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The spatial narratives and representation of slavery and colonial heritage on guided tours in Amsterdam

Emmanuel Akwasi Adu-Ampong^{a,b} and Simone Berg^a

^aCultural Geography Chair Group, Wageningen University and Research, Wageningen, The Netherlands; ^bSchool of Tourism and Hospitality Management, College of Business and Economics, University of Johannesburg, Johannesburg, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Amidst increasing societal discussion on slavery and colonial heritage, tourism has emerged as a potential avenue to address such concerns. Yet, tourism and tour guiding suffers from a paradox. On the one hand, tourism narratives can form a part of an oppressive strategy in colonial approaches against socially excluded and marginalised groups while on the other hand, tourism can offer counter-narratives with progressive potential in transforming mindsets and enlarging perspectives. This article explores these conceptual issues in the context of guided city tours in Amsterdam utilising a qualitative case study design involving participant observation and interviews. We identify the spatial narratives tour guides use to (re)present slavery and colonial heritage, and the factors shaping these narratives. We make two main contributions to the literature. Firstly, we identify how the need for positive atmosphere and good vibes are central to the extent to which tour guides are willing to engage tourists with slavery and colonial narratives in the city. Secondly, we offer a spatial mapping of slavery and colonial heritage narratives offered on tours through Amsterdam. Our study therefore contributes to evidencing how tourism, and tour guides hold transformative potential in dealing with slavery and heritage in an European urban setting.

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Introduction

Tourism is a potential worldmaking force and tour guides in particular play a key role in shaping the socio-cultural imaginary of people, places and events. Within guided tours, both the narrative and the performance of tour guides have a significant influence on the creation of meaningful experiences for tourists. However, tourism and tour guiding suffer from a paradox and their world-making potential is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, tourism is seen as a significant element in oppressive strategy in colonial approaches against socially excluded and marginalised groups (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). On the other hand, tourism has long been recognised for the progressive potential in transforming mindsets and enlarging perspectives (Hollinshead et al., 2009; Reisinger, 2013; Sheldon, 2020). Thus while tourism and tour guiding has the potential to make visible ignored aspects of the world, they can also be used to actively erase the histories and heritage of other people, times and places through narrative absences and caricatured imaginaries. This

CONTACT Emmanuel Akwasi Adu-Ampong  emmanuel.adu-ampong@wur.nl

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paradox is particularly relevant in the context of the spatial representation of slavery and colonial heritage within tourism.

A large number of studies in the extant literature has focused on slavery and colonial heritage tourism in formerly colonised spaces of Africa (Araujo, 2010; Teye & Timothy, 2004; Yankholmes & McKercher, 2015), settler colonies of American plantations (Alderman et al., 2016; Buzinde & Santos, 2009; Small, 2013) and in the Caribbean (Best, 2017; Jordan & Jolliffe, 2013). Relatively few studies have focused on the colonising spaces of Europe (Beech, 2001; Casbeard, 2010) although this is changing with recent emerging work such as Boukhris (2017), Adu-Ampong (2023) and Knox (2024). Amidst increasing societal discussion about dealing with the slavery and colonial heritage in European countries, there is a need for more research on the role played by tourism in this worldmaking process. This explorative study uses the case of tours in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, to identify how slavery and colonial heritage is represented by tour guides and the factors that shape these narratives.

We make two main contributions to the literature. Firstly, we identify how the need for positive atmosphere and good vibes influences the extent to which tour guides are willing to engage tourists with slavery and colonial narratives in the city. Secondly, we offer a spatial mapping of slavery and colonial heritage narratives offered on tours through Amsterdam. Our study therefore contributes to evidencing how tourism, and tour guides hold transformative potential in dealing with slavery and heritage in a European urban setting. In the sections that follow, we first review the literature on slavery and colonial heritage tourism before moving on to the research methods. Next we present the key findings followed by a discussion section and then we draw some conclusions.

Tour guides, spatial narratives and the representation of slavery and colonial heritage

The (re)presentation of heritage sites through tourism is an important factor in shaping tourist experience and satisfaction. Tour guides play a major role in how heritage is presented and what tourists learn. Outside of visitor centres and museums, guided walking tours and tour guides in particular are the most significant mechanism of cultural education for heritage (Mak et al., 2011). Tour guides are a significant influence in shaping tourists' visit from being just a sightseeing tour to becoming a memorable experience (Hansen & Mossberg, 2017). This is done through the use of their communication and service skills and their knowledge and interpretation of a destination's sites and local culture (Ap & Wong, 2001). Tour guides have a choice in which narratives to (not) tell, which locations in the city to (not) show and which specific historical events to (not) recount at which stop and to which depth (Ababneh, 2017). The choices made by tour guides are influenced by several factors such as: the official company position or national level governmental policies (Long & Reeves, 2009); the guides' own sense of identity and connection to the heritage in question (Lim & Aylett, 2007); the composition and perceived interests of the tourists (Io & Hallo, 2012; Wong, 2013) and; the desire to entertain and educate tourists (Potter, 2016). While a combination of these factors is always at play, the need to create a positive atmosphere for tourist satisfaction tends to an overarching consideration for tour guides (Hansen & Mossberg, 2017).

Tourism at heritage sites can therefore be prone to historical errors when a positive atmosphere for tourist satisfaction becomes the ultimate goal. Particularly in the context of slavery and colonial heritage, the quest for a positive atmosphere means glossing over themes that confront visitors with uncomfortable aspects of the past. This is because atmosphere, as an affective feeling of how we experience a space or place, is ephemeral. Consequently, tourism's (re)presentation of slavery and colonial heritage is often fraught with tensions and contradictions (Buzinde & Santos, 2009; Small, 2013). Tour guides play an important role in sustaining and/or subverting tourism's narratives that exclude and/or gloss over aspects of enslavement and colonialism (Alderman et al., 2016; Hanna, 2016; Potter, 2016).

As Gandy (2017, p. 357) explains, ‘atmospheres are both experienced and created: they encompass extant features of emotional and material life as well as its staging or manipulation.’ In the context of such staging, Zhang and Pearce (2016) have shown how guides use jokes to control the atmosphere of a tour and hence stories that do not easily lend themselves to humour can be glossed over. Thus in staging certain narratives in a given space, tour guides make a choice as to which atmosphere to create and can therefore choose (not) to confront visitors with elements of the past that can challenge dominant perceptions of the spatial narratives.

