt help contextualise the images of the beach and help it steer away from a stereotypical representation of the Caribbean, there is another important element that Jack deploys to avoid this: namely, colour. Jack has stripped all of the images of the beach, the sea, the water, the sky and the ship of their original colour and has given them an amber hue. This is a strong move to avoid the colonial tourist gaze and tropicalisation, as colour is a very important element in the tourist representation of the Caribbean. The images no longer show the striking shades of blue and white beaches that allure so many Western tourists to project their fantasies onto. Through *Shore*, Jack obstructs the continuation of colonial power dynamics between the former coloniser and colonised through the tropicalising stereotypical representation of the Caribbean by Europe<sup>21</sup>. Doing this, Jack not only helps the viewer remember the historical colonial exploitation of the island of Sint Maarten by the WIC, she also addresses a contemporary continuation of this colonial, unequal power dynamic (even after formal decolonisation) that operates through tourism and representation. Through this, Jack shows that colonial power dynamics are not just a thing of the past (and thus might be seen as irrelevant by many Dutch people) but that these power dynamics still manifest themselves in contemporary society and thus are relevant and urgent matters. With this she also shows that when remembering colonialism and slavery, it could be important to link it to contemporary societal issues to avoid fixing discussions and memories of colonialism strictly in the past. In the next chapter we will see that this is also an important element in the artwork by Avandia Damberg.

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<sup>21</sup> Rejecting or subverting the tourist gaze can of course be done in many different ways.



Figure 2. Still from *Shore* (Jack 2004).

### *Climate Change and the Hurricane as a Natural Memorial*

While almost all video footage you see in the installation has the amber hue that is also seen in Figure 1 on page 22, the satellite footage of a hurricane has a rich and vibrant cobalt blue colour. It is noteworthy that Jack allows this colour (that in this context is linked to tourist representations of the Caribbean) only for images of the hurricane. In 2017, Sint Maarten, along with the other Leeward Islands like Saba and St. Eustatius, and the state of Florida, was hit by hurricane Irma and hurricane Maria within a span of two weeks. Both of these hurricanes were category 5 hurricanes on the Saffir-Simpson hurricane scale and were incredibly destructive. Due to human driven climate change, natural disasters like hurricanes have become more and more severe over the past few decades (Colbert 2022). While temperatures are changing globally, Latin America and the Caribbean are two of the regions that are most likely to be affected by natural disasters, which is a trend that is predicted to continue in the future (Rossing & Rubin 2010, 63). According to Tilley et al., climate change and other kinds of ecological harm are effects of ‘the overlapping ills of colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism’ (2023, 141). This is evident in how the effects of climate change and ecological harm differentially impact certain groups of people (Tilley et al. 2023, 142), and in how this is out of

proportion with which areas cause most pollution to the environment. Through using colours that are used in stereotypical representations of the Caribbean for the video of the hurricane, Jack shows that the Dutch Caribbean is not just a tourist's paradise, but shows the reality of a place that is vulnerable to natural disasters caused by racialised capitalism<sup>22</sup>. By not only discussing the histories and memories of colonial exploitation in *Shore*, but also addressing the contemporary realities of dealing with the effects of climate change in daily life on St. Maarten, Jack links the issue of colonialism to the present, thereby showing how contemporary issues like the effects of climate change can be linked to the unequal power dynamics that originated in the system of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism and the plantation economy. I argue that by doing this, Jack again shows the importance of not only remembering colonialism as something of the past, but also linking it to contemporary issues that are connected to the history of colonialism.

