

Conviviality Colored

Theological Reflections on the Intersection of Slavery, Migration, and Labor

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1 Introduction

In this chapter I suggest that in order to gain new insights on dynamics of conviviality (mis)formed by racism and xenophobia in Europe the compartmentalization of research on xenophobia and racism must be overcome. Such a claim does not question the need for specialization in a particular topic but argues that expertise gained in such a way should lead to conversation among the diverse areas. What I propose is to go beyond even the comparative studies of different migration dynamics, and to draw together fields of study which may not obviously belong together. For example, why not speak of slavery studies as a particular area of migration studies and why not relate it to research on economic migration? In this chapter, I experiment with creating this link by asking the question: To what extent do experiences of racism and xenophobia reported by descendants of enslaved people and so-called “economic migrants” share the same roots?

I argue that manifestations of racism and xenophobia in present day Europe could be researched by experimenting with intersections usually not created when studying conviviality through theories of the Anthropocene. I propose to connect research on histories of slavery and economic migration in Europe. I make this link because it is remarkable that both research on descendants of colonized people in Europe, or more specifically, descendants of enslaved people in Europe, and research on people labelled as “economic migrants” show that these groups of people experience racism and relationality through xenophobia. Yet, usually, these two bodies of research and inquiry do not engage with one other. What does a seasonal labor migrant (economic migrant) from Eastern Europe, working in the greenhouses and fields in the Netherlands, have to do with the descendant (a Dutch citizen) of an enslaved woman in Suriname during colonial times? The short answer is: They might have the same experiences of conviviality that are shaped by xenophobia and racism. I seek to create this link through theories of the Anthropocene because it seems that they draw attention to such notions as labor, land, and the “good/better life”, notions relevant for contextual theology. “Conviviality colored” in the title thus

refers both to this complexity of migration through which societies (also) in Europe are (further) colored in terms of human appearance (the color of the skin) and to the diversity and ambiguity of the economic migration processes (the need for nuancing).

In order to build my arguments, I use an example from 2019 of “knowledge valorization” (a favored term in the academic world I associate with), which grew into an ongoing knowledge valorization project or process. At the heart of this example is a mobile exhibition on church and slavery (still under development) in the context of the Netherlands. The Dutch society provides an excellent case to study how different types of migrations shape living together¹ in a society. Scaled to the proportions of a world map, the Netherlands becomes a single spot. Yet, there is much to write on the world dynamics related to people who inhabited it and inhabit it today (Jones 2016, Wainer and Báez 2018).

The perspective through which I construct my arguments and reflections are shaped by the modes through which I myself became part of the conversation. These arguments remain experimental and perhaps even narrow-sighted and serve as research impulses and inputs for further conversations on the topic. While the chapter bears traces of collaborative action research, the approach I take here is “simply” the *via reflectiva*, a first-person reflection within a larger and committed process of collaborative research (Marshall and Mead 2005) with the conviction that that there is a clear link between first-person inquiry and social action (Nolan 2005).

In developing my arguments on the link between xenophobia produced by the enslavement of people and through “economic migration”, I use theory formation on the Anthropocene and I take ecclesial communities (churches) as ethical, normative, and participative entities which actively shape and partake in relationality regarding cohabitation. Thus, the chapter argues that theorizing with the Anthropocene on racism and xenophobia through the intersection of slavery studies and “economic migration” can function as a destabilizing force for all fields of knowledge, including theology. This destabilization requires further study on the complexity of living together in particular societies and their worldwide connectivities.

I designed this chapter by following a rhythm of alternating more theoretical sections with more illustrative sections. After the explanation of the title, I introduce an example of knowledge valorization, which led me to experiment with linking slavery studies and migration studies, which I describe in two sections: the Inspiration Festival and a mobile exhibition on churches and slavery. I then continue with a reflection on these cases through theories of the Anthropocene. I conclude the chapter by formulating some insights gained through knowledge valorization, especially in what I observe in the case of the mobile exhibition on churches and slavery.