Spatial narratives, following the work of Azaryahu and Foote (2008) and Ryan et al. (2016), have come to be seen as how space becomes a narrative medium for the (re)telling of historical events across time. Applying this idea of spatial narratives, Hanna (2016) and Hanna et al. (2019) have detailed the selective process through which the routes, stories and museum exhibits of guided tours are spatially arranged in the context of former slave plantations in the American South. Insights from these studies calls for paying attention to the when, where and how tour guides construct narratives about the past in a given space and the experiences of visitors thereof. The construction of spatial narratives according to Azaryahu and Foote (2008, pp. 183–184) tend to follow strategies based on the spatial and temporal scale of specific events: (1) narratives positioned at single points or places; (2) narratives arranged as linear or sequential paths, routes or trails; (3) narratives depicting complex spatial and temporal sequences over large areas or spanning long time periods and; (4) hybrid narrative strategies using combinations of the previous types. In this process, tour guides and site managers make choices as to how to spatially arrange tour routes, the stories to (not) tell at which sites and how to create an overall affective experience for visitors. Thus, irrespective of the strategy adopted, the spatial narratives need to be seen as selective elements that are used to create a given atmosphere for visitor experience – either reinforcing or contesting dominant narratives.

Guided walking tours and tour guides are therefore important ways of evoking affective responses to spatial narratives as they integrate stories with the material landscapes to activate the cultural memories that are often rendered invisible (Casbeard, 2010; Foote & Azaryahu, 2007; Knox, 2024). This process has been conceptualised by Adu-Ampong (2023, p. 2) as the *embodied absence of the past* which he defines as

... the awareness of the physical presence yet narrative absence of the shared history, heritage and role of African-descent people in European societies ... [which] is challenged and activated through tourism encounters of slavery and colonial traces which trigger an evocation and reconstruction of personal and collective memories.

The idea of the embodied absence of the past highlights how tourism, and tour guides hold transformative potential in dealing with slavery and heritage either by glossing over these or rendering them visible for visitors. This is in part accomplished through what Ormond and Vietti (2022) calls the ‘tools of tourism’ – guided tours, guidebooks and tourism maps – that facilitate opening discursive space for the difficult questions of the absences and presences of the (re)presentation of slavery and colonial heritage in European urban tours. These tools of tourism which are the basis for generating the spatial narratives are available in all forms of tours. Yet, studies in this area have tended to focus on specialised tours which are explicitly focused on counter-mapping and counter spatial narratives (Adu-Ampong, 2023; Boukhris, 2017; Casbeard, 2010; Knox, 2024). For instance, Adu-Ampong (2023) focused on the Black Amsterdam Heritage Tour (BHAT) which has the expressed goal of counter-mapping and counter-narratives that make visible the ‘hidden histories’ of the African diaspora, slavery and colonial history of the Netherlands (Adu-Ampong, 2023). Boukhris (2017) also argues that the establishment of the specialised Le Paris Noir tour was because the traditional production of tourism narratives in Paris have made invisible the slavery and colonial heritage of the city and in France as a whole. Yet the question remains as to what extent this embodied absence of the past and counter-narratives are present on general city guided tours.

In the context of increasing memory politics and societal discussion about dealing with the slavery and colonial heritage in European countries, there is need for more research on the role played

by tourism. The present study focuses on exploring how tour guides on general city tours of Amsterdam (re)present the spatial narratives of slavery and colonial heritage of the city.

Case study and methods

The choice of Amsterdam, the Netherlands as a case study is based on a lacuna in existing work that are predominantly focused on slavery and colonial heritage representation in tours in former colonised country destinations and those on former plantations in the Americas. Relatively few studies have focused on the spatial narratives of general city tours in the colonising spaces of Europe. In the Netherlands, the slavery and colonial past was for a long time kept outside of national historiography (Nimako, 2012; Wekker, 2016). The seventeenth century in particular is accorded a pride of place and seen as one of the most important moments in Dutch historiography. This period is seen as one where Dutch trade, science and arts propelled it to the summit of the global economy of that time and has come to be known as the 'Golden Age'. Much of the narrative on this period has focused on the 'miraculous' story of how a 'small and relatively remote country as the young Republic should nevertheless have been so advanced politically, economically and culturally' (Prak, 2005: 2, quoting Huizinga). Increasingly dissenting voices have emerged to show how this 'miracle' of the Dutch 'Golden Age' was built on the exploitation of other people, land and resources through slavery and brutal colonialisation. This has created dissonance around the term amidst ongoing public debates in reckoning with the past. In this context, this study sought to explore the spatial narratives about slavery and colonial heritage, particularly in the seventeenth century, (re)presented by tour guides in Amsterdam.

It is in the past 10 years that the urgent calls to address this past have received broad societal acknowledgement with increased societal discussion on the topic (Adu-Ampong, 2023). There have been three levels of official apologies on this past: the Mayor of Amsterdam on 1 July 2021, the Dutch Prime Minister in 19 December 2022 and on 1 July 2023 the Dutch King offered his apologies on behalf of the Royal Family for their role in the slavery and colonial past. Therefore by focusing on Amsterdam as a capital of a former colonising country, we seek to make a distinct contribution to the literature. We offer a baseline of the current spatial narratives offered on general guided tours in the context of changing societal discussion on the slavery and colonial past. Future research would then be able to trace how tour narratives adapt to include new societal discussions.

Underlined by an exploratory interpretivist approach, this study utilises a qualitative case study design to explore the representation of slavery and colonial heritage by tour guides in city tours of Amsterdam. By adopting an interpretivist approach the observational focus was on the behaviour of tour guides in their work setting, how they interact with the tourists and the narrative they use in engaging with the sites on their tour. The study does not only focus on the narratives presented on the tours, but also on the meaning behind those stories and the tour guides' own interpretations and understandings (Mason, 2002). Data collection was conducted by the second author over a period of six weeks between December, 2022 and January 2023. The main data collection methods utilised were participant observation of tours and semi-structured interviews with tour guides. The selection of which tours to study was based on the following criteria: (i) the tours are general city tours about Amsterdam, (ii) the tours are guided tours, (iii) half of the selected tours are free tours and the other half are paid tours, (iv) both walking tours and canal boat tours are selected within the paid tours category. These criteria ensured a broad selection of tours that reflects the different types of general tours offered in Amsterdam.

