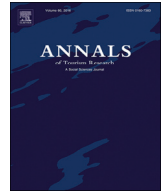




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Research Note

The embodied absence of the past: Slavery heritage and the transformative memory work of tourism



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This tour was truly amazing. I was born and raised in the Netherlands and attended Dutch schools. I visit Amsterdam often, I had no idea that the city had so many hidden historical secrets. This part of the Dutch history was not given when I was in school.

[(TripAdvisor Review comment on the Black Heritage Amsterdam Tours, June 2014)]

Slavery heritage tourism narratives can be transformative at both individual and societal level by activating plural public memories. Yet, since Bruner's (1996) work on slavery heritage tourism, the lack of consistent engagement with key concepts such as collective memory has meant a failure to illuminate the cultural and political work of tourism in societal debates. Empirically, research on slavery heritage tourism has accounted for themes such as visitor typologies, motivations and experiences, and the marketing and management of such sites in Africa (Araujo, 2010; Teye & Timothy, 2004; Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015a), on the plantations of America (Buzinde & Santos, 2009; Small, 2013), the Caribbean (Best, 2017; Jordan & Jolliffe, 2013) and across European cases (Beech, 2001; Casbeard, 2010; Oostindie, 2005). These studies have predominantly focused on presences – the evident material traces that are visible, tangible, observable and measurable (Meier et al., 2013). Yet what is thereby absent are embodied, contested and negotiated experiences through tourism practices and performances. The research problematique

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is: i) how do we study the absent-presence of the (im)material traces of slavery heritage in European cities?, ii) how does tourism perform cultural and political work in rendering that which is absent present in concrete places, people and relations?, and iii) how do we account for the memory-making and activation work of tourism in relation to slavery and colonial heritage? I propose the concept of the embodied absence of the past as a heuristic framework to address these questions by showing how tourism illuminates the (im)material traces of slavery heritage in European cities.

Despite the growing presence of people of African-descent in Europe, their stories, heritage and narratives are often absent in national discourses of belonging and in (heritage) tourism products. In forging the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 2006; Smith, 2006) of the European nation-state, stories of slavery, colonialism and the long-standing presence of Africans on European soil remain largely absent. I conceptualise this as the *embodied absence of the past* - the awareness of the physical presence yet narrative absence of the shared history, heritage and role of African-descent people in European societies. This collective amnesia, I argue, is challenged and activated through tourism encounters of slavery and colonial traces which trigger an evocation and re-construction of personal and collective memories.

The oft neglected tourism-memory nexus (Marschall, 2012) highlights the intersection of tourism and memory in slavery heritage tourism, particularly in European cities (Hondius, 2014; Oostindie, 2009). Here, memories of African-descent peoples fill the absence with life by connecting and drawing sites, traces and artefacts into present discussion often through a process of commodification to attract tourists. This meshing of their often complementary narratives then coalesce into the collective memory of the embodied absence of the past. This constructive engagement with the past heeds the call of Yankholmes and McKercher (2015b) for rethinking slavery heritage tourism not through a dark thana-tourism theme but as dissonant heritage. This embodied absence of the past offers a lens to understand the transformative role of tourism in wider societal debates on slavery heritage and can capture the intricate subtleties of slavery heritage tourism practices and performances which are often instigated by African-descent people. Since absence and presence are corporeal, socially constructed and co-constituted (Frers, 2013), they offer a productive tension "expressed through a combination of representational spaces and material forms as well as embodied practices and emotional performances" (Maddrell, 2013, p. 517). Tourism encounters exemplify these tensions given how the performance between tour guides and tourists (re)activates and (re)creates memoryscapes.