1 One of the Dutch words for society is *samenleving*, which translates as living together.

2 Conviviality Colored, But How?

The title of this contribution evokes the color-line metaphor of W.E.B. Du Bois, who in 1903 already explained that the color issue goes beyond the black-white divide. It is a question of *human relationality*, of “the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men² in Asia and Africa, in America, and the islands of the sea” (Du Bois 1903, 2003, 16).³ The “-line” raises critical questions about inhabitation (physically occupying land by humans), cohabitation (the modes of living together in a biosphere), and, in line with the taxonomy of this volume, the color-line being central to “conviviality”, as conceptualized by Paul Gilroy, which “protects” research on cohabitation and inhabitation from “a kind of descriptive naivety” (Valluvan, 2016: 205): This refers to the hijacked notion of conviviality which captures moments of peaceful diversity but leaves the dehumanizing structures of racism without any critique.

The color-line in conviviality might thus even serve as a heuristic tool to destabilize theorizing on cohabitation through the dominant perspective of establishment/settlement in line with “the figure of the migrant” (Nail 2015, 2018). Such a change of perspective, as proposed by Thomas Nail, demands a new political theory of cohabitation/conviviality (see Bieler in this volume) which views migration, not as an exception to political equilibrium, but as a mode of conditioning habitation. Such a proposal gets closer to the theological theories which envision Christian identity formation based not only on memories of migration but also on actual migration dynamics (Nagy 2009).

Migration in this sense should not be perceived a priori as a problem, certainly not *the* problem of cohabitation, but as phenomena, as processes and unfolding lives encompassing all kind of dynamics (power relations) through which the issues of in- and cohabitation can and should be addressed. Limiting the question to human agency, a migration sensitive approach to in- and cohabitation acknowledges the individual and collective aspirations of humans and their searches for a “good” or even for a “better” life. Qualifying life as “good” or “better” uncovers the theological agenda of this paper and it right away discloses an important aspect of such an approach: the question of the “how” of cohabitation. Narratives in forms of myths, legends, and historiographies are all engaged in dealing with the “how” question of in- and cohabitation. Life on this earth is always creating narratives of attachment to the land, water, and air: what do people do with land, water, and air? In this sense conceiving of migration as dynamics which shape all levels of society (existence, work, labor, social status, education, healthcare) and condition

2 Read “humans”.

3 Du Bois does not mention Europe, because in his perception the color-line played a more significant role outside Europe. Du Bois might be right in observing that in the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe the number of people, through whose presence the color-line becomes visible, were less prominent (there were not large numbers of Black people or Asian people living in Europe), still the color of skin, the racial question, was already politicized and ideologized in Europe (at least in reference to Jews and Gypsy and Roma people). The historical questions of how racism and xenophobia were to be found in Du Bois context have strong links with how theories of race, and through these, racism and xenophobia developed in Europe, already in the Middle Ages (Heng 2018).

habitation and cohabitation in different places and times is less about comparison than it is about looking at and coping with relationality.

2.1 Conviviality Colored in the Context of Racism and Xenophobia

Relationality at large is also at the center of ecclesiology because it is fundamental to churches as liturgical, ethical, and normative communities with a public voice. Therefore, any theology which is concerned about conviviality needs to continually dwell on issues of historiography and how different theological discourses formed and form cohabitation on this earth.

Writing on conviviality colored implies the ongoing task of examining the relationship between theologies and e.g. ongoing colonization, subjugation, exploitation, and dehumanization worldwide.

The theological task, or for that matter, the intellectual task related to conviviality colored, is not only to identify everyday racism (*allegaags racism*, Essed 2018 [1984]) but to address the ideologies fueling xenophobia and racism. Luke de Norhona observes that there is a danger in framing racism “only” at the level of everyday experiences because:

[W]hen the dynamic between racism and conviviality is sited wholly at the scale of “the everyday”, there is very little room for an account of structural and legal forces. It then becomes satisfactory to pick a particular place – a neighbourhood, a workplace, or a park – and then proceed to describe in great detail how people interact there, the interplay of conviviality and friction. (de Norhona 2021: 164)

When working with “conviviality” next to “racism”, the notion of “xenophobia” too needs to be given attention to. The latter term calls attention to the emotive aspects of human relationality and to its political power. Emotions play an important role in conviviality and they translate e.g. into voting behavior (Bruter & Harrison 2020, Bonansinga 2020, Bornschieer et al 2021). Xenophobia signals that the emotion of “fear” is one of the emotions through which humans encounter the other/the stranger/the unknown within a society. It is important to remark that people who experience xenophobia themselves may behave as xenophobic as well. The issue of xenophobia and racism is a complex relational one. Migration dynamics looked at through experiences of xenophobia and racism shed light on patterns of exclusion and inclusion, which in turn regulate, shape, and transform cohabitation.