In a lecture at San Diego State University Jack offers another way to interpret the sign of the hurricane in *Shore*. She argues that while people might forget certain harmful historical events, nature stores these memories and releases them through natural memorials like the hurricane (Jack 2022, 26:39). Jack sees hurricanes as natural memorials, as they displace water from one place to the other, transversing both time and space, and 'travel along similar routes, and use the same winds and natural currents that slave ships used to travel', she expresses in an interview with Uszerowicz (2021). So, salt, the sea and the hurricane form sites and events that Jack reinscribes with meaning, constructing them as sites of cultural memory. Through visualising the hurricane, linking it to a colour that is stereotypically seen as 'Caribbean' or tropical, Jack seems to define her experience and that of the Caribbean as an African diasporic experience – linked to a history of trauma through slavery *as well as* defined by movement and regrowth. Because while nature seems so damaged after a hurricane, it will start regrowing after a about a week (Jack 2022). She creates this fluid, diasporic identity by remembering shared parts of St. Maarten's colonial history that have been largely forgotten all while linking it to contemporary colonial dynamics between the West and former colonies and rejecting this colonial tropical gaze. She uses video, salt and the hurricane as a natural memorial to construct memories that try to counter the dominant narrative of a largely forgotten colonial past.

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<sup>22</sup> Read more about racialised capitalism in the text "Race and Climate Change: Towards Anti-Racist Ecologies." by Tilley et al. (2023).

## Chapter 4: Avantia Damberg

As I have discussed in chapter one, Rothberg argues that colonialism causes a disruption of organic group formations and involves a violent erasure of collective memory (2013, 365). This disruption of temporal past-present continuity, which manifests itself both on a material level as well as the level of memory, is a force that has greatly impacted the history and culture of Curaçao. Curaçao, like Aruba and Bonaire, was originally inhabited by the Caiquetios<sup>23</sup>, an Arawak tribe that came to these islands from the Venezuelan and Colombian mainland several thousand years BC (Symister 2020, 24). While the Caiquetios inhabited these islands for thousands of years, there is very little left of their culture and language as a large number of them were enslaved, transported to Hispaniola and forced to work in mines by the Spanish in 1513 (Schunck 2019, 57). In 1634, the Spanish and most (but not all) of the remaining Caiquetios people were deported to Venezuela by the WIC (Buurt 2014, 20). What is left of the Caiquetios' presence on Curaçao are shell middens, cave paintings, tools made of shells and rock, animal bones, 'Dabajuroid' pottery and some Caiquetio words in Papiamentu (Buurt 2014; Canon van Curaçao, n.d.). In a discussion of the place of memory in anti-colonial struggle in the works of Fanon, Césaire and Cabral, Rothberg concludes that in all of their works these authors see the (re)construction of memories of 'forgotten history' as an important part of anti-colonial struggle (even after formal decolonisation). While it is impossible to 'return' to, or 'recover' authentic pre-colonial or subaltern knowledge, as Spivak warns in her influential text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" ([1983] 1994), Rothberg (using knowledge created by Fanon, Césaire and Cabral) argues that recalling and transforming pre-colonial memories is essential in countering the "forgetting machine" (Césaire [1955] 2000, 52) or the regime of forgetting imposed by centuries of colonial rule (Rothberg 2013, 366).

An artist that deals with this disruption of temporality is Avantia Damberg (1977-). Damberg is a visual artist based in Curaçao, who travels between the Netherlands and Curaçao for her artistic work. She creates collages, animations, installations, documentaries, public art,

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<sup>23</sup> Also referred to as Caquetios or Caiquetia.

street art and land art and deals with themes of identity, memory, colonialism and contemporary life on Curaçao.



Figure 3. Picture of *Curaçose Lagen* (Damberg 2022).



The specific artwork I want to address here is Damberg's installation *Curaçaose lagen* (2022, *Curaçao Layers*). *Curaçaose lagen* is a few meters high installation that is on display at the *Wereldmuseum Amsterdam*<sup>24</sup> as part of the semipermanent exhibition 'Our Colonial Inheritance'. It is located in the room that has the theme 'The Road to Freedom' (Damberg, n.d.). The artwork starts with a cylinder hanging from the ceiling, which has a diameter of about a little over a meter. Seven layers of large beige ceramic shards are connected to this cylinder by thin strings. Each layer consists of fourteen somewhat square shards of about fifteen to twenty centimetres wide and high. Each shard is scraped and painted with a unique brown design, but each horizontal layer seems to have its own theme. It is as if each layer of shards comes from a different vase or bowl and as if connecting these pieces creates a connecting pattern. Under these seven layers of ceramic pieces hangs a see-through fabric in a circle, which has four layers of pictures of light brown letters or documents printed onto it. Upon closer look, one can see that they are manumission papers from Curaçao which declared the freedom of previously enslaved people. The bottom layer is attached to the fabric and consists of five rows of words carved out of wood. They spell out the first two and the last two verses of the Curaçaoan anthem:

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<sup>24</sup> This museum was called the *Tropenmuseum* (the Museum of Tropics, my translation) until 2023.