Tourism can be an oppressive strategy fuelling colonising approaches against socially excluded and marginalised groups (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015), but it can at the same time be a transformative worldmaking force (Hollinshead et al., 2009). Ormond and Vietti (2021) argue that both processes are accomplished through what they call "tools of tourism" - guided tours, guidebooks and tourism maps. These tools which have traditionally facilitated collective amnesia on slavery heritage in Europe are increasingly being appropriated to perform the cultural and political work of challenging, subverting and resisting authorised heritage discourse by counter-mapping dissonant heritage (Cheng et al., 2010). In a number of European cities, transformative narratives on guided tours currently join up other times, places, peoples and societal histories that tend to be

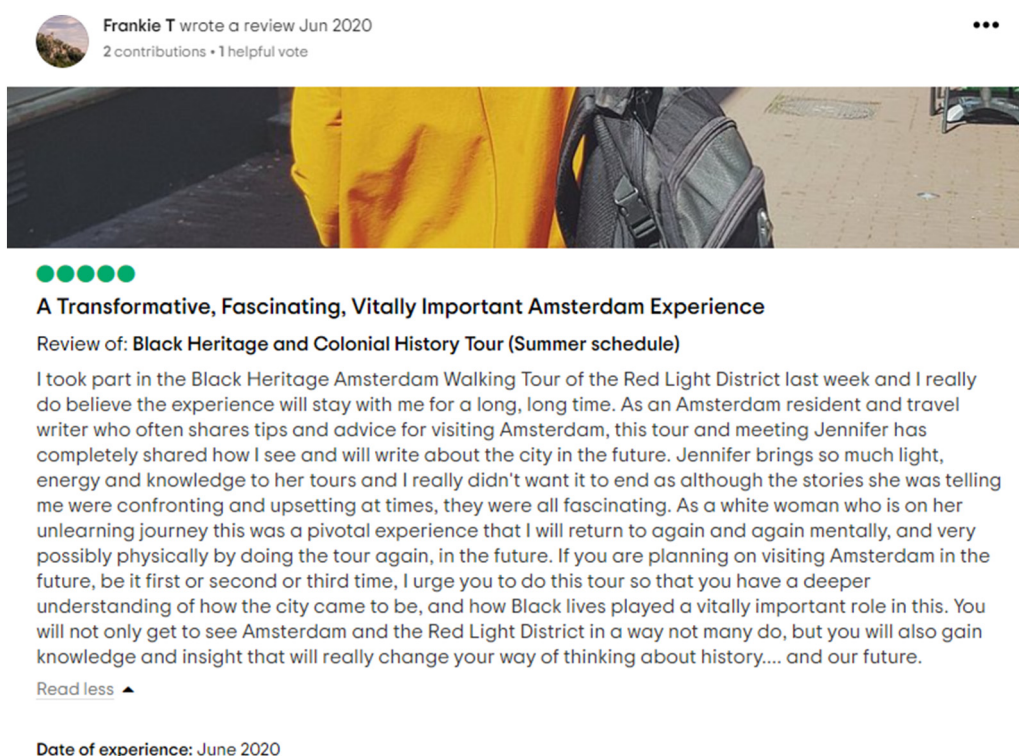


Fig. 1. Screen shot of a 2020 TripAdvisor Review of the Black Heritage Amsterdam Tour.

marginalised (Boukhris, 2017). Examples include Black Heritage Amsterdam Tours, the African Tour in Lisbon, the Le Paris Noir Tour and the Black Brussels Tours.

The Black Heritage Amsterdam Tours offers an illustrative example. This tour, established in 2013 by an Afro-Suriname descent person born in the United States, explores Amsterdam to make visible the 'hidden histories' of the African diaspora, slavery and the colonial history of the Netherlands from the 17th-century onward, as seen in the national landmarks, architecture, canal houses and in museums. It is a guided walking- and boat-based sightseeing tour underpinned by two published guidebooks – Netherlands Slavery Heritage Guide (Hondius, Stam, et al., 2019) and Amsterdam Slavery Heritage Guide (Hondius, Jouwe, et al., 2019). Drawing on my research on eight tours so far, I (a Ghanaian man with Dutch citizenship) can conclude that this tour expressly undertakes the memory work of counter-mapping dissonant heritage (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996) by successfully empowering marginalised-absent voices. Participants acknowledge the tour as triggering personal and collective memory by firmly fixing tourist gazes on the visual traces and narratives of slavery and colonial heritage in the cityscape that have been rendered invisible through existing dominant authorised heritage discourse on the past. This embodied absence of the past is accomplished through connecting sites in Amsterdam (Europe) to other times and events in Elmina (Africa), in Suriname (South America) and to more contemporary societal issues (Adu-Ampong, 2021; see opening vignette and Figs. 1–3).

