

Slavery and Debates about National Identity and Nation-Branding

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Slavery and its legacies are fundamental to Caribbean history and resonate in contemporary debates about cultural heritage. Generally speaking, this holds true for the Dutch Caribbean islands too, but as we will argue in this chapter, there are significant differences in the ways this history and its heritage are reflected in contemporary debates about nation-building and practices of nation-branding in Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao.¹ At the same time, for reasons we will explain below, these debates cannot be fully understood without taking on board the simultaneous rediscovery of slavery and its legacies in the Netherlands. In this contribution, we will focus not only on the situation on the three islands and in the Netherlands, but also on the transatlantic links connecting them. Our lead question concerns the entangled dynamics of memory-making within the challenging constitutional context of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

Curaçao

For ecological reasons the six islands that once formed the Netherlands Antilles were not developed as typical Caribbean plantation colonies. Even so, the Atlantic slave trade and slavery were fundamental to their history under Dutch rule, which began in 1634. Curaçao was developed as a commercial nexus, as was St. Eustatius in the Northern Caribbean.

Mainly in the period up to 1730, Curaçao was a major transshipment hub for enslaved Africans. Only a minority was retained on the island, and the actual proportion of enslaved people in the total population decreased from some sixty percent in the late eighteenth century to thirty percent on the eve of emancipation (1863)—relatively low figures by Caribbean standards. Nevertheless, throughout the colonial period and up to this day, enslaved Africans and their descendants have formed the majority of the insular population. However, the ethnic makeup of the population has changed considerably, first from the late 1920s through the 1950s owing to regional labour migration spurred by the oil industry, and again



Mural in Curaçao referring to the slave revolt led by Tula in 1795 (photo Gert Oostindie)

in more recent decades owing to extensive outmigration to the Netherlands and replacement immigration from the Caribbean and Spanish America.

There is no doubt that slavery and its legacies are major subjects of public debate in contemporary Curaçao. But this is a relatively new development, at least in the sphere of government, education, and culture. The first museums dedicated to slavery date from the 2000s, as do official monuments commemorating slavery and, particularly, slave resistance. The national day in celebration of resistance to slavery—*Dia di Lucha pa Libertat* (Day for the Struggle of Freedom)—dates only from 1984, whereas in the other former major Dutch Caribbean colony, Suriname, the end of slavery has been celebrated annually, on a day known as *Keti Koti* (The Chain is Broken), since the 1863 emancipation. In explaining the former's tardiness, one cannot ignore the fact that there was an obvious continuity in the presence of colonial and postcolonial elites. Whereas in Suriname the White planter class had more or less vanished by the twentieth century, the partly Protestant, partly Jewish White elite of Curaçao has remained present and highly influential in local society to the present day. Also present is the Roman Catholic church, to which until recently most Afro-Curaçaoans adhered, and which was deeply implicated in upholding both slavery and colonialism as such. This has certainly not stimulated an early and open debate about slavery. Where descendants of enslaved Africans and their owners

live side by side, discussing slavery and its legacies is a delicate and potentially divisive matter—particularly as socioracial hierarchies have persisted into the present.

This is not to say that there is no previous tradition of public reflection on this past and its legacies. Curaçao did not produce something similar to the Afro-Surinamese author Anton de Kom's 1934 book *We Slaves of Suriname*, an eloquent and bitter indictment of slavery, colonialism, and racism. But already in 1929, the Afro-Curaçaoan Pedro Pablo Medardo de Marchena published his pamphlet *Ignorancia ò educando un pueblo*, lashing out against the colour line and the mental legacies of slavery. A few years later, and inspired also by Marcus Garvey, Willem E. Kroon spoke against the repressive Roman Catholic Church and racial self-hatred: "Don't think of yourself in terms such as *triste color*, sad colour, no doubt this is an invention of the white people."²