Lanta nos bos ban kanta  
Grandesa di Kòrsou;  
Kòrsou isla chikitu,  
baranka den laman!

Let's raise our voice and sing  
the grandeur of Curaçao;  
Curaçao, small island,  
a boulder in the sea!

Kòrsou nos ta stima bo  
ariba tur nashon.  
Bo gloria nos ta kanta  
di henter nos kurason.

Curaçao, we love you  
above all nations.  
Your glory we sing  
with all our hearts.

I ora nos ta leu fo'i kas  
nos tur ta rekorda  
Kòrsou, su solo i playanan,  
orguyo di nos tur.

And when we are far from home  
we all recall  
Curaçao, its sun and beaches  
the pride of us all.

Laga nos gloria Kreado  
tur tempu i sin fin,  
k'El a hasi nos digno  
di ta yu di Kòrsou!

Let us praise our Creator  
always and forever,  
for He has made us worthy  
to be Curaçaoan!

(Curaçao Voor Jou, n.d.)

### *Constructing Pre-Colonial Memories*

When reading the information given with the artwork, the visitor learns that the ceramic pieces are enlarged replications of ceramic archaeological findings from the Caiquetios. Damberg used iron oxide dye to decorate the ceramic pieces, as this material was also used by the Caiquetios to form the reddish dye (Janga 2005, 74). As very little information of the Caiquetios culture remained due to their deportation by the Spanish colonisers, the visualisation of what remains from their life on Curaçao in *Curaçaose Lagen* can be understood as constructing memories of historical knowledge that has been destroyed and forgotten by the workings of colonial oppression. The thin strings holding the ceramic pieces together could be interpreted as referring to the delicate ways memories of the Caiquetios are reconstructed through archaeological findings. They seem to acknowledge that these memories are not authentic and all-encompassing memories but rather that they are partial reconstructions of the past through

limited material artefacts that can carry these memories. The use of the material of ceramics and the way that it has existed for thousands of years and will endure thousands of years more could refer to how the influence of the Caiquetios on contemporary and the future of Curaçaoan culture<sup>25</sup> will continue, even if it is not widely acknowledged and part of canonical cultural memory. By making visible what is often forgotten, Damberg creates a counter-memory that goes against canonical cultural memory and the way it forgets or rather suppresses virtually all pre-colonial cultural memories. This subsequently decentres colonialism as the shaping force of Curaçaoan culture. The manumission letters, printed on textile, refer to freedom and the abolition of slavery on the 1st of July 1863<sup>26</sup>. While these documents are literal declarations of freedom, they also refer to centuries of enslavement, dehumanisation and collective trauma. They refer to the transatlantic slave trade, the plantations on which enslaved people were forced to work and they carry the names of former slave owners and previously enslaved people – names that are common on Curaçao until this day. The bottom layer, consisting of the Curaçaoan anthem carved out of wood, uses a nationalist framework to create a sense of national independence, pride, community, identity and a rejection of colonial rule. Damberg discusses her use of wood as a material and says ‘wood is flexible and only becomes more beautiful and powerful with everything it endures. This fits the development of Curaçao’s population’ (Damberg, n.d.).

While she makes use of a nationalist framework by incorporating the Curaçaoan anthem, therefore possibly falling into the trap of using essential, fixed and static ideas of identity as Gilroy discussed in “The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity” (1993), the different layers of the artwork do address the plurality and hybridity that is at the root of a possible Curaçaoan (diasporic) identity. It shows part of the influence of the Caiquetios, the enslaved Africans and the Europeans on contemporary society on Curaçao. Even though organic group formations (like that of the original inhabitants of Curaçao) has been violently disrupted by colonial rule and the transatlantic slave trade (which of course, her artwork cannot change), Damberg seems to construct a narrative that highlights and makes visible the perseverance of the Caiquetios’ pre-colonial cultural influence on contemporary society, which creates a sense of continuity and cultural memory that colonialism has so forcefully tried to disrupt. By doing

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<sup>25</sup> When talking about ‘Curaçaoan culture’ I want to acknowledge and stress that there is no one ‘Curaçaoan culture’, but that a Curaçaoan imagined community is non-essential, constructed, plural and hybrid.