After approaching a number of tours that fit the selection criteria, a total of eight guided tour(s) (guides) agreed to participant observation. Consent for observation and recording of the tour guide narratives was secured at the start of each tour. During the tour, the tour guide has been observed in their natural working environment with attention to the tour guides' narratives, the meaning behind the narratives and what shapes these narratives. Furthermore, the interaction between the tour guide and the tourists was also a point of attention, such as the questions asked by the tourists. While attending the tours, the route of the tour and stops where the guides presented their stories were mapped out with a special interest and focus on the locations and narratives connected to

Table 1. Overview of participant observed tours.

	Type of tour	Free/Paid	Duration of the tour	Origin of the guide
Tour 1	‘Free walking tour’	Free (Tip-based)	2 hours	Dutch
Tour 2	‘Free walking tour’	Free (Tip-based)	2.5 hours	Italian
Tour 3	‘Free walking tour’	Free (Tip-based)	2 hours	Canadian
Tour 4	‘Free walking tour’	Free (Tip-based)	2 hours	Dutch
Tour 5	‘Walking tour’	Paid	2 hours	Dutch
Tour 6	‘Walking tour’	Paid	2.5 hours	Canary Islands
Tour 7	‘Canal cruise’	Paid	1 hour	Portuguese
Tour 8	‘Canal cruise’	Paid	1 hour	Irish

the so-called Golden Age. Observational notes were taken during the tour, which were expanded and detailed at the end of each tour. The tour guide narratives at each stop were recorded and transcribed to form the basis for data analysis (Table 1).

While all tour guides were happy to give consent for the participant observation of their tours, not all of them were willing to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Consequently, in the end, five tour guide interviews have been conducted for this explorative study. Semi-structured interviews has been chosen as this method allows the researcher to listen to the participant, adapt the interview questions and ask follow-up questions that are based on the specific context and information shared by the participant (Klandermans & Staggenborg, 2002). The interviews with tour guides were conducted either on the boat or in a nearby cafe immediately after a guided tour. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed, and on average lasted for 30 minutes. As part of the informed consent process, it was agreed to secure the anonymity of tour guides, the tour companies they work for and the names of the specific tours. Therefore pseudonyms have been used in reporting the research findings. The table below gives a quick snapshot of the tour guides interviewed Table 2.

Data analysis entailed an iterative process in which an inductive coding approach has been chosen in line with the explorative nature of this research. Data consisted of the fully transcribed interviews, participant observation notes and recordings of tour guide narratives on tour. The interview transcripts were analysed with the use of ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis software through a process of open, axial and selective coding (Boeije, 2010). During coding the transcripts were read several times to identify and annotate important statements in relation to the research questions. After these coding process, the transcripts were re-read to ensure that codes reflect the data and that all

Table 2. Overview of interviewed tour guides.

Tour Guide	Snapshot biography
Tim (Red tour)	Tim is a Dutch young male in his late twenties who is originally from Leiden but has been living in Amsterdam for 10 years. He has been working as a guide in Amsterdam for about 7 years, first guiding cycling tours and now guiding ‘free walking tours’
Tess (Blue tour)	Tess is a Dutch young female in her late twenties who lives in Beverwijk – a small city close to Amsterdam. She has been working as a tour guide for only 9 months at the time of the interview
Hannah (Pink tour)	Hannah is a Portuguese female in her thirties who has been living in Amsterdam for the past 7 years. She has been working as a guide for 5 years
Lucy (Brown tour)	Lucy is an Irish female in her early twenties who has been living in Amsterdam for 1.5 years now and for just as long has been working as a guide
Max (Green tour)	Max is a Dutch male in his late thirties who has been living in Amsterdam for his whole life. He has been working as a guide for two years now

relevant fragments have been picked up through the coding process. Furthermore, a thematic analysis was also carried out on the notes from participant observation, notes on the tour routes, the stops involved on the route and a summary of tour guide narratives at each stop. A number of reoccurring themes emerged from this process and the flexibility of the thematic analysis enabled patterns within the data to be analysed and interpreted (Willig & Rogers, 2017).

Tour itineraries, routes and stops

During the participant observation, it was found that for four of the ‘free walking tours’ (Red, Orange, Yellow and Green tours) there were on average nine sites on the itinerary route where the guide stopped to tell a story. Out of these nine stops, there were on average two or three sites where the guide discussed themes related to the seventeenth century, colonialism and/or slavery. The two ‘paid walking tours’ (Blue and Purple tour) included an average of ten stops on the route walked. On these tours, the narratives concerning the seventeenth century, colonialism and/or slavery were told at an average of two or three stops. In addition, the Pink and Brown ‘canal cruises’ highlighted an average of 14 sites during the boat tour. For these ‘canal cruises’, there were an average of three stops along the route where themes of the seventeenth century, colonialism and/or slavery came up. The Pink and Brown ‘canal cruises’ tours are by boat and tend to follow different routes with few overlaps, given the many canals in the city centre of Amsterdam. The main canals used include the Herengracht, Prinsengracht, Keizersgracht, Golden Bend or Houseboat alley, and the open harbour. The boats often slowed down whenever significant landmarks and/or touristic sites were to be highlighted and stories about those places told.

For the ‘free walking tours’ and the ‘paid walking tours’, the stops and storylines for both were fairly similar, with some few exceptions. The most significant stops that were part of most of the walking tours are highlighted on the map in [Figure 1](#).

In addition to these major sites, the guided tours always stopped at any of the many different coffeeshops found throughout the city centre of Amsterdam. In the Netherlands, coffeeshops are places where cannabis is legally sold and used.

Spatial narratives about the seventeenth century, slavery and colonial heritage

During participant observation, it became clear that all tour guides except Tess (Blue Tour) used the term ‘Golden Age’ in their narratives about the seventeenth century. The term was used mostly to refer to the pride associated with the power and wealth the Dutch accrued during this period. Most of the guides who made use of the term ‘Golden Age’ did so without any further explanation about the exploitation that sits behind the term and the contentions associated with it. It was only during the Orange ‘free walking tour’ that the guide while using the term ‘Golden Age’ in reference to the seventeenth century shortly emphasised that the ‘Golden Age’ also has a dark side that is less positive. The guide then offered counter-narratives about colonialism and slavery. For the remainder of this section, we trace the spatial narratives by focusing on some of the key stops on the tour and assessing the narratives told there.

The Dam Square

Known as the historical heart of the city and the central public square, this was the location for the start of four out of the six ‘walking tours’ (Red, Yellow, Green and Blue tour). Here, the guides introduce their tour and lay the foundation for the rest of the tour narratives. As Tess (Blue tour) explained,

I think the Dam is the most important, that’s where it all starts ... because that’s where you actually start telling about the history, the origins of Amsterdam. You know, you start with the basic explanation. Yes you have to understand that first before you can show the rest.

