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"A Bigger Story". The Poetics of Relation in the Art and Performance of Hew Locke and Raoul de Jong

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ABSTRACT

This contribution argues that a critical re-evaluation of Dutch colonial history requires a fundamental structural change in institutional epistemologies, moving beyond a simple methodological shift. By examining the transnational artistic and literary practices of Guyanese-British artist Hew Locke and Surinamese-Dutch writer Raoul de Jong, this paper demonstrates how their creative work forges a new 'poetics of relation' to confront and dismantle imperial ways of thinking. Through a transdisciplinary analysis, the study compares Locke's use of a 'Black Baroque' aesthetic – which employs abundance and excess to recontextualize colonial symbols – with De Jong's performative writing and resistance to literary categorization. The analysis reveals how both artists actively embody a logic that subverts the traditional separation of past and present, challenging established frameworks and foregrounding the knowledge held within ancestral memories and lived experiences. Locke and De Jong share a mode that is not merely a critique of colonialism but an act of re-creation, offering a path towards a language of human connection that transcends national borders.

KEYWORDS

Suriname; colonial legacy; Netherlands; literature; Dutch; Guyana

Introduction

Following decades of growing calls for new colonial narratives, recent studies on Dutch colonial history have shifted the focus from a purely economic or 'trade-oriented' narrative to a more critical examination of violence, slavery and the enduring legacies of Dutch colonialism.[1] The official apologies from Prime Minister Rutte (2022) and King Willem-Alexander (2023) have created a critical moment for historical and creative re-evaluation in the Netherlands.[2] This has brought to the forefront a key challenge: how can a new, shared story be told within today's institutions drawing on existing archives? Does this require primarily a methodological shift, such as incorporating new perspectives and uncovering marginalized voices? Is it sufficient to simply deconstruct and recontextualize the dominant colonial narrative? Or does this effort necessitate a more fundamental, structural change – a new language of relationship – and what is the role of the creative arts in creating and shaping this new shared narrative?

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Traditional historical accounts, as noted by Fatah-Black and De Koning (2023), are predominantly framed from a White, European perspective, leaving significant gaps in our understanding. In their work, *Eyewitnesses of Dutch Slavery* (*Ooggetuigen van de Nederlandse slavernij*) the authors address this Eurocentric bias by inviting contributions to create a more multi-faceted narrative of Dutch Atlantic slavery. This appeal serves a dual purpose: not only does it seek to recover new historical accounts, but it also democratizes the process of historical production by involving a wider range of voices beyond those typically sanctioned by academic institutions.

Following the principles outlined in the NiNsee report, 'Exploration of the Dutch Transatlantic Slavery Museum,' Fatah-Black and De Koning advocate for an 'unleashed perspective'.[3] This perspective is multifaceted and implies several key shifts in historical methodology. First and foremost, it prioritizes the lived experiences and voices of the enslaved and their descendants, repositioning them from passive subjects of study to active historical agents. This reorientation towards Black perspectives necessitates a departure from traditional archival sources – such as official records, travelogues and nature descriptions – and requires scholars to seek out and validate alternative forms of knowledge. The new approach fundamentally challenges the epistemological foundations of traditional historical practice by valuing knowledge that exists outside of written, authoritative sources. It acknowledges the importance of imaginative and creative forms of expression as legitimate historical sources. Furthermore, it invites a critical examination of the very structures and institutions that shape how this new knowledge is generated and disseminated.

Perhaps the most dominant of all structures is the nation. A feature of contemporary empire scrutiny is that it is often still a home affair: what is the imperialist legacy of *our* country house, *our* city or *our* nation? In other words, the efforts are compartmentalized, directed at a domestic audience, and focused on how the national cultural memory and its representations are affected by this new consciousness around imperial heritage. In this contribution, I would suggest that looking beyond the national reach, looking beyond existing structures, borrowing from thinking and practices in the visual arts and bringing this to literary production opens up a road to a new language of relation as it reveals that individual stories can be read as threads of a larger story. My analysis focuses on the work of Guyanese-British artist Hew Locke and Dutch writer with Surinamese heritage Raoul de Jong. Their shared Caribbean context – Guyana and Suriname as neighbouring nations with overlapping colonial histories – provides a first touching point for a transnational and transdisciplinary dialogue. More importantly, this comparative approach posits that visual and literary art employ similar strategies of storytelling and meaning-making, which can generate a new poetics of relation. Locke's artistic practice, therefore, serves as a lens for interpreting De Jong's literary work. This approach responds to De Jong's call in his essay-cum-travelogue *Boto Banja* to read his writing beyond the national narrative and the Neerlandophone cultural sphere. It explores the interconnectivity of the colonial experience and its legacy by seeking connections across nations, artistic practices and cultural and racial lines. First, I will give a short overview of how the debate on the colonial legacy affects practices and structures of our Western institutions, in particular in the Netherlands.