<sup>26</sup> While slavery was officially abolished on the 1<sup>st</sup> of July 1963 on the Dutch Caribbean islands, many enslaved people were forced to continue to work for the plantation owners for another 10 years (Seuren 2023).

this, she creates counter-memories that counter canonical cultural memory (and specifically forgetting) on pre-colonial society and culture on Curaçao – thereby reappropriating a pre-colonial past to make an anti-colonial statement.

Not only does *Curaçoise Lagen* intervene into Dutch canonical cultural memory, but the artwork also intervenes into a general omittance of Dutch Caribbean anti-colonial struggle in the academic realm. According to Chelsea Schields, anti-colonial effort from the Dutch Caribbean is often overlooked in scholarship on post- and decoloniality (2019, 155). She contributes this in part to the fact that territorial independence is often equated with decolonisation and that because the Dutch Caribbean islands are still part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to varying degrees, they do not fit into this framework as easily and are overlooked (Schields 2019, 155). Schields encourages post- and decolonial scholars to use a broader definition of decolonisation so that we can recognise other forms of anti- or decolonial effort in Dutch Caribbean archives (2019). Through her artwork, Damberg visualises the actual presence of anti-colonial resistance in both the past and present of Curaçaoan society.

Like Jack does in *Shore*, next to in artistically constructing and visualising (pre-)colonial memory Damberg addresses the ways in which certain colonial dynamics have continued in the contemporary relationship between the former metropole and colony. Damberg does this by visualizing and representing the Papiamentu language. Papiamentu is a creole language that is spoken on Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire that has influences from Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, and native Caribbean and African languages (Jacobs 2012). Over the past century there have been many discussions about the value of the language, as well as about its place in Curaçaoan education (Van Putte 1999). During the beginning of the twentieth century the colonial elite wanted the language used in Curaçaoan education to be Dutch to keep the connections with the metropole strong (Rutgers 1996). In 1907 it was decided that most education should be taught in Dutch and in the 1930's it became entirely forbidden to talk Papiamentu on school grounds even though Papiamentu is the mother tongue of the vast majority of people on Curaçao (Rutgers 1996, 136). While this changed partly since the 50's and 60's, prejudices about the inferiority and simplicity of the creole language persisted (Van Putte 1999, 16). By centering the Papiamentu language in her artwork Damberg rejects this devaluation of Papiamentu that is based on colonialist and racialized ideas.

So, through constructing memories from the pre-colonial Caiquetios, the enslaved African people and the European colonisers, creating a current Curaçaoan imagined community and connecting all of these elements that make up the past and present of Curaçao, Damberg construct a diasporic, hybrid, fluid identity that is defined by movement, flexibility, resilience

and a rejection of colonial rule. Not only does she do this, but by exhibiting this installation in Amsterdam, the capital city of the former metropole, Damberg creates a counter-memory that opposes Dutch canonical cultural memory (or the regime of forgetting) in relation to the negative effects of colonialism that is prevalent in the Netherlands.

## Conclusion

In this thesis I have brought together insights from the fields of memory studies and postcolonial studies to show that processes of remembering and forgetting are intentional instead of neutral or innocent (Hannoum 2019, 369). Acknowledging this non-innocent, intentional nature of memory and forgetting has allowed me to understand the construction of canonical cultural memory related to colonialism in the Netherlands, as there is a level of intent in what and how a group wants to remember (and forget) and in how they create their collective identity based on this interplay of forgetting and remembering. What we choose to remember and forget shapes our experience of contemporary society, events and meaning-making processes and constructs a sense of collective identity. While canonical cultural memory related to the negative effects of colonialism is remembered on many sites, I argue that art is an important site in which processes of remembering and forgetting are negotiated and contested.