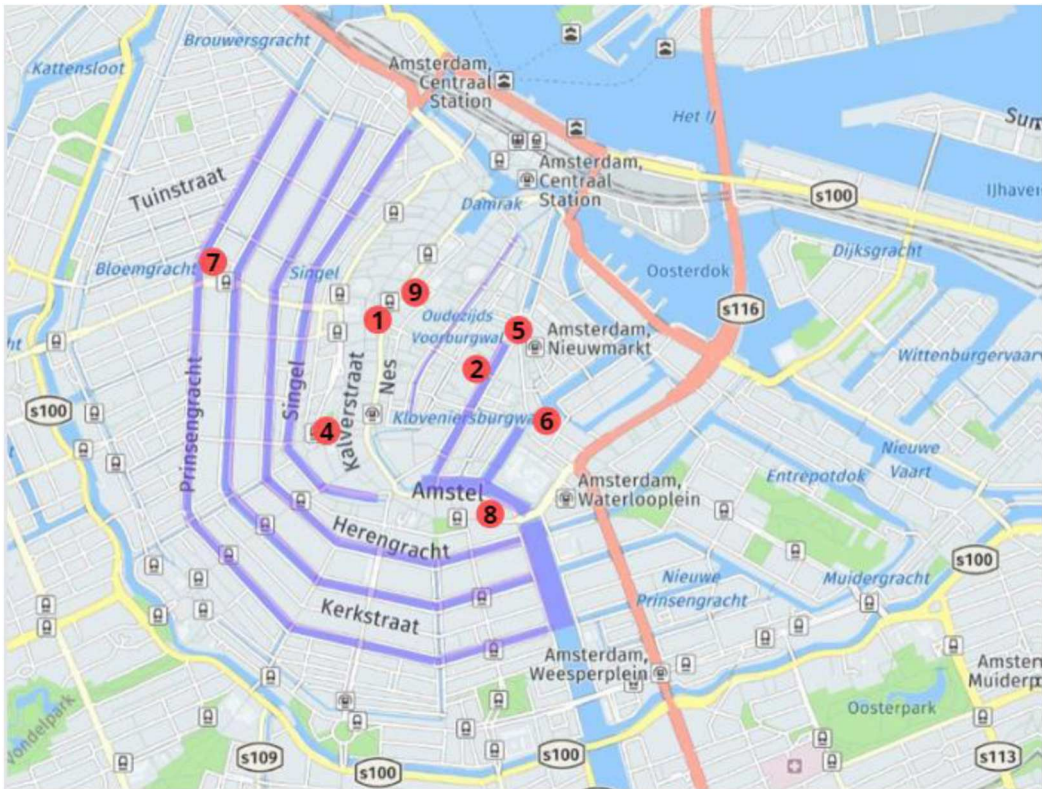


Figure 1. A map of the city centre of Amsterdam showing key stops on the tours (*Authors' own illustration – not drawn to scale*).

Notes: (1) *The Dam Square*: The central square and historic heart of Amsterdam, where the National monument and the New church are located; (2) *Headquarters of the VOC and WIC*: The former headquarters of the trading Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC); (3) *Canals (the major ones within the city centre)*: such as the Herengracht, Keizersgracht, Prinsengracht, Oudezijds Voorburgwal, Oudezijds Achterburgwal; (4) *The Begijnhof*: An inner court that dates back to the Middle Ages and houses Amsterdam's oldest wooden house, a Protestant and Catholic church; (5) *The Waag*: Originally the city gate of Amsterdam; (6) *Rembrandt house*: A museum and the former home of the famous painter Rembrandt; (7) *Anne Frank house*: A museum dedicated to Jewish wartime diarist Anne Frank; (8) *Jewish quarter*: The neighbourhood that was home to the Jewish community from the sixteenth century until their persecution during World War II; (9) *Beursplein*: A square where the national monument the Beurs van Berlage is located. This monument symbolises the birth of the global stock exchange in Amsterdam.

The main themes offered at this site included the Royal palace, the Dutch Royal Family, the origins of Amsterdam, the National monument, the Red-Light district, the New Church building and other typical Dutch cultural aspects. The seventeenth century was only a small part of the narratives told at this location but all guides talk about the Royal palace which dates back to the seventeenth century and served as the city hall during this time. The guides starting their tour from this location also briefly touched on the growth of Amsterdam during the seventeenth century by mainly highlighting the Dutch shipping fleet, the trade, and the power and wealth of the Dutch in this period. Several of the guides pointed out the golden ship on top of the Royal palace, as can be seen in [Figure 2](#), as a symbol to explain about the shipping fleet and trade that took place in the seventeenth century. However, colonialism or slavery were absent in the narratives told on the Dam Square, except in the narrative of the Blue tour for which the guide gave a brief introduction on the origins of the VOC and related this to colonialism.

The VOC headquarters

De Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC) – the Dutch East India Company – was established by the States General of the Dutch Republic in 1602 to protect the state's trade in the Indian Ocean. The VOC grew rapidly with a monopoly charter and became the first company to be listed on the



Figure 2. The Royal Palace on the Dam Square.

newly developed stock exchange in Amsterdam. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the VOC was the world's largest trade and shipping company with state power to negotiate treaties, wage war, engage in slave-trading, establish colonies, coin money as well as take and execute prisoners on land or at sea. This all-encompassing power of the VOC brought significant wealth to the Netherlands. One of the former VOC headquarters building features as a stop on all on the walking tours.

From the participant observation, it was clear that this VOC headquarters (Figure 3) was the most important place where stories related to the seventeenth century were told. Four out of the six 'walking tour' guides (Orange, Yellow, Blue and Purple tours) presented their main narrative related to the seventeenth century at this site which now serves as a University of Amsterdam building. The narratives of all these guides were completely focused on the themes of wealth and power of the seventeenth century and no other themes were touched upon. During the observations, it was noticed that the stories of the Orange and Yellow 'free walking tour' guides, who spoke for about 10–15 minutes, were significantly longer than those of the Blue and Purple 'paid walking tour' guides, who spoke for only a few minutes. Here, the guide of the Purple 'paid walking tour' focused her story on the VOC's power and wealth. She explained the size of the shipping fleet and emphasised that the VOC was the most powerful and richest in the world. She also drew attention to the fact that many of the people involved in the VOC were Jewish. She indicated in the interview that she mentioned this because her husband was Jewish. She also talked about the function of the VOC headquarters in the past and today.