2.2 Conviviality Colored by Xenophobia and Racism

W.E.B Du Bois died too early (1963) to be able to correct his assessment that the color-line may not affect Europe when he wrote that “the problem of the twentieth century [was] the problem of the color line” referring to the racial inequity and relations among people of different backgrounds and to the color-line managed by ideologies of economics and global power aspirations (Du Bois 2003 [1903]:16). Xenophobia and racism are theoretical notions which originate in experiences of turbulences and dissonances of living together as human societies organized through various political powers (kingdoms, states, em-

pires, or smaller political entities). In his 1903 text, Du Bois does not mention Europe as a place where the color-line plays out, because in his view the color-line played a more significant role outside of Europe. However, social theories demonstrate that the color-line issue was present in Europe already during and long before Du Bois' observations and has a direct relationship to Europe through histories of colonization and people's enslavements (Heng 2018, Mosse 2020). The color of skin, the racial question, has been politicized and ideologized in Europe for centuries, at least in reference to Jews, Muslims, Gypsy and Roma people, and people of another faith than Christianity; of course, xenophobia also has aspects of fear of the other in terms of faith and ideology (civil wars, ethnic wars, nationalism).

Theory building on race and the color of skin occurred as early as the Middle Ages⁴ and these discourses in all their complexities (pros and cons) had clear lines to theological discourses as well. The history of slavery and the presence of Muslims and Jews in Europe were shaped by the dynamics of the color-line and reflect dynamics of dehumanization. The historical questions of how racism and xenophobia were found in Du Bois' context and how racism and xenophobia happen in contemporary Europe have strong links with how theories of race, and through it, racism and xenophobia developed in Europe, already in the Middle Ages (Heng 2018). I hasten to add a critical note to this argumentation by noting that patterns of exclusion and inclusion based on skin color and the value hierarchy, with lighter skin at the top, can be found outside of Europe and outside Christian theological discourses as well. Cheng Yinghong, in his seminal work on racism in China, argues for the universality and adaptability of racism (Cheng 2019).⁵ Hashi Kenneth Tafira calls attention to theorizing racism in the social relations among Black people in so-called post-Apartheid South Africa. He too argues for the universality of racism (2018; see also Rugunanan and Xulu-Gama 2022). Divya Dwivedi (2023) goes even further by examining the relationship between racism and the caste system in India.

Racism and xenophobia should not be seen as a fashionable passion of so-called Western scholarship and narcissism. I choose to work with the notions of xenophobia and racism because, when linked to human mobility, these point to one of the core questions of any theological-missiological conversation: questions about the other, about perceptions of the other, about belonging and habitation (the other and the land/territory/space), and about modes of relating to each other. This latter a set of notions, concerning the flip side of love as an ethical command for inter-relationality, becomes the subject matter of inquiry: hate, ego-centric love, harming love (superiority), and dehumanization of the other. This relationality (inter-human and larger environmental/cosmological) is always situational and involves the "creation", "distraction of society", and transformation of societies.

4 Historians confirm that fear of the other/the unknown is as old as humanity (Isaac 2004).

5 In a Sinocentric superiority white people from Europe are perceived as barbarians. Already in Ancient Egypt Black and Asian were two stereotypes of the enemy.