Important as these reflections may have been, they were not about slavery itself, nor explicit pleas to rethink slavery as constitutive of Curaçaoan national identity. The first attempts to achieve that rethinking date from around 1950 and included a lecture by the well-known author Pierre Lauffer on Tula, the principal leader of the major slave revolt of August 17, 1795.³ Since the 1960s, in the context of the Black Power movement and particularly the May 1969 revolt on Curaçao, several grassroots activist groups put enslavement and its legacy back on the societal and political agenda. Tula, hitherto either depicted as a criminal or simply disregarded, was now heralded as the protagonist of the Afro-Curaçaoan struggle against slavery and racism. This is the context in which the government symbolically recognised August 17 as the *Dia di Lucha pa Libertat*. The story of his rediscovery half a century ago up to his contemporary status as a national hero encapsulates the success of an emancipatory narrative of insular identity, one in which resistance to slavery has taken centre stage.⁴

It would take until 1998 before the first museum dedicated to slavery opened its doors, in a prime location in Willemstad. Ironically, the Kura Hulanda Museum (the name means "Dutch courtyard") was established by a wealthy Dutch entrepreneur whose highly critical attitudes towards Curaçaoan politicians made him an unlikely partner in nation-building efforts. Likewise, the museum's distinctly non-localised narrative of the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Americas may have been more appealing to an international tourist public than to the insular population, and as such indeed was promoted as a key element in nation-branding.⁵ Nonetheless, Kura Hulanda marked a new era. Since then, Curaçaoan activists have opened several more local museums dedicated to slavery and Afro-Curaçaoan cultures, as well as a "Slave Route," supported by local and metropolitan Dutch funding. Some of the older museums have now added slavery as a topic to their exhibitions, or are in the process of doing so.⁶

These museums, as well as a score of scholarly and educational books and articles published in recent decades—though still mainly written by Dutch and foreign historians—explicitly address both the violence and racism of slavery and

the resistance of the enslaved.⁷ But the discourse about legacies seems to remain slightly ambivalent. Thus while creolised forms of expression such as the Creole language Papiamentu and local musical styles such as the Antillean waltz and *tumba* have long been celebrated as typical for the entire insular culture, it took far longer for the more heavily African-style *tambú* to be accepted as such—in fact, the colonial ban on *tambú* was only lifted in 1952 and exempted from remaining restrictions in 2012.⁸ And when it comes to openly addressing the mental legacies of the attempt at dehumanisation that is inherent to slavery, Antillean scholars and activists observe that there is still a long way to go.⁹

The recognition that slavery was constitutive of Curaçaoan history and identity has been literally canonised in the recently published official historical canon of Curaçao, with a great number of entries critically dealing with the slavery past. Unfortunately, school text books and course materials used in primary schools dedicate little attention to slavery and colonialism.¹⁰ Pride in accomplishment against the odds of colonialism and particularly slavery forms the backbone of this instrument of nation-building. At the same time, however, it is not easy to reconcile this celebratory narrative of the nation with the sobering realities of non-sovereignty, hence dependence on the former coloniser and enslaver, and the fact that almost half of the Curaçaoan community now lives in the Netherlands rather than on the island.

This is not the type of predicament one uses in nation-branding. Instead, the branding of Curaçao for international tourism mainly evokes both generalised commercial perks and typical local heritage that refers to an unproblematised colonial past. Thus, on the one hand, images of sun, sand, and sea, happy and welcoming locals, luxury resorts, and the like; and on the other, colourful images of the colonial inner city of Willemstad with its forts and mansions and plantation estates scattered over the island. This type of tourist campaign may be successful in attracting foreign visitors and hence contributing to the local economy, but it seems quite at odds with the dominant narratives of nation-building. In the field of musical branding, we do find exceptions to this rule, though.¹¹

An overly rosy branding may be problematic in itself—one is reminded of Derek Walcott's anger over a Caribbean island selling away its true character, "the way it whored away a simple life that would soon disappear."¹² But one may also wonder whether this type of nation-branding does not underestimate the commercial potential of invoking another, more painful and perhaps also more conflictive cultural heritage. This, indeed, was the idea behind the Kura Hulanda Museum, whose owner had high hopes of attracting well-to-do African-American tourists not only to his museum but to his adjacent boutique hotel, a luxury complex also named Kura Hulanda. Curaçaoan activists and professionals driven by idealistic rather than commercial motives have likewise attempted to use the heritage of