Imperial Epistemologies

A critical consensus has emerged among practitioners engaged in decolonization efforts, particularly within museum, university and archival contexts. As articulated by a panel of museum professionals in *The Future of Dutch Colonial Past*, a central concern is the need to dismantle the existing 'infrastructure'.[4] This infrastructure, they argue, is rooted in the nineteenth century and is defined by disciplinary boundaries – including ethnography, history and art – that are a direct product of a disciplining narrative based on an imperial worldview. Consequently, any genuine attempt to create inclusive and truthful narratives about the colonial past must move beyond simply foregrounding new voices. It requires a critical examination 'under the bonnet' of these institutions to expose, and dismantle, the imperial structures of thinking that underpin contemporary epistemologies.

Wayne Modest, Director of Content at the World Museum Amsterdam, offers a particularly sharp critique, asserting that without fundamental change, 'the infrastructures that are in power will simply absorb and incorporate all those who were formerly colonized under a colonial system, without really changing anything.'[5] He argues that the core obstacle to achieving genuine equity is a lingering belief in Europe and North America 'that the people who were colonized are not necessarily as human as others'. Modest concludes that 'until that belief changes, I mean, fundamentally changes, questions around diversity and inclusion will always be maternalistic, or paternalistic, because it's always about helping those who are not as human, yet.' The silence that followed this observation among the panel members, all of whom are practitioners, suggests that Modest's bleak assessment may have been perceived as too daunting or paralysing to address in a roundtable format. This is particularly significant given that, unlike academic theorists, these practitioners are directly involved in shaping the narrative of the Dutch imperial past, and Modest's argument suggests their efforts might be rendered marginal or even impotent by these deeply embedded structural biases.

This focus on the pervasiveness of White supremacy is echoed by Kehinde Andrews, writer, activist and Professor of Black Studies at the University of Birmingham. In his recent work, *Nobody Can Give You Freedom: The real mission of Malcolm X*, Andrews recounts his shift from critiquing archival biases to advocating for a more radical approach.[6] He initially argued for the inclusion of Malcolm X's speeches as 'just as legitimate as though he had written those words down,' challenging the privilege accorded to written sources in the academy.[7] However, Andrews has since concluded that the problem with academia is not merely a 'White' curriculum, but that 'the entire framework of knowledge is White. The founding fathers of the disciplines are dead White men who didn't just hold racist beliefs, their entire intellectual frameworks were shaped by White supremacy.'[8] He now calls for a rejection of these structures rather than a mere revolutionizing of them, arguing that they are fundamentally underpinned by a racist worldview.[9]

While Modest's and Andrews' critiques are profoundly challenging, their calls for de-disciplining and a rejection of inherited frameworks resonate deeply. The contributors to the *Future of Dutch Colonialism* debate recognize the need to investigate and dismantle these structures of thinking to forge new connections that do not merely reproduce established logics. This is especially true for the national frame, which can obscure wider connections. My own transnational analysis is

a direct response to this call, acknowledging the connectivity and permeability of meaning-making in the contemporary postcolonial world. This approach, which eschews rigid disciplinary and national boundaries in favour of a fluid exploration of history, literature and activism, embraces the relational, ambivalent and fragmented nature of postcolonial discourse. The following analysis will examine three specific strategies and critical devices – excess and abundance, resisting categorization and theatricality and performance – as ways of investigating imaginings of power. I will begin with the work of Hew Locke, exploring his polyvalent use of a baroque aesthetic, before turning to Raoul de Jong's performative writing practice.

The Poetics of Excess and Abundance: Black Baroque

In a recent interview, artist Hew Locke reflected on the linguistic landscape of his youth in Guyana, noting how village names like De Kinderen, Mon Repos and Edinburgh Castle bore witness to past colonial structures. He observed that, to his younger self, these names did not register as foreign but were simply 'our own thing'. That the names bear witness to the changing colonial domination was clearly not something the young Locke was aware of. Yet the impact of symbols, artefacts and (hi)stories would become integral to Locke's work. He builds 'layers, upon layers and layers [. . .] layers, physical layers and layers of meaning' to show the complexity of symbolic systems and meaning making.[10] Locke's early life coincided with Guyana's transition to an independent republic, an event he has frequently cited as formative to his enduring fascination with the symbols and 'paraphernalia' of statehood.[11] Locke returned to Britain at the age of twenty-one to study at Falmouth and London. Today, Hew Locke is a renowned artist and, recently, curator of the British Museum's *Hew Locke: what have we here?* In the exhibition Locke displays his own work – often as a commentary – alongside objects from the British Museum to highlight the profound impact and legacy of British and European imperialism. He shows that the colonial project's 'desire to collect and to categorise' must also be seen as 'a means to power, domination and control.'[12]