3. Introducing the Illustration: The Origins of the Need for Experimenting with the Labor-Migration-Slavery Link

In 2019 the organizers of the so-called Inspiration Festival⁶ invited me, a migration scholar teaching at the Protestant Theological University (PThU) in the Netherlands, to develop “something” on migration for the 2020 festival. The reasoning behind the invitation was: Migration is “a hot topic within the society”, so the church, in this case represented mainly by White, Dutch-speaking, and middle class people, sees as one of its tasks during such a festival, to create awareness related to societal topics. My intention was to create awareness about the complexity of migration dynamics within Dutch society by offering a range of workshops on migration. Each workshop would address a particular aspect of migration dynamics and its relation to conviviality. In order to strengthen the interdisciplinary nature of this project, I immediately connected with a cultural anthropologist from the Center for Theology of Migration at the Vrije Universiteit, and the two of us designed the following workshops: 1. On Fleeing forward: presenting a project in which “new Dutch citizens” meet “Dutch citizens” in order to foster intercultural living together; 2. On Contacts among and with migrants’ churches⁷ in the Netherlands; 3. A theatre performance by an artist who used to live as an asylum seeker; 4. On labor migration: fear and the new neighbors; 5. On slavery and churches – a mobile exposition on the relationship between churches and slavery (special focus on Suriname).

By creating such a range of workshops, I methodologically signaled that migration is never a single-issue and when focusing on the refugee crisis one should not forget about other issues related to migration dynamics which equally influence cohabitation within a society. In that sense the link between slavery of the past and economic migration of the present can be made through the issue of land exploitation.⁸ I argued that migration processes penetrate all levels of society, and a single focus approach misleads policymaking but also churches’ performance of public theology. Therefore, the design of the workshops sought to problematize the public discourses e.g. on economic migration as well labor migration.

6 The Inspiratiefestival Terschelling is an independent Christian organization that seeks to connect different Christians, mainly Dutch speaking Christians in the Netherlands, with the aim of inspiring them for more commitment to the local churches and by setting an agenda that addresses actual, relevant, and urgent issues from the broader society. Its main activity is a yearly festival organized on the island Terschelling; Hoofdpagina (inspiratiefestival-terschelling.g.nl). While there is much diversity among the organizers and visitors of the festival in terms of denomination, age, and social status, white is the dominant skin color and Dutch is the mother tongue of most of the participants.

7 See a definition of the “migrants’ church” in Nagy 2009.

8 The link again connects to the Europe-wide phenomena of farmers’ protest (e.g. Meijer 2022, Lifferink et al. 2023).

3.1 Labor-Economic Migrants?

One of the workshops intended to invite three persons originally from Poland who work in the agricultural, construction, and health sectors in the Netherlands. The workshop aimed at critically looking at what occurs with migration and labor in the Netherlands. The one-sidedness of the choice sought to emphasize how these hard-working people experience racism and xenophobia (Valdez 2021).

The meaning of the term *economic migrants*, at least within Europe, has shifted during the last few decades and has been used with different meanings in different legislative texts and by various organizations working with migration issues. The European Commission's Migration and Home Affairs, for example, gives a definition with a reference to the UNHCR Master Glossary of Terms from 2006 (meanwhile outdated): "A person who leaves their country of origin purely for economic reasons that are not in any way related to the refugee definition in order to seek material improvements in their livelihood."⁹ The same source also gives a definition of *labor migration*: "Movement of persons from one state to another, or within their own country of residence, for the purpose of employment."¹⁰ It is sufficient to look at these two definitions to state that the more complex the legal definitions on the relationship of migration ("searching for a better life") and labor are, the more complex the discourses become which use such terms to handle relationality. For example, people from Eastern Europe working in the agricultural or construction sectors in Western Europe are often identified as "economic migrants" and not as "labor migrants" by citizens of the countries they work for/in.

Upon the expansion of the EU to include a number of former Communist and Eastern European states, "economic migrant" came to denote the cheap labor coming from Eastern Europe to Western Europe and being used mainly in "black labor"¹¹. Recently the label has entered public speech along with knowledge about border controls and migration management which distinguish between "refugees" and "economic migrants". Remarkably such new definitions are rarely applied retrospectively to histories of colonization: to what extent would it help to conceive of colonizers as economic migrants? This perspective is rarely proposed because of the political sensitivity of the matter. For example, if the colonizers, in their search for a better life, considered it their right to take control of lands and waters, what are the valid arguments to condemn acts of migration undertaken in search of a better life? Whom do land, water, and air belong to? When and why? Such an elaboration might once again sharpen the question of "in search of a better life" in relation to cohabitation.