Entrance, made by Giovanni Abath, to the Parke Lucha pa Libertat, Willemstad, Curacao, 2021 (photo Charles Martina)

slavery not only for nation-building, but equally for nation-branding. The idea is simple and convincing. Most tourists come to the Caribbean primarily for fun and relaxation, but this does not exclude that a considerable number of them—of whatever colour or nationality—might also be interested in local culture and genuinely open to learning about the abhorrent pages of colonial history, including slavery.¹³

This has been the operative idea behind a series of museum initiatives taken in the past two decades on the island, mainly by cultural entrepreneurs of Afro-Curaçaoan background. Not all of these have been successful, to put it mildly. To the best of our knowledge, the problem was a lack of neither good ideas nor professional approach but rather stable funding. Major problems were inherent to the island's small size and the limited number of potential national and international visitors, making it very hard to uphold an economically viable cultural infrastructure in the first place. Even prior to the Covid-19 crisis, most museums were in dire straits; the crisis was simply disastrous and it remains to be seen what forms recovery will take.

Does this mean that slavery is not a viable subject for nation-branding? Not at all, but economic viability is indeed a problem. A more sustained island-wide campaign combining the various individual museums may be part of a solution. We may also point to another type of commemoration, in monuments. In 1998, the Curaçao government unveiled a new seaside monument called *Desenkadená*

(equally, *The Chain is Broken*). Designed by sculptor Nel Simon, the monument testifies to the suffering and despair as well as the resistance and triumph of the enslaved. UNESCO has declared it a Messengers of Peace Site. Other monuments dedicated to the 1795 slave uprising are the columns representing a fist with a broken shackle, which were commissioned by the National Park Foundation (founded on January 20, 1998) and created by the artist Yubi Kirindongo. They are placed in seven locations marking the seven-week trajectory of the rebelling slaves in 1795.¹⁴

Two further observations are appropriate. First, activists are becoming more creative and are not only using museums for nation-branding but also other purposes, such as cinematic culture. Next, owing to Curaçao's small size, schoolchildren from all over the island have had or will have the opportunity to visit places commemorating, both for locals and visitors, their local history, slavery included. An awareness that their history is not only presented to them (nation-building) but equally to foreign tourists (nation-branding) may well help foster a sense of pride in the local heritage of slavery.

Aruba

For the first three centuries of Dutch colonisation, both Aruba and Bonaire were mere dependencies of Curaçao. Up to the 1863 emancipation, enslaved people of African origin formed at most one-third of the population. The establishment of an oil refinery in the 1930s resulted in a demographic explosion through the settlement of migrants, mainly from English-speaking Caribbean islands. After the collapse of the oil industry, tourism boomed in the 1980s, resulting in another demographic boost through immigration, this time primarily from Spanish America. The ethnic makeup of the island is therefore more diverse than in Curaçao with its still predominantly Afro-Caribbean population.

Aruba separated from the Netherlands Antilles and attained *status aparte* as an autonomous country within the Kingdom in 1986. In the decades-long struggle for this *separacion*, exclusive ethnic definitions of Aruban identity as a mestizo nation prevailed. In this rhetoric, there was no place for the island's slavery past and little place for the Afro-Caribbean immigrant population. In recent decades, contestations over the essence of Aruban culture have lost their fierceness and given way to more inclusive nation-building efforts. In the domain of heritage, particularly the Afro-Caribbean contribution of the carnival is now appreciated as a truly Aruban bacchanal and also branded as such. In recent years, attempts have also been made to upgrade the once predominantly Afro-Caribbean industrial town of San Nicolas, and this effort included the establishment of two museums celebrating the lives and contributions of these Black migrant workers to Aruba.¹⁵