The embodied absence of the past thus pays attention to the practices and performances of memory making through tours such as the Black Heritage Amsterdam Tour. It helps us to understand how individual and collective memories are (re)activated as tourist sites are transformed into *lieux de mémoire* [sites of memory] (Nora, 1989). Another contribution lies in offering a heightened sense of slavery heritage traces in the present cityscape thereby opening up discursive spaces for counter-narratives on current culture, politics and plurality of remembrance, memorialisation and commemoration. The founder of the Amsterdam tour embodies this memory-making and circulation process as she is invited as a speaker on diverse public panels on the themes emerging from the tour.

The increasing appropriation of tourism tools to challenge, subvert and resist authorised heritage discourse shows that dominant (tourism) tools can be used to dismantle 'the master's house' (Lorde, 1984) of collective amnesia. The concept of the embodied absence of the past therefore opens up new research lines in the geographies of slavery heritage tourism by highlighting how the spatial, embodied and material encounters in slavery heritage tourism can transform individual and



Dvrede wrote a review Sep 2018

Amsterdam, The Netherlands • 1 contribution • 1 helpful vote



Amazing experience

Review of: Black Heritage and Colonial History Tour (Summer schedule)

What I experienced during the tour was astonishing. I was born and raised in Holland. My parents taught us everything they know about their Suriname/marron history, traditions and culture. Attending school as a young girl and later woman you get to learn everything about the golden age, east and west india companies, and the dutch masters. Hardly anything is taught about the slavery, slavetrade and the atrocities that our ancestors went through.

During the tour I saw with my own eyes the traces that have been left in our capitol Amsterdam, they are all over the city. Stories of slaves and black people working and living in amsterdam. Families that reveal their wealth, throughout the city. Stories left untold in art in our "grand rijksmuseum". The canals with the large houses worth millions and their history, labor done by slaves, the connection of holland with other places in the world (indonesia, new york, surinam etc.) I will never look at Amsterdam the same way again. A beautiful city with a piece of dark history.

Thank you to our tourguide Jennifer Tosch. Your passion, knowledge and excitement for your work is impeccable. Our group was amazing, people from the UK and the states joined the tour! You will not be disappointed. Its a must, especially if you live in Holland. I suggest you take the combination tour (boat, walking, museum) to get a full picture of the black heritage. This is our world history, our heritage , right in front of us. It is our duty to know about these things and share it with our generation and the next, our children.

[Read less](#) ▲

Date of experience: September 2018

Trip type: Traveled as a couple

Fig. 2. Screen shot of a 2018 TripAdvisor Review of the Black Heritage Amsterdam Tour.



ottariides wrote a review Jan 2017

Amsterdam, The Netherlands • 1 contribution • 1 helpful vote



Much, much more than canal bridges and clog facts.

Review of: **Black Heritage and Colonial History Tour (Summer schedule)**

This tour was a game changer. I've lived in Amsterdam for 11 years but wow did I learn a lot about ways to look at the visual clues of the city. The tour pointed out and decoded signs of Black involvement in the establishment of the city and Dutch wealth and identity, issues which are politically, culturally, socially so important to engage with. Jennifer's amazing storytelling skill and humour makes this charged subject matter very accessible. This is a must see for people interested in more than tit bits about bridge numbers and clogs, who look for a critical engagement with the city's history. We started on foot, moving through the red light, onto a boat and ended up walking through the Rijksmuseum looking at a careful selection of paintings and dioramas which continued the questions and stories begun in the first part of the tour. At each stage the information was delivered with context, building up connections and stories along the way. Jennifer encouraged questions and conversation from everyone, and she seriously knows her material. This tour is well planned, researched and very special. Don't miss out.

[Read less](#) ▲

Date of experience: January 2017

Trip type: Traveled with friends

Fig. 3. Screen shot of a 2017 TripAdvisor Review of the Black Heritage Amsterdam Tour.

collective memories by crystallising the multiple interconnected histories held in certain sites. As a Ghanaian man married to a Dutch woman with children growing up with multiple heritages, the concept of the embodied absence of the past has personal resonance. The more counter-narrative discursive spaces opened up tourism's transformative potential emerges, the better for improving cultural understanding of transnational heritage, memory and belonging.

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CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emmanuel Akwasi Adu-Ampong: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2023.103590>.

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