It has been documented that the color-line impacts how people in their different positions are perceived and how they experience cohabitation (De Conink 202; Sime et al

9 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/economic-migrant_en.

10 https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/labour-migration_en.

11 Note the genealogy of the term "black labor" from the exploitation of Black people to the exploitation of people underpaid.

2022; Lewicki 2023). Yet, as already observed by de Bois, one should not forget that xenophobia and racism happen within these groups as well (Hürtgen 2020).

3.2 Migration Looked at from Another Perspective: Slavery and Churches?

As introduced above, a mobile exhibition on slavery and church was meant to become another activity under the rubric of migration during the Inspiration Festival in 2020. In my reflections on how to address migration at the Festival I realized that, within the Netherlands, migration has hardly ever been thematized through the lens of the slavery system of Dutch colonialism or vice versa. Slavery has hardly ever been studied through the lens of migration studies, except for some attention to forced migration. Nevertheless, both the colonial and the so-called postcolonial period offer rich material for exploring different types of migration dynamics (Oostindie 2008; Rodriguez 2023). The slavery system offers a complex and rich entry to study the question of cohabitation through different types of migration (economic, labor, forced, legalized, and illegalized, just to name a few). In terms of working with historiographies of migration, the colonial period seems to provide genealogies of migrations which link past and present issues of habitation.

This exercise in 2019 of mapping out what is there in terms of migration in the Netherlands and what might be relevant for the predominantly white attendees of the Festival, brought me in contact with an informal workgroup, which called itself *Heilzame verwerking van het slavernijverleden voor "wit" en "zwart"* (Healing processing of the slavery past for "White" and "Black"¹²), at that time composed of representatives from the Evangelisch-Lutherse Gemeente Amsterdam,¹³ the De Evangelische Broedergemeente Amsterdam-Stad en Flevoland,¹⁴ and the Nationaal instituut Nederlands Slavernijverleden en erfenis, NiNSee.¹⁵ This workgroup, focusing on the history of slavery in Suriname, seeks to further peaceful cohabitation between Black and White residents within the political state called the Netherlands. The workgroup is clear about the importance of historical research in order to better understand patterns of racism and xenophobia today. The group seeks to understand how church and slavery could co-exist, to name the evils and the injustices originating in how Christian ideologies supported and tolerated slavery, and/or to highlight theologies which rejected the enslavement of people. Yet, an equal emphasis is also made by the motto "We must go on. And we must go on together!" I have heard this sentence uttered countless times during my encounters with this group.

In developing the contents of the different workshops, it became more and more clear that there is a link between labor-migration-slavery and cohabitation. Yet, I failed to identify theoretical frameworks through which I could delve into this link and formulate some theological reflections.

12 Note that this is my own translation of the name of the group. The group is still in conversation about the official English translation of the name.

13 Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Amsterdam, <https://www.luthersamsterdam.nl/>.

14 The Moravian Brethern Chruch in Amsterdam, <https://ebga.nl/>.

15 <https://ninsee.nl/>.

In the midst of organizing the event, COVID -19 broke out and the Inspiration Festival was cancelled. Yet, my collaboration with the different partners continued and the collaboration with the *processing slavery* group remained and deepened. The insights I gained from this group compelled me to embark on an initial exploration of how the issues raised in the mobile exhibition could inform reflections on combating racism and xenophobia in conviviality. As a disclaimer: these reflections are my own personal reflections and as such an attempt to generate further conversation on the topic.

3.3 A Mobile Exposition on Churches and Slavery

The workgroup was founded by Black and White members of the Lutheran Church in Amsterdam. Most of the Black members had roots in and/or close links to Suriname. It seems that the liturgical practice of frequently sharing the Eucharist was one of the factors which led to consciousness about the churches' involvement in the business of slavery. Yet it also created consciousness about the role of churches in leading to the peaceful (healed, reconciled) cohabitation among Blacks and Whites in the multireligious, multiethnic, and multicultural context of the Netherlands with its worldwide connectivity. It seems that participating in the Holy Communion, Black and White people together came closest to experiencing the one, wounded body of Christ.

