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Monuments as Actants of Mnemonic Change

1 Introduction

Monuments in public spaces that have gone unnoticed for years can suddenly provoke protests. Their tangibility may prompt people, for example, to denounce inequality and racism in society by damaging the material traces or defacing them with slogans. Of course, iconoclast actions have a long history. Recently, the international Black Lives Matter movement has brought new focus and attention to monuments related to colonial history, including slavery. This outrage is not so much an expression of presentism as some historians claim, but the neglect to historicize the monument itself and to take into account the changing perception over time (Grever 2023). Monuments are often mistaken as mimetic representations of a homogeneous past that do no justice to the complexity of what is represented (Kleinberg 2023). Inspired by Ann Rigney's work, in this essay I reflect on the extent to which protests against such public monuments in the Netherlands are effective in changing the current mnemonic regime regarding the Dutch colonial past.

2 A provocative colonial statue

One of the most controversial statues in the Netherlands is that of J.P. Coen, who triumphantly looks out over the main square in his hometown Hoorn with a cannon at his feet. Jan Pietersz. Coen (1587–1629) was a Dutch governor-general of the East Indies Company (VOC). To ensure the monopoly on the lucrative nutmeg trade on the Banda islands, he carried out the VOC's order to depopulate Banda Lontor in 1621: more than 14,000 Bandanese were murdered, survivors deported as slaves to Batavia, many of whom were branded with the Hoorn coat of arms, their villages burned down, leaders tortured and beheaded, approximately 400 people could escape (Ghosh 2021). From this perspective the statue and the many street names in the Netherlands in honor of the governor-general express symbolic violence towards the descendants of the victims. Coen's cruel exercise of power is still present in the public space, with all its deep-rooted prejudices about empire and race.

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As in other Western countries, rising nationalism in the Netherlands since the 1870s led to the erection of statues and monuments of military leaders and naval heroes. They radiate triumph and pride about the 'successes' Dutch generals and admirals had achieved with their conquests in the Americas, West-Africa, and Asia. At the time of their erection, the initiatives often came from the upper middle classes. Regarding Coen, a special statue committee was set up, in which the Minister of the Colonies – also the former mayor of Hoorn – had a seat, as well as other notables. Cheering speeches were given at the unveiling.

Nevertheless, there were protests against the erection of two Coen statues at the time: in 1876 in Batavia (now Jakarta in Indonesia) and in 1893 in Hoorn. Already in 1868, historians sharply criticized the planned statue in Batavia opposite the governor-general's palace. Historians, journalists, and Socialists also protested in articles against a statue in Hoorn. In 1886, a well-known historian argued that one statue for Coen in Batavia was enough, because: "there is blood on his name." (Van der Chijs 1886, 159). Finally, in 1942, during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch Indies, Indonesian nationalists removed the immense statue of Coen in Batavia from its pedestal. In short, from the beginning there was opposition to Coen's planned statues, but these voices were marginalized or suppressed. Hence, if we historicize and contextualize such colonial statues, it becomes clear that the current protests are not an expression of alleged presentism or poor historical awareness. On the contrary, such an approach enriches our understanding of the plurality of views and the change of memories.

After 1945, the statue in Hoorn was regularly defaced or the pedestal painted with slogans such as "Take it down." To commemorate his four-hundredth anniversary in 1987, the local Westfries Museum organized a Coen exhibition. At the official opening, the Moluccan artist Willy Nanlohy – dressed in a Tjakalele outfit – unexpectedly handed over a black book of Coen's misdeeds to the present Prince Claus, the husband of Dutch Queen Beatrix, and left the room in silence. Other Moluccans then suddenly distributed pamphlets explaining out loud the reasons for their action. Those present reacted furiously, a commotion broke out; security guards removed the Moluccans. Prince Claus, known for his commitment to former colonized countries, was the only one in the room who remained calm.

Protests continued to emerge in subsequent years. For instance, in memory of all victims of Dutch colonialism, in 2013, a journalist together with other activists lit thousands of candles around Coen's statue. In 2020, heavy demonstrations took place in which mounted police kept demonstrations in favor of and against the statue apart (see figure 1). The conflict became so heated that the mayor declared an emergency ordinance in the city. Three years later, the Hoorn city council refused, after a long debate, to apologize for its slavery past, as several Dutch cities have done. What will happen to Coen's statue remains unclear for the time being.

Figure 1: Protests and counterprotests around the statue of J.P. Coen in Hoorn, 2020. Photo Menno Ellerbroek.

3 Performative and interactive communication

What does Coen's case teach us about the actions and reactions of activists and authorities surrounding controversial public monuments, with what effect in changing the current mnemonic regime of the Dutch colonial past? First, it is important to realize that seemingly unchanging monuments are actually material nodes of cultural memory as part of a multi-dynamic global media network. Through photos, videos, social media, exhibitions, and education, they circulate around the world and travel rapidly from one medium to another. Monuments "never stand alone" (Rigney 2022, 14). Embedded in the memory landscape of a city or region, they are like a palimpsest: a recycled piece of parchment on which commissioners, artists, and diverse groups of users leave their traces. As a result, the meaning-making of monuments changes over generations with different pre-understandings and interpretations. They are actants "in shifting assemblages that bring together material objects, narratives, locations, and human actors in changing constellations" (Rigney 2022, 16). No wonder that Moluccan migrants – also from the original Banda Islands – who came to the Netherlands in the 1950s increasingly viewed the statue with mixed feelings.