In analysing how both Jack and Damberg negotiate colonial memory in their artworks, I have discussed both artists as active agents that create counter-memories that contest canonical cultural memory on the negative effects of Dutch colonialism. They do this from a diasporic perspective which highlights hybridity, fluidity and the partial nature of memory and knowledge. Jack remembers colonialism in the Dutch Caribbean through the signs of salt and the ship, which she uses to argue for the importance of remembering the negative effects of colonialism without the literal visual representation of colonial trauma which could retraumatise and continue the dehumanisation of people that are historically connected to the experience of Dutch colonial exploitation. As she does this, she constructs a diasporic Dutch Caribbean identity that is connected through a history of Dutch colonial exploitation and through the experience of movement, hybridity and regrowth. Not only does Jack show us how we can remember the negative effects of Dutch colonialism in the Dutch Caribbean, she also addresses a contemporary continuation of this colonial, unequal power dynamic (even after formal decolonisation) that operates through representation, tourism and climate change. Through this, Jack shows that colonial power dynamics are not just a thing of the past but that these power dynamics still manifest themselves in contemporary society and thus are relevant and urgent matters. With this she shows that when remembering colonialism and slavery, it is important to link it to contemporary societal issues, to avoid fixing discussions and memories of colonialism strictly in the past. Damberg constructs a Curaçaoan identity that is marked by hybridity. She does this by remembering the largely forgotten pre-colonial Caiquetios culture

through re-creating archaeological findings of their ceramics and the largely forgotten or ignored past of the exploitation of enslaved Africans. Like Jack, Damberg highlights the importance of addressing ways in which this colonial, unequal power dynamic continues to influence the relation between the Dutch Caribbean diaspora and the Netherlands in contemporary society, even after formal decolonisation. While Jack does this in relation to tourism and climate change, Damberg addresses the devaluation of Papiamentu.

All in all, I argue that these diasporic artists from the Dutch Caribbean actively re-negotiate colonial memory through their artworks by remembering often forgotten elements of the history of Dutch colonialism in the Caribbean. They make artistic interventions into the canonical cultural memory on the negative effects of Dutch colonialism and the national identity that is constructed through this process of remembering and forgetting. As I have shown, diasporic knowledges form a unique potential for the creation of this kind of memory contestation that challenges canonical cultural memory through their diasporic, marginal and hybrid position. They reimagine this past in the present, thereby creating diasporic identities and transforming cultural memory through their diasporic remembering – ‘a “return” not to some essential identity but to a historical itinerary that colonialism displaced without fully erasing’ as Rothberg put it (2013, 365).

Using semiotics as my methodology allowed me to take a close look at the meanings Jack and Damberg’s artworks constructed in relation to the social contexts they refer to and are created and exhibited in, but it did limit me in how many case studies I could include in this thesis. I do think it would have been interesting to look at more artworks from Dutch Caribbean diasporic artists to have even more diversity in the media they use, the places that these artworks are displayed in (online, in a museum, in public spaces, which country, etc.) and how that influences meaning making and how they relate to each other. To limit the scope of my thesis I have chosen to analyse contemporary artworks, but it would be incredibly interesting to take a more historical approach and see how these artworks relate to a possible history of anti-colonial art from the Dutch Caribbean diaspora. While *Shore* and *Curaçaoose Lagen* are both part of an anti-colonial struggle, I am aware that I still bring them into conversation with a Dutch context. While I made the choice to link these artworks to the context of Dutch colonial remembering and forgetting, I encourage future researchers to look at how these anti-colonial artworks relate to the corpus of anti-colonial art in the larger Caribbean – thereby centring the Caribbean and decentring Europe or the Netherlands.

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Figure 2. Page 28		Jack, Deborah. 2004. <i>Shore</i> . Installation. Big Orbit Gallery, Buffalo, New York. <a href="https://www.deborahjack.com/shore">https://www.deborahjack.com/shore</a> .
Figure 3. Page 31		Damberg, Avanti. 2022. <i>Curaçaoase Lagen</i> . Installation. Wereldmuseum Amsterdam, Amsterdam.