Slavery, in contrast, has but a minor place both in narratives of Aruban history and nationhood and in the domain of cultural heritage. Even so, over the years, more research has been done on the cultural heritage of the enslaved people on this island as manifested in language, musical expressions, and family histories. Aruban cultural institutions teamed up to host the 2008 exhibition on local slavery, *Exposicion herencia di sclavitud*, to teach school children about this chapter in Aruban history.¹⁶ Also, a group of Aruban artists has promoted the Aruban tradition of the Afro-Caribbean *tambú*. But clearly all of this is not nearly as important as it is in Curaçao. This is not surprising. Most Arubans do not consider themselves Black, and those who do have roots mainly in other Caribbean colonies and hence relate to other, literally faraway histories of slavery.

Slavery is virtually absent when it comes to the nation-branding of Aruba. Tourist brochures market this “one happy island” as ethnically diverse but emphasise it as being *Latino* with a Dutch twist, rather than Afro-Caribbean. History figures little in this branding, except for a few colonial buildings and fortresses and modern hotels and shops erected in quasi-colonial style. But otherwise, little history, and no slavery. While this reflects the lesser importance of slavery in insular history, one may also assume it makes a difference that Aruba, unlike Bonaire and Curaçao, caters primarily to the US market and attracts mainly White American tourists.

Bonaire

While enslaved people formed only a third of the total population in 1806 and a quarter by 1863, the majority of the Bonairean population was of African origin, and this has remained so until today. Over the past two decades substantial immigration from Spanish America and the Netherlands, linked both to the island's integration into the Netherlands as a quasi-municipality and the development of tourism, has considerably diversified the insular population. Unprecedented Dutch involvement in, and indeed control of, government has provoked protest against what is now often described as “recolonisation.” Interestingly, in this context the concept of “slavery” has achieved renewed currency, as in the polemical juxtaposition of recolonisation, slavery, and apartheid as signifiers that condemn Dutch policies and actions.¹⁷

Ethnically, Bonaire has traditionally been more similar to Curaçao than to Aruba, and much of what is today cherished as typical cultural heritage of the island is Afro-Caribbean, particularly as this developed in the island's second town, Rincon. In this context, research conducted in the 1980s testified to persistent racial divides with a history going back well into the nineteenth century.¹⁸ But much of the narrative of Bonairean identity is about a tranquil society of peasants and fishers

interrupted only in recent decades by tourism and recolonisation. Slavery is not a dominant theme in Bonairean nation-building, and unlike in Curaçao, there are no national heroes related to slave resistance, although Boi Antoin's 1997 book *Lantamentu di katibu na Boneiru* (The Slave Revolt on Bonaire) did bring its leader Martis into focus.¹⁹

The slavery past does figure rather conspicuously in nation-branding. Stone cabins once used for stay overs by enslaved women and men working in the salt pans are now a colourful attraction for tourists, and explanatory signs have been added to the site. Likewise, the former colonial plantation has been renovated. Marketed as the Mangazina di Rei (The King's Warehouse), it attracts tourists with the promise of giving a taste not only of local produce, but also of how slavery was back then. Since this constitutional reform, the interest of the Bonairean population in its own culture and history, including the history of slavery, seems to have grown. Paradoxically, the new municipal status of Bonaire implies far better access to funding for the preservation and sharing of cultural heritage, slavery included, than presently available in Aruba and Curaçao. Thus in 2020, Dutch government funding enabled the production of a short film on the abolition of slavery on the island.²⁰

The Netherlands

Colonialism and slavery have been integral to the development of the Netherlands since 1600, but this has only been seriously recognised in recent decades, primarily owing to the large-scale settlement of migrants from the former colonies, who have brought this history home to the metropolis.²¹ The impact of these postcolonial communities on memory-making in the Netherlands has been highly uneven. The first wave of immigrants, from Indonesia, had been largely connected to the colonial order and was therefore rather frustrated over the loss of empire as well as the chilly reception in the Netherlands. In contrast, for the majority of subsequent postcolonial immigrants, first from Suriname and then the Dutch Caribbean islands, colonialism was associated with slavery and hence inspired anything but nostalgia. These Caribbean communities also encountered hostility and racism in the Netherlands, and a general ignorance and lack of interest in colonial history in mainstream Dutch society, including in education.