A central characteristic of Locke's artistic practice is a deliberate embrace of abundance and excess, which he has described as a 'baroque aesthetic'.[13] His work employs a collage technique of layering and profusion to create a dense visual tapestry that navigates a 'fine line between kitsch and something quite serious.'[14] A prime example of this is his re-imagining of British historical monuments.[15] As early as 2006, Locke adorned a statue of Edward Colston in Bristol with layers and layers of shiny, cheap jewellery. Upon closer inspection, this seemingly decorative assemblage reveals potent signifiers of Colston's history as a slaver, including cowry shells, shackles and skulls. What appear mundane items are turned into potent signifiers, woven into a visual tapestry that reflects the complex, often chaotic, interplay of global capitalism, historical exploitation and cultural symbols. Smothered in glittering necklaces and pendants Colston is only recognizable as a shape on a pedestal, stripping the monument of its individuality and personal reference and broadening it into a metaphor of European colonial exploitation. The deliberate over-saturation is kitsch *and* meaningful at the same time. By transforming Colston as a symbol of imperial power into a generic figure of baroque excess, Locke performs a symbolic act of reclamation and re-inscription. The

familiar, stoic figure becomes theatrical, carnival-esque, undermining its original solemnity and revealing the constructed nature of respectability and authority.

Locke's merging of opulence and cruelty is most poignant when he describes how he adopted an infamous image by William Blake from John Gabriel Stedman's 1796 publication *The Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. Stedman's detailed and illustrated account of his time as a soldier enlisted by the Dutch authorities is a significant historical document that offers one of the most comprehensive depictions of the brutal realities of plantation slavery and colonial society in the 1770s. William Blake was among the engravers enlisted to produce the illustrations for the publication based on Stedman's instructions. The most arresting image is the hanging of an enslaved man, 'Account of a dreadful execution'.[16] Today the explicit etching by Blake is considered too gruesome to reproduce. And yet it is this image that Locke includes in several of his works including the *Ambassador 1* (2021). The ambassador series comprises four figures on horseback, carrying messages, or warnings, from the past. They resemble traditional statues of figures on horseback that are peppered all over the Western world. Rider and horse are covered in gold and silver-plated pendants, images and symbols. One of them is a representation of Stedman's tortured man but Locke makes a crucial adaptation: he turns the black body of the enslaved man into gold. The gold transformation is astonishing, as Locke himself describes: 'if you paint them gold, then all of a sudden, they don't [seem] horrible anymore. They become very reminiscent of attractive baroque carvings that you see in historic stately homes.'[17] Locke draws several lines of relation in one gesture: from the opulent decorations of the stately homes – often built on the revenues of colonial exploitation – through the extreme cruelty-turned-baroque representation by erasing Blackness, presented by a Black envoy carrying messages from the past. The erasure confirms the reality of the body as the locus of the racial ideology, of past and present, of the complexity of representation and its interplay with context.

Hew Locke's artistic engagement with the baroque as a historical moment, an aesthetic and a critical sensitivity connects his work to a broader transnational movement of Black artists. Their method draws on what is referred to as the Black Baroque, diaspora baroque, or neo-baroque. This approach is distinct from the synonymous highly ornate European cultural movement which originated in the seventeenth century.[18] Historically, the European Baroque, with its opulence and theatricality, coincided with the rise of global empires and the brutalities of the transatlantic slave trade. Contemporary Black artists, however, activate this historical context not to emulate it, but to move beyond it by asserting Black agency and identity. By harnessing characteristics of the Baroque – theatricality, illusion, excess and hybridity – they construct alternative narratives that challenge the 'false absences' of the European self-narrative and centre Black identities.