The guide of the Blue 'paid walking tour' clearly had a different focal point in her story. When asked what stories connected to the seventeenth century and Golden Age, Tess explained that; *'Well in this tour we talked more about the origins of, what it yielded and how the VOC operated a bit and about the West India Company as well. So I talk about that a little bit.'* She says she mainly talks



Figure 3. The former VOC Headquarters.

about the VOC and the West Indies Company (WIC), which was also evident from the observations. What she did not specifically mention during the interview but became clear during the observations was that she clearly placed a lot of emphasis in her narrative on the darker side of this period. She explained about the rise of the VOC, the power and wealth they had and the fact that although the VOC is called a trading company they actually colonised a lot through processes of oppression and murder, and paid very little for spices in the colonies. She then spoke about the rise of the WIC and the trade in sugar and slaves while emphasising the colonisation of New York, the Caribbean and Suriname. She concluded her story with the bankruptcy of the VOC and WIC and emphasised that the colonies remained intact until after the Second World War. Although her story was fairly short, it was clearly noticeable that she felt it was important to emphasise the darker side of this past as a counter-narrative to the more dominant ‘wealth and power’ narrative. During the interview she elaborated on her reasoning for this by noting that:

So I go into a bit of detail but not super deep into the details about what exactly happened back then in Indonesia for example ... I think it has to do with several reasons. With the fact that you don't really have something you can show. We are in front of the building then, the headquarters of the VOC but I don't really have anything else ... I personally like to have a visual, something to show. What it looked like or a globe or a picture, that kind of things. You don't walk past that ... and this isn't really the tour to go into all that much detail either. I certainly think it's an important subject to talk about, which is why I do but I don't go into super deep detail because it's just a casual history tour.

Thus while the guide considers it important to talk about colonialism and slavery, there is hesitation to go into great depth because she is unable to show something visual beyond the building itself and the tour is considered as a casual history tour – in contrast to a specialised tour like the Black Heritage Amsterdam Tour.

The narrative of the Orange and Yellow ‘free walking tour’ guides was a bit longer and differed in certain aspects. Both guides talked about the rise of the VOC who traded spices such as nutmeg, cinnamon, clothes and black pepper in Asia. Both guides referred to the large shipping fleet and the power and wealth of the VOC across the world. Only the guide of the Orange ‘free walking tour’ mentioned that the Dutch colonised a lot, naming some of the many colonies. Furthermore, both guides explained in detail about the birth of the stock exchange and the high financial dividends that were distributed. The guides mentioned how all these developments led to an enormous growth of Amsterdam and brought much wealth to the city. It was highlighted how the VOC was the richest and most powerful business organisation in the world. The guide of the Orange ‘free walking tour’ ended his story by indicating that it is also important to highlight the darker side of the Golden Age. He talked about the involvement of the Dutch in slavery and exploitation and how the Dutch government recently apologised for this.

The WIC headquarters

Like the VOC, De West-Indische Compagnie (WIC) was founded in 1621 as a trading company in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It was granted a monopoly charter from the State General of the Dutch Republic for all trade and shipping west of the Cape of Good Hope. This involved primarily trade and shipping of slaves from the west coast of Africa to the plantations of the Americas and Caribbean. The building that once housed the headquarters of the WIC therefore features prominently on the tour routes.

The Red ‘free walking tour’ guide presented his main narrative concerning the seventeenth century at the WIC headquarters. Here, his narration focused almost entirely about the seventeenth century. He began by recalling the story he had earlier talked about in terms of the alternation of religion in Amsterdam, from mainly Catholicism to mainly Protestantism. He narrated how Amsterdam became a republic and fought an 80-year war with the Spanish at the time. He further narrated the wealth generated by Spanish and Portuguese trade in spice, oil and slaves and how the Dutch wanted in on this wealth. It is in this context, he explained, that the VOC and WIC came into existence and experienced great growth in the seventeenth century. He highlighted the trade in spices, oil, textiles and slaves. He then went on to discuss the emergence of the Stock Market in Amsterdam, which was open to all and brought a lot of economic flexibility. Because of all these developments, Amsterdam grew enormously during the seventeenth century and the VOC and WIC became the most powerful and richest in the world. In addition, the guide also clearly emphasised the Dutch involvement in colonialism. He mentioned the many Dutch colonies that were scattered all over the world and that many country and place names originate from the Dutch language and/or Dutch place names. Finally, he ended his story by briefly discussing the fall of the VOC and WIC. It was striking that every time the guide talked about trade, he clearly mentioned the trade in slaves as well. However, this was only naming and he did not elaborate on what exactly it entailed. During the interview, he explained why he does not elaborate on the details about themes such as slavery on his tour:

The fact is that people don't come for a story about slavery. People come for a big story. I believe going to a different environment is stressful. It is fun stress but it is stress. My tour is to give meaning to that city so that they feel much more at home and understand things. Slavery is not the main point Usually the mood just goes down [when the details about slavery comes up]. They want to have a good time for two hours so to go into slavery is just something very difficult to come out of again. . . . It's very difficult in terms of atmosphere to get out again because you give people a sense of guilt and that's very difficult as an entertainer tour guide to get out of that because that's not what people come for. People come very much for fun, I want to have my expectations plus some extra.

Tour guides such as Tim on ‘free walking tours’ rely on tips from tourists and hence the concern about not generating negative atmosphere and experiences on the tour. This issue about atmosphere, tourist discomfort and mood management is an important point that we will return to in the discussion section.

The Waag

The Waag (Weigh House) is a fifteenth century building and the oldest remaining non-religious building in Amsterdam that was listed as a national monument in 1970. It was originally built as one of three city gates as part of the Amsterdam city walls. With numerous changes in use functions over the centuries, the seventeenth and eighteenth century saw the transformation of the former city gate into a weighing house in the 1600s. Here, all assortment of goods were weighed including goods that were brought from the colonies and through the exploitation of the VOC and WIC. It was in 1819 that the last item was weighed here as the Waag fell into disuse as a weighing house.