Activism to ensure recognition of the Dutch slavery past initially emanated from the Afro-Surinamese community. This activism has a long history, starting with the publication in 1934 of *Wij slaven van Suriname* (*We Slaves of Suriname*) by the Afro-Surinamese activist and author Anton de Kom. This seminal book, at once a historical account and political treatise, has been rediscovered time and again as the ultimate literary condemnation of Dutch colonialism and particularly slavery in

Suriname. In 2020, the book was included as one of the fifty lemmas (“windows”) in the national canon of the Netherlands and immediately appeared in bestseller lists.

The 1990s saw the emergence of a broader community-based activism urging official recognition of the Dutch role in the Atlantic slave trade and slavery in the Caribbean colonies. That citizens of Surinamese backgrounds dominated this lobby, led by the Landelijk Platform Slavernijverleden (National Platform [for the] Slavery Past), is not surprising. Mass migration from Suriname dates from the 1970s as compared to the 1990s for the Antilles and particularly Curaçao. The Afro-Surinamese community was therefore more firmly grounded and had already developed a solid basis for a political lobby. Nonetheless, the Curaçaoan novelist Frank Martinus Arion made a crucial contribution to this lobby by publishing a short article in a Dutch weekly, calling for “a good gesture.”²² This eloquent plea did much to bring the issue of slavery and national recognition to the heart of Dutch politics.

In 2002 a national monument in commemoration of the slave trade and slavery was inaugurated, and more monuments were erected in several Dutch cities afterwards. In response to calls first articulated by the Surinamese and Antillean communities in the Netherlands, successive Dutch governments have expressed “deep remorse” for the nation’s slavery past. A national slavery institute with both scholarly and educational tasks was established in 2002 but was not able to fully develop its potential and fell victim to budget cuts imposed by the then centre-right government, which clearly had quite different nation-building ideals. But the tide has turned again, and plans are now being completed for a genuine national slavery museum.²³

Slavery was included as one among fifty themes of the first national historical canon, in 2006, and was maintained and strengthened as such in the 2020 update which now also includes Anton de Kom. Amsterdam and Rotterdam, the country’s two largest cities, have both financed historical research to establish their involvement, and other cities have followed, notably The Hague and Utrecht, but also other parts of the country.²⁴ Amsterdam has offered official apologies, and the mayors of the two largest cities have urged the national government to do the same. Leading Dutch museums have organised exhibitions on slavery, culminating in a 2021 exhibition in the leading national museum for art and history, the Rijksmuseum, in Amsterdam. Over the past two decades, Dutch national television has broadcasted a number of television series and documentaries about slavery and its contemporary legacies, including racism and the increasingly discredited *Zwarte Piet* tradition. And more scholarly and popularising books on the subject have been published in the past two decades than in the preceding four centuries—we will not even begin to list the dozens of new titles, mostly in Dutch.

As for content, the overall tendency is to stress the inhumanity of slavery, the resilience of the enslaved populations, and the incompatibility of this history with the rosy Dutch self-image of having been in the historical vanguard of the struggle



Banner for exhibition on slavery Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, 2021

for tolerance, human rights, and democracy. From the start, a link has been made from the slavery past to contemporary problems of racism and white privilege, a concept successfully introduced in the Dutch public debate by the Surinamese-Dutch scholar Gloria Wekker²⁵—hence the struggle to do away with the highly problematic figure of *Zwarte Piet*. Geographically, there has long been a rather unbalanced representation of slavery, with a heavy focus on Suriname. This has

gradually been corrected to the degree that Curaçao too now forms part of the mainstream narrative. Slavery in the three Northern Dutch Caribbean islands is still treated as a footnote, even if recently educational materials have been developed.²⁶ Dutch colonial slavery in other parts of the Americas, in the Cape Colony and Asia are becoming part of the debate, as is the African part of the history, presently mainly narrowed to Ghana with its historic Dutch fort of Elmina. The focus on slavery in Suriname and Curaçao, of course, reflects not only the longevity of Dutch colonialism in these two places, but also the dynamics of the Caribbean community in the Dutch societal and political landscape.