As Christa Clark and Adrienne Childes explain in an interview for the University of Chicago's Black Baroque project: 'What we conceptualize as Black Baroque in the visual arts is a practice that emerges from and engages traits characterized as baroque but specifically accommodates the experience of New World slavery and its continuing impacts.'[19] They continue, 'in taking on the baroque, contemporary Black artists are challenging false absences by asserting in bold and spectacular ways their historical and contemporary presence. Our project investigates how Black artists use baroque aesthetics as a reparative or liberatory strategy, imaginatively responding to the profound

displacement and historical absences of the Middle Passage in ways that centre Black identities.' This creative and critical intervention transmutes a traumatic past into a fertile ground for artistic innovation and a new relational language. Their work not only challenges existing expectations but also affects the very 'infrastructure' of knowledge and representation. The principles of the Black Baroque, with their intentional embrace of theatricality, abundance and performance, offer a valuable lens for analysing the work of both Locke and Raoul de Jong.

Hemmed In Two: An Embodied Critique of Institutional Power

Locke's 2000 installation, *Hemmed in Two* (see Figure 1), created for the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, exemplifies his use of B/baroque sensibilities to critique institutional frameworks. The work, a growth-like installation made from cardboard packaging resembling a tank-like vessel, or ship, adorned with shapes resembling drums and topped by a fairground canopy with a crown on top, is literally squeezed between four marble pillars of the Victorian building. Barcodes are stuck all around the shape that provide a link to objects in the museum that are connected with transatlantic slavery. The structure, or creature, appears both trapped and defiant. It is simultaneously pinched from the sides by the columns and weighed down by a canopy, creating a claustrophobic scene. Yet, despite being restricted, being prevented from moving freely, the creature-like form conveys a clear sense of motion; it is poised for action and appears determined to find a way out.

The setting, the celebrated museum that emerged from the Great Exhibition in 1851 as an expression of Britain's confidence as the nineteenth century's largest empire, embodies a complex history tied to empire, collection and classification. Its Dorian columns physically push against the piece, highlighting the tension between the fluid, improvised

Figure 1. Hew Locke, *Hemmed in Two*, cardboard, acrylic, marker pen, wood, found objects, approx. 12 × 8 × 4 m, 2000 (V&A).

narrative of the vessel and the rigid, historical authority of the institution. This installation demonstrates how Locke engages with both the physical and symbolic qualities of a space to create a narrative that challenges the confines of a celebrated institution whose history is inextricably linked to empire and exploitation.

By treating Locke's rich oeuvre as a narrative and a coherent body of work, we can derive an analytical language that extends beyond visual art. This is a crucial connection to the work of Raoul de Jong, whose writing also engages with the feeling of being 'hemmed in' by existing expectations that appear to want to keep his writing in its preassigned place. De Jong, like Locke, pushes against these constraints with the conviction that doing so will lead to a new perspective that is 'bigger than the Netherlands and Suriname.'

The Struggle for Literary Inclusion

The appointment of author Raoul de Jong to write the prestigious Bookweek Essay, a high-profile annual tradition in the Dutch literary world, was an emotional affair. In his book, *Boto Banja. Or the secret society of dancing authors*, his eponymous character confesses that he 'burst into tears' upon receiving the invitation.[20] This emotional response, De Jong explains, stemmed from a combination of joy at the opportunity and frustration with the literary establishment's treatment of his previous work, *Jaguarman*.[21]

De Jong recounts an experience that echoes that of Hew Locke: the persistent miscategorization of his work, which was presumed to be of interest only to a niche audience.[22] He reveals that 'Despite all my nominations for literary awards, *Jaguarman* landed on a shelf with books about Suriname or South America, not on one for works of literature. So readers only found my book if they were already interested in Suriname, not if they were looking for something about the human condition.'[23] He had intended the book as a 'gift', a tale of resilience and survival that offers hope for all of humanity but finds that his work is categorized and neutralized on the 'other' shelf; because, naturally, a story about Suriname could not possibly be of universal interest. The effort to constantly reposition his work became exhausting: 'after two years of attempts at always putting on a happy face, I noticed I was tired. The struggle was costing me my sense of joy. I didn't feel like convincing people anymore that I was giving them a gift. That's why I was crying.'[24]

The Bookweek Essay commission offered a chance to overcome these limitations. De Jong frames this opportunity in powerful, symbolic terms: 'And then, all of a sudden, I had a sword in my hand and a crown on my head.'[25] Like Locke, he focuses on symbols of state and power. The crown positions him as an ambassadorial figure, while the sword – his pen – becomes the tool with which he confronts the established order. This battle is not merely against an incomplete history. In relation to one of his travel companions, the American Dana, he suggests: 'I am confronted by powers that have falsified history for centuries and that have determined how Dana views the world for fifty-eight years.'[26] For De Jong the issue lies not only in the content of historical narratives but also in the very epistemological frameworks – the lenses or frames – that shape people's perceptions. By challenging these structures, De Jong effectively reverses the

traditional dynamic. He suggests that it is the Western reader who needs to be 'saved' by new stories, repositioning his work from a niche offering to a crucial, corrective intervention.