The Waag (Figure 4), served as one of the locations where the Purple 'paid walking tour' guide referred to the seventeenth century. She pointed out some of the changing uses of the Waag such as the use by guilds for such things as teaching. Here, the anatomy guild in particular was highlighted as well as how the famous painter, Rembrandt, depicted the building in one of his paintings. In addition, the guide focused her stories on the Jewish Quarter and the Jewish community in Amsterdam throughout history. She discussed Amsterdam during the Second World War, the German occupation, the persecution of the Jews and the hunger winter. She also talked briefly about Amsterdam in the 1960s, including hippies and drugs. The bulk of her narrative at this site focused on the seventeenth century. The guide explained the rise of the VOC and how that contributed to the growth of Amsterdam. She explained that trade was done in those days and that this brought a lot of wealth. She specifically highlighted trade with Japan and talked about how special that was as the Dutch were the only ones allowed to trade with Japan because they built harbours. She also briefly mentioned that the Dutch had colonies in the Caribbean and South Africa. A striking observation was that the guide, in her narrative, indicated that she felt it was important to highlight



Figure 4. The Waag with three different guided tour groups in foreground.

that many people automatically think of the wrong things that happened in the seventeenth century, such as slavery, but she was of the view that the Dutch also did good things, such as building harbours. It must be pointed out that the guide also spoke about the Netherlands being very honest about the dark side of the past. She highlighted the apology for slavery by the Dutch government. She also indicated that the Netherlands is trying to create more awareness by updating history books and creating exhibitions in museums.

The canals

The founding of Amsterdam as the most watery city in the world started with the building of a dam for which the city got its name. In order to manage water and defend itself the first canals were dug. The expansion of the city in the Middle Ages therefore required the further digging of new canals. However, it was not until the seventeenth century that the most ambitious of canal building project was embarked upon in the city. Fuelled by the wealth generated through the slave trade and colonial exploitation, the three major canals of the city (Herengracht, Prinsengracht and Keizergracht) were built and completed around 1660. The result was a quadrupling of Amsterdam's population and the developed maze of an efficient system of navigable interconnecting canals that facilitated trade in global merchandise.

During the two 'canal cruises' (Pink and Brown), it was found that there were no specific stops where guides talked about the seventeenth century. The guides mainly told stories about the seventeenth century while cruising along the main canals, such as the Herengracht and Prinsengracht. The boats however slowed down on the canals so that guides could highlight significant sites that came into view such as the canal houses and the 'Golden Bend'. The Pink 'canal cruise' guide also referred to the Dam square, the Hortus Botanicas and the Maritime Museum. The Brown 'canal cruise' guide while cruising along the Prinsengracht spoke briefly about Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. She recounted the rise of the VOC, going into the trade and large shipping fleet. The wealth and power of the VOC were highlighted. The story focused mainly on the function of the canals and canal houses at the time. She also explained how the stock market emerged in the seventeenth century. Both colonialism and slavery were not highlighted at any point in the whole seventeenth-century narrative.

During the interview, Lucy the guide told the researcher that her employer instructs them to not go into sensitive or political themes. She explained that her employer ask to exclude themes like colonialism and slavery in her narratives because, '*The main thing is we don't want to look like we are glorifying them or anything.*' She is supposed to stick to the spice trade and not go into sensitive or political parts of this seventeenth-century history because it can make people uncomfortable. During the interview, she explained that some guides still prefer to highlight the issue of colonialism or slavery but she would rather not name it at all:

Well I wouldn't say we would ever prohibit people from talking about it but I would say that it is advised to not to. For obvious reasons. I would say that many different speakers like I said, they might mention the word slavery because they feel it is ... they talk about the black page in their history and I think that that is fine but personally on my tours I would rather not mention it at all.

The Pink 'canal cruise' guide (Hannah) on the other hand talked more about the seventeenth century. This guide first highlighted Dam Square, talking about Amsterdam in the seventeenth century and the origins of the VOC. Later, when cruising along the Herengracht, she talked about the canal houses that date from the seventeenth century and how certain architectural features and symbols showed wealth. Further on the route, the Hortus Botanicas was highlighted, which is a greenhouse that preserved plants brought back from the colonies. Finally, Hannah also talked about the seventeenth century as we cruised past the Maritime Museum which she mentioned served as a warehouse for spices and gunpowder and today serves as a museum. Here, she also highlighted the replica of a VOC ship which lies next to the museum, elaborating on its use for trade. She spoke about how the Dutch owned New Amsterdam which is New York today. She also explained the

rise of the stock exchange. In her story, the focus was mainly on the power and wealth of the Dutch. She only briefly mentioned colonialism and slavery did not come up at all. In the interview, she explained why she did not discuss colonialism and slavery in depth. Strikingly, Hannah stated that she does talk briefly about the involvement of the Dutch in slavery during her tours but she did not do so on the observed tour. She explained that,

Well normally, when I pass the Herengracht or when we have to go around, still from the open harbour we point out. I let them know that of course it was the most wealthiest company but they did trade in a way that was not of course correct because they did trade with human beings. We call slavery ... I try not talk too much because nobody really cares. The last time I tried to talk about that, there was not a really good feeling on the boat.

When pressed on the avoidance, she stated that,

I try to say it in subtle way, where I do make clear that that has happened ... You have to really ... if you want to talk about history then you also have to show the dark side because there was one ... I do know but it is just like in this tour, most of the people just want to be on the boat. Of course, they want to know about history so I point it out in the most subtle way and if they ask me well ... what does it consist of? I will tell them.

It appears that the avoidance of colonialism and slavery in the narratives of the canal cruises is mainly due to concerns over affecting the atmosphere of the group and the perception that tourists have other interests.

The Red, Orange and Green 'free walking tour' guides referred to the seventeenth century at one of the canals in the canal belt. For the guide of the Green 'free walking tour,' this was where the main story related to the seventeenth century was told. The Red and Orange guides also focused their stories such as housing in Amsterdam, the Red-Light District and prostitution. During these two tours, the stories related to the seventeenth century were mainly focused on the canal houses, as can be seen in [Figure 5](#). Both guides explained how these houses originated from the seventeenth century and how they served as merchants' houses and warehouses for the storage of goods gathered from the trade in that time. In addition, attention was paid to the architecture of the canal houses. Here it was explained that the canal houses are narrow because that determined the amount of tax that the people had to pay, how certain architectural features showed how rich or powerful the person who lived there was and how the hooks at the top of the canal houses were used to lift up goods to store these high and dry. Whereas the Orange 'free walking tour' guide kept his story superficial and short, the Red 'free walking tour' guide delved somewhat deeper into the topic. In his narrative, he elaborated more on the goods that the Dutch traded in the seventeenth century. The trade in textiles and spices was highlighted, but in addition this guide also addressed the trade in slaves. He clearly explained how the Dutch set up a system in which they traded not only goods but also human beings in North-America, South-America and Africa.