So one may observe that progress has been made, and indeed the 2021 slavery exhibition opened by Dutch King Willem Alexander in the country's most prestigious museum, the Rijksmuseum, has been a milestone in this respect.²⁷ But what does all of this mean for nation-building and nation-branding? In the Dutch Caribbean, the memory of slavery is never far away. In the Netherlands, in contrast, decades of campaigning for recognition started from the correct assumption that little of this history was widely known in the first place, and that it would be a major challenge to convince a predominantly White Dutch audience that this is their history too. To put things in context, the total Afro-Caribbean population in the Netherlands, including Afro-Surinamese, may be estimated between three hundred thousand and four hundred thousand, hence only a small proportion of the country's total population of over seventeen million. Thus education has been a central issue throughout the Netherlands, and this is indeed where significant gains were made. It may not be enough, and the tone may often still be apologetic, and there is a racist backlash as well—but there is no doubt that there is far more awareness now about the Dutch slavery past than there was a few decades ago. This is also reflected in opinion surveys that find Dutch involvement in the Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean slavery now tops the list of episodes that are a source of shame and regret. In a 2021 representative survey, fifty-six percent of all Dutch people considered the national slavery past as (very) negative.²⁸

Is this enough? It's open to discussion, to say the least. The debates about whether or not the Dutch state should go beyond regrets by officially offering apologies illustrate this. Between the two poles of deep engagement with the subject among both Black and White Dutch people, as opposed to a White chauvinistic backlash refusing any recognition, it seems that for the majority of the Dutch, this is a past that, like colonialism in general, is no longer unknown or denied, but neither is it considered mainstream Dutch history. Thus the same 2021 survey indicated that compared to Dutch citizens with a Caribbean background, White Dutch are clearly less interested in the issue and in historical research into the period. And while overall only thirty-one percent of those surveyed supported the idea of official apologies, seventy percent of Dutch citizens of Caribbean background did.

Hence references to Dutch colonialism in general and Dutch involvement in slave trades and slavery do, in the end, figure in debates about Dutch identity, and this broadening of the historical horizon may indeed be seen as an important element towards a more inclusive nation-building. But at the same time, acknowledging colonialism and slavery exposes a glaring contrast to the traditional rosy narrative of national identity which many Dutch are still reluctant to relinquish.

Clearly colonial history is not an explicit element in Dutch nation-branding, though colonial riches have contributed considerably to the historic scenery of Dutch cities, so abundantly displayed in marketing campaigns for international tourism. There is a niche market for tourism related to the Dutch slavery past, as apparent in the Amsterdam slavery tours that have been offered since 2013. In recent years, slavery guides have also been produced for several other Dutch cities, but so far this seems to respond primarily to a national niche demand. The 2021 slavery exhibition in the Rijksmuseum may mark a shift, with its laudatory reviews not only in the Dutch press, but also in some major foreign newspapers. The upcoming establishment of a national slavery museum may also attract foreign tourists, though it will undoubtedly target mainly a national public. In any case, it seems unlikely that this history, with its sobering impact on rosier Dutch narratives of the nation, will be a permanent core element of nation-branding.

Slavery became part of museum and commemorative programming in the Netherlands to accommodate Caribbean migrants and add them to the list of target audiences. Initially, slavery was added as a “perspective” on the past, relevant not to all Dutch citizens but to a specific group. Yet ongoing research and presentations continue to link this past to the Dutch mainland and its national history. Public debates over what aspects of the past should be included in the Dutch national narrative further intensifies interest in the presentation of the colonial era. As a result, the attention in the cultural sector is expanding, thereby increasing awareness in society and political and policy realms of a colonial past that is not “a foreign country” at all: it is a subject in present-day identity debates that capture headlines on a regular basis. While the state did not introduce it as a keystone of nation-building, slavery nonetheless seems to be slowly finding its way into the practice of building the nation.