The act of representation, as symbolized by the crown and sword, is a political struggle, requiring both a factual and symbolic engagement to achieve change. While the experiences of Hew Locke and Raoul de Jong seem distinct, my approach reveals how their individual struggles against categorization and institutional 'infrastructure' are deeply related. By drawing on disparate but interconnected insights from literary, artistic and institutional critiques I construct a constellation of observations. Locke's artistic practice, with its baroque aesthetic and use of excess and abundance, provides a metaphorical and critical language for understanding De Jong's literary frustration with being 'hemmed in' by genre and national boundaries. By connecting these seemingly separate phenomena – the visual art of one artist and the literary reception of another – I argue that they are not isolated incidents but rather threads of a larger, shared struggle against the same underlying imperial and epistemological structures. This methodology allows for the emergence of new insights that are only visible when these individual observations are viewed collectively, as a single, coherent constellation, as a similar mode. This mode stretches beyond the words on the page. Role play, ritual and performative elements are an integral part of De Jong's text but are not contained by the words on the page. His performance spills in paratextual presentation and even promotion activities.

The Politics of Performance and Self-Staging

Raoul de Jong's work deliberately blurs the lines between text, paratext and performance, using visual signalling as a critical tool. This is evident on the cover of *Boto Banja*, which features a portrait by photographer Charles Fréger, known for his work on the relationship between individuals and their uniformed personas.[27] On the back cover, De Jong himself is depicted dressed up in a sailor's outfit, adopting a correspondingly characteristic pose.[28] This performative masquerading is also repeated in promotional materials, such as newspaper articles around Book Week 2023, where he adopts the classic seafaring pose.[29] This deliberate staging of the self is both a playing-of, and a playing-with authorized roles. It is a playfully subversive act – 'between kitsch and something quite serious' – a play on caricature that is also a serious performance to investigate expectation, power and identity.

Focusing on the South African context, artist and researcher Sharlene Khan argues that self-performativity, dressing up and the performing of rituals are not only artistic tools to subvert authorized knowledge, but also aim to centralize alternative narratives.[30] Khan draws on Mignolo and Vazquez's concept of 'aestheSis' to stress that alternative narratives are not just new stories but must include an alternative way of relating to the world, a different way of seeing and expressing as a way to different modes of knowing and being.[31] The act of dressing up and adopting otherness serves to destabilize rigid categories and expose the constructed nature of reality. The complexity is expressed through layering and performance 'exposing the seams of crafted facades and the rules of narrative'.[32]

Ritual and the Transnational Journey

In addition to its paratextual elements, performance and ritual are central to the text of *Boto Banja*. The short publication uses black-and-white footprints as dance steps to separate paragraphs, visually representing the book's themes. We learn that the Boto Banja is a song, a dance and a healing ritual. The author, De Jong, performs his own healing ritual through the story of the protagonist's sea voyage from the Dominican Republic to Curaçao. Despite travelling on a luxury catamaran, the crossing ends in disaster. The boat gets into serious trouble; De Jong and his two crew members are rescued by local fishermen in a homemade boat. The journey is abandoned, and De Jong spends time in the Dominican Republic with new friends before returning home.

This story serves as a vehicle to focus on the lives and work of the so-called 'dancing writers' whose work De Jong wants to highlight and whose ranks he wishes to join. These authors include Anton de Kom and Theo Comvalius – both Surinamese authors who wrote a history of Suriname – and American authors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes as well as French-Caribbean author Aimé Césaire. De Jong connects their stories across languages and nations, linked by a shared spirit of survival and self-affirmation. They all left their homes and travelled, particularly across the seas: from America and the Caribbean, to Africa, to Europe. Unlike their ancestors who were forced to travel as victims of the transatlantic slave trade, these authors journeyed by choice and on their own terms. They refused to be 'hemmed in', confined by the roles assigned to them in White society or to have their stories relegated to ethnographic collections. According to De Jong, their stories are too important for that, as they tell a universal tale of survival: 'A wondrous, epic, true-life story that was much larger than just the Netherlands and Suriname, one that told about oppression and liberation, about what's on the other side of liberation and how you, as a human being, can celebrate it.'[33] This suggests that what follows oppression and liberation is something to be celebrated by all 'as human beings.'