Second, communication about contested monuments is both performative and interactive. It often starts with demonstrating, carrying banners, chanting slogans, wrapping and defacing the statues, as has been happening around the Coen statue since the 1980s. Next, the municipality responds with cleaning and security measures. Counteractions follow by those who want to honor and to protect the statue. For instance, in 2020, far-right political leader Thierry Baudet laid flowers at Coen's statue as a tribute to what he saw as a heroic governor general. Another telling example related to colonial history took place on 30 June 2023. Two activists commemorated slavery by placing a self-made monument in the Zeeland port of Vlissingen without a permit. Their performative action was a protest against the city council's refusal to erect a slavery monument. The municipality left the 'illegal' monument undisturbed for the time being and invited the initiators for a meeting to talk about it. The following night, however, the monument was defaced with racist and right-wing extremist slogans in protest against the protest. A week later, the municipality requested to remove the slavery monument, because no permit had been granted for it. At the invitation of the Zeeuws Museum, the contested slavery monument is now placed in the museum's courtyard.

Third, although authorities respond differently to disputed monuments, municipalities usually choose to do nothing (the status quo), place an explanatory text on the monument or change its function and name. In the Netherlands, in response to substantive protests, a statue is rarely moved to another location. As far as is known, total destruction has never occurred, as recently happened with the highly controversial bronze statue of Confederate General Robert Lee in Charlottesville (US) that was secretly melted down to be remade into a more inclusive artwork. Another option to respond to protests is innovative conceptualization, such as reframing existing monuments or creating new sculptures nearby that encourage passers-by to critical (self) reflection. This variant has not yet been applied to existing Dutch colonial statues.

Yet the protests against the Coen statue in Hoorn have had some effect on the Dutch mnemonic regime of the colonial past. At a local level, the Westfries museum in Hoorn now presents his life and the massacre on the Banda islands in a permanent critical exhibition. At the national level, Dutch history books have been adapted and expanded.

4 Disruptive public monuments

To better understand the impact of public monuments on mnemonic change, Hannah Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (1958) offers a meaningful approach. Arendt, a political philosopher and engaged in hermeneutic phenomenology,

distinguishes three types of activities that make up the human condition. Two of these are relevant for understanding the impact of monuments in the public sphere (see in particular Donohoe 2016). Arendt considers *Work* as contributing to the construction of the world, such as processing raw materials, using tools, building houses and infrastructures. *Action* is what Arendt calls the lived experience of human activity, revealing interaction on the one hand and initiative on the other in the public space of appearances: showing oneself in deeds and words, to be seen and heard. Indispensable components of action are natality (the capacity of taking an initiative, starting something new) and plurality (the various perspectives of unique but equal human beings). An application of this distinction to the construction of public monuments can illuminate its impact on collective memories.

Monuments as work often confirm dominant ideologies and indicate a desire of human beings to transcend their lifespan through something that outlives them. Examples are the state-sanctioned 'great man' statues, which perpetuate narratives as part of a canonized mnemonic regime. However, despite their seemingly eternal materiality, these monuments are always caught up in the passage of time with changing interpretations and emotional effects. They can provoke anger among people who feel hurt or offended by what they represent. The protests against the Coen statue in Hoorn are an example of this. *Monuments as action* are deliberate interventions in the public, political sphere and can be conceived as political speech-acts, giving space to natality and plurality. They bring about a sudden and unexpected interruption of experiencing the world. These monuments are the opposite of mimetic representation but constitute creative conceptual innovation and stimulate a critical conversation on what is actually represented.

An example of surprise and disruption is the temporary public sculpture by Hew Locke (Birmingham), entitled "Foreign Exchange," unveiled in 2022. Locke both emphasizes and reframes the life-story of Queen Victoria's statue in Birmingham. The artwork does not remove elements of the figure but adds layers to it. In a construction of fiberglass, it fixes Victoria in a crate on a ship, where she is joined on deck by five smaller replicas of herself. The effect is to evoke how the monarch's image was manufactured and shipped across the British Empire, imposing British rule on colonized territories and the dominance of British collective memory. Another example of a monument as action is "Stalin's boots." A life-sized representation of the former Stalin Monument in Budapest's Memento Park with just large bronze boots on top of the pedestal in 2006. This monument mocks the whole idea of a monument as propaganda and self-glorification. It makes visitors aware of older narratives and encourages critical reflection on a totalitarian mnemonic regime.

5 Concluding remarks

Public monuments represent the condensation of layered and complex histories. As carriers of collective memories, embedded in a dynamic global media network, they are the result of selective perception, forgetting or repression. This certainly applies to the colonial past of European countries, such as the Netherlands. Debates, petitions and protests surrounding existing colonial monuments express new narratives, keeping the plurality of the past alive.

Monuments as work continue a homogeneous and one-dimensional narrative, often about the nation. Protests against these representations can stimulate a new view of the past. It is also possible that they can be converted into monuments as action by adding critical murals or sculptures. In themselves they refuse plurality and support an ideological and unified meaning that closes off or discourages an opportunity for discussion. *Monuments as action* – or as Actants – are, on the other hand, deliberate interventions in the memory process, "undermining hegemonic narratives and decommissioning their normative power" (Rigney 2023, 21). As political speech-acts they invite people to reflect critically on past and present, offering them an effective opportunity of mnemonic change.