This changing practice is also due to developments in the debate about control and ownership over museum objects. Museums and collections in the Netherlands have been built either around a “local” narrative or a narrative about “the Other.” While history museums presented the story of “a small country that conquered the world,” anthropological museums presented “the world that was conquered.” In the end, both form part of a larger story of “who we are and where we come from,” according to the Dutch museum association. But the distinction between the two types of museums has created a hierarchy of belonging, placing the Caribbean and the “perspective” of slavery outside mainstream Dutch history.²⁹

In 2019, the ongoing international debate on the ownership of objects with a colonial provenance prompted the Dutch minister of culture to commission an advisory committee chaired by Lilian Gonçalves-Ho Kang You. Based in part on interviews with cultural experts of the Caribbean islands, the commission recommended the recognition of injustice committed in the colonial period. This recognition means that not only should the law be taken into account, but that in matters of ownership and belonging, the historical, cultural, or religious meaning of objects for the countries concerned should also be taken into consideration.³⁰ In 2020, another commission was appointed, this time to formulate guidance on what is or should be considered the Dutch national collection—heritage which “says who we were and are [as a country].”³¹ The commission aims to redefine Dutch heritage as including private ownership and public accessibility, to prevent valuable art from leaving the country, but has also concluded that the Dutch collection should represent “the richness, complexity and diversity of our material heritage. It serves as a mirror of Dutch identity in all its diversity. Its contents can change over time.”³² This again means that the relationship between heritage and myriad population groups linked to the former Dutch colonial world is gaining recognition. This acceptance of ethnic diversity and the fluidity of geographical boundaries over time could lead to slavery no longer being seen as a Caribbean “perspective” but rather as an integral part of Dutch national history and heritage. The recent and rather belated inclusion of Caribbean professionals in Dutch heritage institutions has clearly played a role in these developments.

Acceptance of slavery in the representation of the Dutch past has taken a long time, mostly because it requires a change in a national narrative that relies heavily on the glorification of those who brought the Netherlands economic prosperity. In contemporary art museums, this evolution has a different dynamic. While both historical and anthropological museums cater mostly to local visitors, contemporary art museums are more aligned with international consumers and interests.³³ At the same time, the representation of Caribbean artists in contemporary art is much greater than it was during colonial times. These artists are able to address slavery heritage in more personal and therefore layered ways than the apparent dilemma of pride in versus shame of the past that is seen in historical museums. Their art presents their experience of the world as complex, and migration, creolisation, colonial and postcolonial oppression, and inequality as given historical factors that need to be navigated. This requires honesty, self-awareness, acceptance, irony, and humour, and the ability to celebrate life fully while maintaining full awareness of its dark sides. The resulting work attracts national and international audiences alike, as demonstrated by visitor numbers.³⁴ While presenting slavery in a historical context conflicts with the traditional Dutch sense of self and nation, contemporary personal artistic reckonings with the past spark much less debate and are not avoided in nation-building and nation-branding cultural sites.

Transatlantic Links

In sum, we argue that throughout the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the common slave past has become more accepted in debates about national identity—and to a far lesser degree in processes of nation-branding. But it is also clear that there are deep contrasts in the place allotted to this past on both sides of the Atlantic. In this final section, we offer some comparative reflections, both on developments within the transatlantic Kingdom of the Netherlands and in a wider geographical and hence political framework.