'A Wondrous, Epic, True-Life Story'

The secret society of dancing writers tells a 'A wondrous, epic, true-life story' that is both transnational and inclusive. De Jong fuses the wondrous and the performative when, dressed in his sailor costume, he performs a ritual to ask the Winti spirits for protection before the catamaran sets off for Curaçao. The evocation of the Afro-Surinamese gods functions as the expression of another powerful bond that ties the dancing authors together. They exemplify a shared history of enslavement, the history of the Middle Passage, survival on the plantations but equally a resistance to oppression, an alternative world vision, respect for the ancestors and the spirit of survival. De Jong describes the Winti gods as joyful, playful and 'human':

> They are similar to humans, but three metres tall. They are handsome, radiant, a little mischievous and without apology for what they are. They are not just nice and good. So we don't have to be either. They speak to us through dreams and strange coincidences. We can communicate with them through offerings, and through colour, dance and music.[34]

This description does not show ironic detachment; De Jong takes the spirits and rituals seriously. The gods are a presence, a given, they crop up, no qualification or rationalization necessary. They are the embodiment of history, of community, of resistance and survival. The gods are not about belief *per se*, they are about expressing the self and one's place in the world, in history, in connection with others. Just as dressing up is a gesture to feel connected with the past, the Winti rituals performed by De Jong are equally an act of allegiance, a cultural positioning more than a gesture of faith. The rituals foreground a different way of seeing and feeling that emerges from inherited stories and memories. The incorporation of performance and spirituality as a 'natural' form of sensing and perceiving is also a corrective gesture that complements Western rationality – embodied in the scepticism of the catamaran's third crew member Russel – and allows alternative sources of meaning-making. They are foundational forces; the way Greek and Roman gods are seen as a cradle of Western culture. What matters is their embedding in a wider cultural narrative, not as a hidden story, but out in the open to make that 'whole story' complete: De Jong points out the inequality:

> I never had to go looking to find Neptune. He came on his own to me, in high school, as part of a culture that was the cradle of our 'civilization'. To find Agwé, though, I first had to dare to believe years ago that the story that had always been told to me was not the whole story. I unravelled a worldwide web of dancing writers, and only then did I come to understand there were gods who exist in my colour, too.[35]

Yet this is more than a corrective gesture, another version to redress the balance. It is after all a 'a wondrous, epic, true-life story.' The combination of adjectives creates an ambiguity that challenges traditional distinctions between fiction and reality, between historical fact and a more mythic, allegorical truth. Instead of treating the knowledge and narratives as mere folklore or superstition, De Jong frames them as a valid and vital way of knowing. This act of centring spiritual and ancestral memory is not simply a literary device; it is an epistemological move. It challenges the traditional Western rational analysis by presenting an alternative framework where historical truth is also embodied in ritual, storytelling and spiritual connection. And this comes together in the dance of the boat, the boto banja.

The Dance

Theo Comvalius, one of De Jong's dancing authors, in a 1935 essay, stresses the historic and identitarian importance of the song and dance as they were for many centuries, 'the only [possible] expression of the soul of the people without rights'.[36] The performance itself is rich with symbolism. Men dress as sailors, and a boat holds dolls – a white doll surrounded by Black dolls, alongside bottles of alcohol and flowers. The Black dolls symbolize the ancestors who survived the Middle Passage. De Jong reinterprets this survival not as mere endurance but as a conscious act of resistance, noting that these were individuals who 'did not swallow their tongues on the way, who did not jump off the ship and who did not die of grief.'[37] This reframing shifts the narrative from one of victimhood to one of agency and survival. De Jong cites anthropologist Trudi Martinus-Guda on the healing power of the Banja: '[We] symbolise [. . .] when we play such a banya, the power of unity, of reunification.

So that you can be filled with that power. And your inner self can recover.'[38] The Boto Banja is above all a healing act, and a coming together of people who, despite being geographically dispersed – 'Surinamese, Jamaicans, Americans and Martinicans' – are connected by the shared history of their ancestors arriving on the 'same ships.'[39] This act of restoration, represents a profound shift from a focus on suffering and subjugation to one of strength and survival. For De Jong, the significance of this act extends beyond the descendants of enslaved peoples, offering a universal lesson in resilience for all of humanity. This 'bigger story' culminates in the idea that humanity itself is boundless, as De Jong suggests: 'We are everything, as vast as the universe itself.'[40]