For the Green 'free walking tour' guide, the Herengracht was the location where he told his main story linked to the seventeenth century. When he was asked during the interview about the most important stories linked to the seventeenth century and Golden Age that are part of his tour, he reflected that:

But yeah I try to talk about the WIC and VOC and what happened in that time. I address some of the buildings and the canals and of course the Dam is a very important one ... I talk about the rise of the VOC and the WIC, the trade, the colonies, Indonesia, the Molukken. That mainly. I find it a very interesting topic and a very important part of the history of Amsterdam. So, I address it quite a lot in my tours. I think I talk about it way more than other guides. Just because it interests me and I think it is a big topic.

Thus Max from the green tour considers themes related to the VOC and WIC, the canals and canal houses, trade and colonialism as most important in his tour. While he perceived that he speaks about the seventeenth century more than other guides, the observations showed that this is not the case. It was observed that he talks about these subjects nearly as much if not less than what the other guides did on their tours. In his story, he discussed the growth of Amsterdam in the seventeenth century. He started his story with the rise of trade, mentioning that the trade was mainly in



Figure 5. Canal houses on the Herengracht with a tour boat on the water.

spices. The rise of the VOC and WIC was highlighted and the influence of the Spanish, British and Portuguese in the seventeenth century was also briefly mentioned. The narrative focused on the power and wealth of the Dutch. Further, colonialism undertaken by the Dutch was also discussed at some length. The guide explained how the Dutch colonised Indonesia and Suriname, among others. What was striking was that initially slavery was not discussed at all in the guide's narrative. However, as we walked on, one of the tourists asked whether the Dutch also traded in slaves, to which the guide briefly replied that the WIC did indeed do so but the main focus was on the trade in spices. After this, the guide immediately moved on to another topic. Later in the interview Max explained why slavery is not included in his narrative:

... I try to not really go too deeply into the sensitive topics like slavery. Of course it is really important to address this but I try not to because it is just my goal to entertain the people and you just notice that the people do not like it. ... it brings down the mood of the people. That is just what it is. So I try to not go into those parts.

It quickly becomes evident that although the tour guide considers it important to talk about slavery, he does not do so because he perceives his tour as one of entertainment – and therefore feels talking about slavery generated negative atmosphere, feelings and reactions from the tourists. This is very much in line with the sentiments expressed by Tim on the Red 'free walking tour.'

Positive atmosphere and good vibes: how tour guides circumvent the spatial narratives of slavery and colonial heritages

In this paper, we sought to understand how tourism, particularly walking and boat tours, deals with slavery and colonial heritage in an urban setting. To this end, we explore the spatial narratives about

slavery and colonial heritage (re)presented by tour guides in Amsterdam. A total of eight guided tours were followed through participant observation from which five of the tour guides were interviewed. Our findings evidence the double-edged nature of tourism's worldmaking potential. As others have rightly pointed out, tourism can promote a widening of perspective on the past and a transformation of mindsets (Hollinshead et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2020). Yet at the same time, tourism can become an accomplice in oppressive strategies of excluding marginalised group histories and making invisible narratives on unflattering aspects of the past (Chambers & Buzinde, 2015). In the following section, we highlight three main discussion points that emerge out of our findings.

Firstly, our findings shows the challenge and opportunities of tourism in providing a balanced and nuanced representation of the past. On the tours studied, the dominant spatial narratives about Amsterdam in the seventeenth century are largely constructed from the perspective of power and wealth. This framing therefore tend to exclude aspects of the past that undermine the cultural imagery of wealth and power commonly associated with the idea of a 'Golden Age.' Although a hybrid narrative strategy is mostly used by tour guides vis-à-vis the framework of Azaryahu and Foote (2008, pp. 183–184), it was clear that the narratives (re)presented on the tours tended to be focused on single points in time and on the specific place/site in question. This results in glossing over the slavery and colonial heritage narratives that connect these specific places/sites to other places and time. Thus, while the tour guides in this study (re)present the colonial heritage in their historical narratives, that of the slavery heritage is more often excluded, with only half of the tours observed including this part as well. Moreover, even in the few instances of inclusion, there is very limited elaboration of how the slavery and colonial heritage past underpins the wealth that built Amsterdam. Clearly, there is selectivity in which narratives are told at a given site and hence what comes to be eventually considered as heritage (Ashworth, 2003; Lowenthal, 2011). This is evidenced in the construction of the spatial narratives on the tours in Amsterdam where the uncomfortable aspects of the past imbued in a given site are deliberately excluded and only the less controversial elements are kept in the narratives.

Secondly, we extend research on the key influences on tour guides' construction of heritage narratives. Guided tours are based on a developed itinerary that determine which route(s) through the city are to be taken, which sites and sights to show, and which narratives to tell and to what depths at which stops. A number of factors can influence this process including the goal of the tour, composition of tourists, employer requirements and the goal of the tour (Buzinde & Santos, 2009; Levy, 2017; Peck, 2010; Potter, 2016; Wong, 2013). We found that guides are conscious of the perceived interests of tourists and hence remain open to adapting their tour narratives to meet such needs. This meant that for much of the time on the observed 'walking tours' it was the basic facts about Dutch culture, food and history of the city of Amsterdam that were offered. For the 'canal cruises,' guides perceived that tourists just want to relax on the boat and hear interesting stories about the city that are not too confronting. However, the interviews brought up several cases where the tour guide went into more detail on themes such as colonialism and slavery when the tourists originate from former colonised countries by the Dutch. This is a well-established issue in the literature of how tour guides constantly adjust their narratives, as found in studies of plantation tours in the US (Alderman et al., 2016; Buzinde & Santos, 2009). This situation was also a reflection of both implicit and explicit rules of the tour companies to prohibit tour guides from going deep into the unsavoury parts of the heritage narratives. Thus, for all tours except the 'free walking tours,' the employer had a significant influence on the route and narratives presented in the tour. Furthermore, a key influence on tour guides' selectivity of spatial narratives related to their perception of their own role in the tourism production system. A number of tour guides saw themselves as entertainers and hence sought to (re)tell stories that had humour and entertainment value. Stories about slavery and colonialism therefore had to be glossed over because, although being educational, such topics dampen the mood on the tours. This discomfort and dampening of the general mood on the tour was noted during participant observation.