First, of course, these developments have not occurred in a vacuum, but rather in a broader Black transatlantic framework. The struggle for recognition of the slavery past and some sort of reparations, linked to calls for an end to racism, has a long pedigree throughout the Americas in which the recent Black Lives Matter movement is another milestone. Within the Caribbean proper, the Commonwealth Caribbean countries have been calling for reparation policies for some time now, and Suriname has joined this call. Because of their constitutional status, the Dutch Caribbean islands are not at liberty to join such international political campaigns, but it stands to reason that this activism has inspired Dutch Caribbean activists.³⁵

Second, the Dutch rediscovery of slavery parallels similar developments in other European countries with substantial Caribbean communities—hence France and the United Kingdom, but not Portugal and Spain. The British and French trajectories, with national regrets, exhibitions, research projects, educational outreach, links made to contemporary racism, and so on have much in common with the Dutch case. One contrast is that the Netherlands is late in its initiatives to create a dedicated museum—the United Kingdom has the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool plus various permanent exhibitions in Bristol, Hull, and London, while France, as well has permanent exhibitions and a memorial in Bordeaux and Nantes, respectively, and a future memorial in Paris, boasts the *grande oeuvre* of the magnificent Memorial ACTe Slavery Museum in Guadeloupe. Incidentally, another contrast is that in remembering slavery, both the United Kingdom and France have long nurtured a rather chauvinistic tradition of extolling metropolitan abolitionists—this type of self-congratulatory commemoration is not rooted in Dutch traditions, as the final end of slavery came late and was therefore an embarrassment rather than a humanistic gesture even remotely qualifying as heroic.

Returning to the Dutch Caribbean case, we cannot ignore that some of the asymmetries of the colonial past seem to be reproduced in the present. Thus the paradox that since the late 1990s, the Dutch rediscovery of—mainly Caribbean—slavery has resulted in a considerable number of exhibitions, documentaries, and a range of other educational products which were first conceived, elaborated, and

disseminated in the Netherlands before they were brought to the Caribbean. Within the Caribbean, there was another postcolonial hangover that sustained this asymmetry. There are clearly more financial means available for this type of exchange within the Kingdom, hence for the Dutch Caribbean islands, than for Suriname, an independent state since 1975. Either way, the exchange of educational materials, exhibitions, and the like has been overwhelmingly one-way. This is also typical in a broader sense—thus the model of a national historical canon first established in the Netherlands was emulated in recent years in Curaçao, with different content of course, but with the same objectives and structure.

There is also an upside to this story of seemingly ongoing postcolonial dependence. In the Netherlands itself, from the beginning, most of the activists who demanded recognition of the slavery past had an Afro-Caribbean background, but once it came to translating this struggle into research, exhibitions, media productions, and the like, they had to operate in a White institutional environment. But also right from the beginning, there were exceptions, as in the work of the Curaçaoan artist Felix de Rooy, who (co)curated exhibitions on racism and slavery in the Netherlands beginning in the late 1980s but was later also actively involved in setting up permanent exhibitions in Curaçao, including one in the Savonet Museum.³⁶ In recent years, the number of curators and researchers of Caribbean background has been slowly increasing, which has been a factor in the general struggle to decolonise leading academic and cultural institutions. This process is anything but complete, but it does seem to hold promise for a more equitable relationship in this field between the Netherlands and its former Caribbean colonies—a relationship in which slavery is acknowledged as part and parcel of a national past shared by all.

In conclusion, we observe an increasing awareness of the slavery past everywhere in the Dutch Kingdom. However, how much that past is part of nation-building and nation-branding processes differs per nation, mainly depending on how that past is experienced by today's citizens (as alien or familiar). Moreover, its (tangible) heritage is only used for nation-branding when it looks good in tourist campaigns. But this also helps foster a sense of pride in local slavery heritage. Meanwhile, activists increasingly put slavery and its legacies on national agendas. Partly because of this, the slavery past and its cultural heritage are now prominently presented in the national narratives of Curaçao and Bonaire, and are gradually receiving more recognition in the Netherlands as well—only Aruba presents a different picture. Dynamics in this field are intense, though, and only time will tell whether this so long not really “shared” past will become a truly cohesive factor in a supranational identification with the Kingdom of the Netherlands.³⁷