Conclusion: A Poetics of Unravelling and Unbinding

The works of artists Hew Locke and Raoul de Jong share a profound commitment to an alternative mode of thinking and creating. They do not merely critique historical narratives, rather they actively embody a logic that subverts the traditional Western separation of past and present, of reality and myth. Their art flirts with kitsch and sentimentality, posing a direct and deliberate challenge to the way Western society has traditionally produced and organized knowledge. This shared artistic method serves as a powerful corrective gesture against the imperial ways of thinking that are often built into the very foundations of our modern institutions, such as museums, universities and publishing houses, while offering a model for the fundamental, structural change that Wayne Modest argues is essential for decolonizing institutional frameworks. Both Locke and De Jong confront and deconstruct these established frameworks, freeing their narratives from confining structures. Locke's practice, through baroque aesthetic and the theatricality of excess, recontextualizes colonial symbols to expose the brutal histories they conceal. A poignant example is his transformation of Blake's harrowing image of an enslaved man into gold, a gesture that draws a direct line between the opulent decorations of stately homes and the brutal reality of slavery that funded them. This visual strategy resonates in De Jong's literary one: a resistance to being 'hemmed in' by genre, or reader expectations. The persistent miscategorization of De Jong's work, which was relegated to a niche shelf for books about Suriname rather than being recognized as literature about the human condition, highlights the expectations and constraints that Locke critiques.

Ultimately, the power of their work lies in its transformative potential. It is not a passive reflection on the past, but a powerful act of re-creation. By foregrounding the knowledge held within ancestral memories, spiritual rituals and lived experience, these artists offer a new framework for understanding our past and present. Their work does not critique colonialism but also builds new connections and narratives that acknowledge our interconnected, tangled, layered history. Their work is not just about deconstruction; it is about building a new, more inclusive and sophisticated language of human relations, offering a path for all of us to connect with the 'wondrous, epic, true-life story' of humanity, beyond the confines of a single, monolithic perspective. In doing so, they not only preserve the past but also actively shape a more whole and complete future, moving beyond deconstruction towards the fundamental structural change required to forge a new language of relation.

Notes

1. For example, the large-scale NIOD research program titled "Independence, Decolonization, Violence and War in Indonesia 1945–1950" (IDVWI), a joint research programme of the KITLV, the NIMH and the NIOD Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies. This program generated twelve book publications with Amsterdam University Press, 2022 (Open Access). The report that led to PM Mark Rutte's official apology was by the Slavery History Dialogue Group Advisory Board, *Chains of the Past*.
2. Huffelen, "Brief vervolgtraject excuses slavernijverleden." An initial fund of 200 million Euros was attached to the apology. During the Commemoration Year (1 July 2023 to 1 July 2024), two hundred projects were supported in the Netherlands and the Caribbean. These ranged from visual and performing arts workshops and literature events to podcasts, dialogues, safe space sessions. In a parliamentary letter dated 22 April 2024 it reads: "[T]he Commemoration Year has set a movement in motion, with widespread attention and recognition for, and dialogue and knowledge-building about the history of slavery. And now that this momentum is here, we are working together to build a structural dialogue about our shared history and to increase knowledge and awareness in society, to commemorate together and to combat the effects of the history of slavery."
3. Urwin et al., *Ontketend perspectief*, 10; and Fatah-Black and De Koning, *Ooggetuigen*, 17.
4. Van Bijnen et al., *The Future of Dutch Colonial Past*, 16–25.
5. Ibid., 18.
6. For an informative article on the archive debate, see Breakell, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive."
7. Andrews, *Nobody Can Give You Freedom*, 13.
8. Ibid., 14.
9. Ibid., 14. Andrews further critiques the traditional academic demand for a separation of "thought. . .from action," noting that success within the system is often predicated on an ability to "engage with the Whiteness of academia." This insular approach, he contends, often discourages meaningful engagement with a broader public.
10. Locke, "Hew Locke: Raw Materials 27," a17.
11. See, for example, Driver, What Have We Here? 168–72.
12. Locke et al., what have we here, 14.
13. "at home: Artists in Conversation." See also Mercer, "Postcolonial Baroque," 1–25.
14. Abrahams, "Glitter Bug," 58.
15. See also Hew Locke, "How do you want me?" a series of portraits in which Locke dresses up with – or buries himself under – a wide range of colourful trinkets and objects to explore the working of power and hierarchy in a postcolonial, transnational context.
16. Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition*, 105.
17. Whyte, "A World Before the World we Know."
18. Adrienne Childs, Driskell Prize Lecture: Black Baroque. I use Baroque, with capital B, to refer to the historical cultural movement and baroque to refer to the aesthetic practice. It strikes me that Black Baroque is playing with this distinction too, with the power of capitalization.
19. Willis, "A Black Baroque Interview."
20. De Jong, *Boto Banja*. An English edition of *Boto Banja* (trans. John Eyck) is in preparation and scheduled to appear in early 2026. For this rewrite, De Jong collaborates with John Eyck. *Boto Banja* was part of a literary translation project at the University of Sheffield in December 2024.
21. An excerpt of *Jaguarman* (translation John Eyck) including the drawings by De Jong is included in this special issue. *Jaguarman* will be available in English in January 2026. I would like to thank John Eyck for his generous collaboration.
22. "at home: Artists in Conversation." Locke phrases his sidelining when he is asked about *Hemmed in Two* over two decades later, he confirms that the work was partly an act of resistance to the way he as an artist and his work was received. The web of