Finally, a key insights from our study relate to the concerns with the atmosphere and vibes on a tour. This appears to be a significant factor in shaping the spatial (re)presentation of slavery and

colonial heritage narratives on the tours observed. The ease and willingness of tour guides to provide any in-depth narrative on this heritage was conditioned on the sense that doing so will (not) spoil the atmosphere amongst tourists. This is consistent with research from Zhang and Pearce (2016) who found that guides resort to using humour in creating a positive atmosphere and good vibes for tourists. Thus, several of the tour guides admitted to skipping the stories of slavery and colonialism, even at sites that embodied these stories, because such stories do not lend themselves to jokes or jibes, have a negative impact on tourists' moods and/or could evoke negative reactions within the group in ways that do not accord with curating a positive atmosphere of good vibes. This situation is particularly acute with 'free walking tours' that depend on donations from tourists. Since giving a positive feeling throughout the tour becomes essential to increasing income, tour guides become weary about negative reactions (Wong, 2013). In this sense, atmosphere and negative vibes mainly refer to issues of embodied affect on tourists and the discomforting feelings that can be produced in the slavery and colonial heritage tourism encounter. The affective experience of the atmosphere of a given tourism encounter can be ephemeral and tour guides can easily switch between confronting and comforting narratives. However, in our study, the tour guides choose to focus mainly on curating a positive atmosphere only. This highlights the double-edged sword of tourism as on the one hand having the progressive potential to make visible difficult aspects of the past (Hollinshead et al., 2009), and on the other hand having the tendency to actively erase difficult heritage because of perceived discomfort of tourists and need to create good vibes. Here, further research can explore how visitors experience such atmosphere and vibes and the extent to which they would prefer to be confronted with confronting spatial narratives.

Tourism as a cultural production can shape collective memory and therefore offers an important avenue for new interpretive possibilities (Foote & Azaryahu, 2007; Watson et al., 2012). As Buzinde and Santos (2009) have noted, it is often a challenge to present the full history when it comes to sites associated with slavery and colonialism. However, this challenge is one that need to be faced head-on in order to develop transformative tourism experiences that make visible key aspect of the past that have been rendered absent in national narratives (Adu-Ampong, 2023). The 'tools of tourism' (Ormond & Vietti, 2022) – guided tours, guidebooks, and tourism maps – provide opportunities for even general city tours to be designed in ways to both educate and entertain tourists as they encounter varied spatial narratives. In the extant literature, it appears that such opportunities tend to be taken up by specialised tours instead of being included in other standard city tours. For instance, the findings of Boukhris (2017) are about a specialised tour (Black Paris Tour) which provides a counter-hegemonic narrative that, set against the dominant monolithic tourism imaginary of Paris, centres Black heritage, slavery and (post)colonial history of France. Similarly, Adu-Ampong (2023) talks about how the specialised Black Heritage Amsterdam Tour seeks to make visible the 'hidden histories' of the African diaspora, slavery and the colonial history of the Netherlands from the seventeenth century onward – which is largely absent in the other general tours on offer in the city. In light of the findings from this current study, the remaining question then is how can non-specialised city tours 'expressly undertakes the memory work of counter-mapping dissonant heritage' (Adu-Ampong, 2023, p. 103590) in order to (re)activate tourist sites as *lieux de mémoire* [sites of memory] (Nora, 1989) of often neglected aspects of the slavery and colonial past?

Conclusion

Exploring the spatial narratives of slavery and colonial heritage by tour guides in Amsterdam reveals how these narratives get selected, at which points they are told and to what depth, and the key factors that shape this process. The main locations common to both 'free walking tours' and 'paid walking tours' include the Dam, Beursplein, the headquarters of the VOC or WIC, the main canals, the Begijnhof, the Waag, the Rembrandt house, the Anne Frank house, the Jewish quarter, and one of the many coffeeshops in Amsterdam. For the 'canal cruises,' the

boat slows down at various sites such as the Skinny Bridge, the Jewish quarter, the Hermitage, the Maritime Museum, the Hortus Botanicas, the Rembrandt House, and some of the many canal houses. Tour guide narratives focused mainly on the basic facts about the city such as housing, Dutch food, bicycle culture, coffeeshops and drugs, the Red light district and prostitution, Amsterdam's three X's, art, and the Dutch royal family. In addition, tour guides also focused on history and cultural aspects such as the origin and development of Amsterdam, the switch in religious form, the miracle of Amsterdam, the seventeenth century, the second World War, the canals and canal houses.

In terms of the narratives on the seventeenth century all tours touched on similar themes constructed from the dominant narrative frame of the 'Golden Age,' growth of Amsterdam, the VOC and WIC, stock exchange, trade, shipping fleet, power and wealth of the Dutch, canals and canal houses, and the Royal palace on the Dam. The themes of slavery and colonialism were only partly included in the narratives of tour guides and not in all tours. However, they were not included in all tours. Two tour guides do not cover the topic of colonialism at all. Furthermore, the topic of slavery was excluded from the tour guides' narratives in four out of the nine tours. Thus while most guides generally do highlight the colonial heritage, the slavery heritage is more often excluded from narratives and is found in only half of the tours. Key influences on the narratives told by tour guides, particularly the 'paid walking tour' and 'canal cruises,' include the script from their employer with fixed routes and the perceived interests of tourists. A significant influence on the seventeenth-century narratives told was concerns about atmosphere and vibes. Tour guides sought to curate a positive atmosphere of good vibes and did not want to elicit negative affective reactions that are prone to emerge when talking about slavery and colonial heritage.

This paper respond to calls for critical approaches to tourism research in postcolonial Europe (Adu-Ampong, 2023; Boukhris, 2017; Knox, 2024). We provide insights into the complex processes in which general guided tours in Amsterdam approach the (re)telling of the narratives that frame the history of the city in relation to slavery and colonial heritage. By focusing on 'free walking tours,' 'paid walking tours' and 'canal cruises,' we identify the challenges of harnessing the transformative potential of guided tours in engaging with difficult heritage and collective memory. Tour guides play a key role in the production and consumption of meaningful experiences in the tourism encounter. It is important that the spatial narratives provide a nuanced perspective on slavery and colonial heritage that are (re)presented at the various stops and sites of a tour. While positive atmosphere and good vibes are key, it is important to also challenge tourists with the confronting narratives of the complex histories of the places they visit. The words of tour guides can etch the spatial narratives of places on the minds of visitors.

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Notes on contributors

Emmanuel Akwasi Adu-Ampong is Assistant Professor in Cultural Geography, Wageningen University, the Netherlands, and a Senior Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa. He researches on the geographies of slavery and colonial heritage tourism in relation to the politics of cultural memories.

Simone Berg recently graduated with an MSc degree in Tourism, Society and Environment from Wageningen University and Research, the Netherlands. Her research focusses on heritage tourism and socially sustainable community-oriented tourism developments.

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