expectations and associations in which Locke's work was caught, cannot be dissociated from a desire to distinguish between self and other. Locke states: "At this point in time, I was having problems with the way people were seeing my work. I would make work and people would say, 'Oh what festival are you making this for?' Or, 'Have you been to Haiti?' [. . .] I was seen as a sort of neo folk artist. So, what I realized, like a lot of British artists of colour, sometimes is that you end up having to educate your audience [. . .] basically the work I made was viewed and being exported from somewhere else, it wasn't being viewed as British art at all. I was other, put them to one side, with them people."

23. De Jong, *Boto Banja*, 8–9.
24. Ibid., 12.
25. Ibid., 10. "toen kreeg ik plotseling een zwaard in mijn handen en een kroon op mijn hoofd."
26. Ibid., 36. "Ik heb machten tegenover me die de geschiedenis eeuwenlang hebben vervalst en die achtenvijftig jaar lang hebben bepaald hoe Dana naar de wereld kijkt."
27. The cover is taken from Fréger's 2011–2013 series *Outremer* for which he portrayed mainly military personnel in French overseas territories. https://www.charlesfreger.com/portfolio/outremer/.
28. The sailor costume itself is of course a barely coded signal for homosexuality and an expression of a shared identity and aesthetic sensibility. See Meecham, "Reconfiguring the Shipping News."
29. See for example the image by Shody Careman to accompany Van Houwelingen "De eerlijke vinder."
30. Khan, *Postcolonial Masquerading*, 30–33.
31. Mignolo and Vazquez, "Decolonial AestheSis." Mignolo and Vazquez blame Western aestheTics for playing a central role in "configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices, or, more precisely, other forms of aestheSis, of sensing and perceiving."
32. Tseëlon, *Masquerade and Identities*, 11–12.
33. De Jong, *Boto Banja*, 15. "Een wonderlijk, episch, waargebeurd verhaal dat veel groter was dan alleen Nederland en Suriname, dat ging over onderdrukking en bevrijding, over wat er aan de andere kant van bevrijding ligt en hoe je dat, als mens, kunt vieren."
34. Ibid., 21. "Ze lijken op mensen, maar dan drie meter lang. Ze zijn knap, stralend, een beetje ondeugend en zonder excuses voor wat ze zijn. Ze zijn niet alleen aardig en goed. Dus dat hoeven wij ook niet te zijn. Ze spreken tot ons via dromen en vreemde toevalligheden. Wij kunnen met hen communiceren via offers, en via kleur, dans en muziek."
35. Ibid., 23. "Ik heb nooit hoeven te zoeken om Neptunus te vinden. Hij kwam vanzelf naar me toe, op de middelbare school, als onderdeel van een cultuur die de bakermat was van onze beschaving. Om Agwe te vinden moest ik jaren geleden eerst gaan geloven dat het verhaal dat me altijd verteld was niet het hele verhaal was. Ik ontrafelde een wereldwijd web aan dansende schrijvers en pas toen begreep ik dat er ook goden in mijn kleur bestaan."
36. Comvalius, "Het Surinaamsch negerlied," 214. "eenige uiting van den zielstoestand der rechtelooze wezens." Comvalius spent time and effort in making the Banja a prestigious song in the eyes of the "educated European." He layers on the poetic prestige markers when he suggests that the Banja contains "metaphor, metonymy, but also often personification and synecdoche."
37. De Jong, *Boto Banja*, 18. "De voorouders die onderweg hun tong niet hebben ingeslikt, die niet van het schip zijn gesprongen en die niet zijn gestorven van verdriet."
38. Ibid. [We] symboliseren [. . .] wanneer we zo'n banya spelen de kracht van eenheid, van hereniging. Zodat je met die kracht vervuld kunt worden. En je innerlijk zich kan herstellen."
39. Ibid., 19. "De wereld noemde ze Surinamers, Jamaicanen, Amerikanen en Martinikanen maar hun voorouders waren op dezelfde schepen in de "nieuwe wereld' gearriveerd."
40. Ibid., 59. "Wij zijn alles, zo groot als het universum zelf."

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