In 2019 the workgroup announced an open writing competition in the Netherlands and the Caribbeans for essays addressing churches, the history of the enslavement, and ways to create consciousness about these. In the same year, in collaboration with the workgroup, the Luther-Museum in Amsterdam created an exhibition titled "Churches and Slavery" and the workgroup organized a symposium with the title borrowed from the name of the workgroup: *Heilzame verwerking slavernijverleden voor "wit" en "zwart"*. In the beginning of 2020 an edited book (Boeker, Doth, Vyent, and Wöhle) with the same title was published. The editorial team, composed by two Black and two White people, mirrored one of the basic principles of the workgroup: Blacks and Whites together, critically examining the past, combating xenophobia and racism, and contributing to peaceful living together. As mentioned earlier, it was this vision of the group and the existing exhibition that compelled me to initiate contact with the group and start exploring whether we could create a mobile exhibition during the above-mentioned festival as part of addressing the broader, yet interrelated, migration dynamics shaping and affecting in- and cohabitation in the Netherlands.

After a series of initial talks with one of the prominent members of the group and upon her invitation, I joined the workgroup in February 2020 with an explicit understanding that I did so as part of my work as the chair of Theology and Migration at the Protestant Theological University (PThU) in Amsterdam, which educates future ministers of the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN) and theologians for society at large. Despite the COVID-19 outbreak, the workgroup did not let go of the idea of the "travelling" exhibition on church and slavery and delegated the task to a core team, composed of three people, including myself, to create something that could travel to local churches upon invitation.

The workgroup formulated a couple of principles to guide their work, one of which is to create awareness among Christians in the Netherlands about the question of the

churches' complicity with the slavery system. The workgroup functions also as a think tank where the participation of both Blacks and Whites is seen as crucial. The workgroup includes members with different professions, including theologians and historians. Another principle is that the exhibition only travels by request: it must be the communities/churches who recognize the need to invite the exhibition into their space in order to engage with the relationship between slavery and churches. The community needs to reflect on the question: what does their community have to do with the question of slavery? Are there objects or material things which they can add to the material of the exhibition? In some cases, the church building, graves, altars, or other objects within the church have direct links with the slavery system. The churches are invited to organize a program with and around the exhibition so that they can facilitate encounters and talks on the topic. When placed in the church itself, the exhibition becomes part of the liturgical space for that time. The presence of the exhibition triggers discourses on lived theology in different ways.

The workgroup requests that the local, mainly ethnically homogeneous, churches consciously reach out to either Black or White neighbors to whom they can directly relate to via the exhibition. This latter task seems to be rather challenging for the White as well as for the Black communities.

3.4 What is the Exhibition All About?

After testing out the idea with a trial exhibition on July 1, 2021, in the Muiderkerk in Amsterdam,¹⁶ the official opening of the travelling exhibition took place at the Protestant Theological University (PThU) in December 2021. It was a conscious decision of the workgroup to start the journey of the exhibition at the PThU in order to symbolize that the theological education and training of ministers have a direct link to how ministers read and interpret the Bible, how and what they preach, how they organize church life, and how they and the churches they lead are present in public life. The opening of the exhibition comprised a symposium where Black and White speakers underlined the necessity to "process" the slavery of the past and face up to the challenges of cohabitation of White and Black in a society with numerous colonial histories. The opening also included a modest ritual of reconciliation, as well as different forms of art (poetry, music) interspersed between short addresses by people representative of the issue.

The exhibition started to travel throughout the Netherlands. The first version of the mobile exhibition was realized under the curatorship of a young Black writer and critic, Vincent van Velsen. Based on feedback from churches and visitors to the exhibition, it became clear that the exhibition needed upgrading. Therefore, two Black researchers, a historian and a theologian, were asked to update the text and the narrative of the exhibition. Their explicit intention was to give voice to the enslaved people through the narrative of the exhibition. Reflections upon and analysis of the process of upgrading deserve a study in itself because it reflects various issues throughout the collaboration which have

16 July 1, Ketu Koti ("broken chains" in the Surinamese language Sranantongois), is a national day of commemoration in the Netherlands to mark the abolition of slavery in the Dutch Antilles on July 1, 1863 (because of the transition period the abolition was not realized until 1873).

been colored by either White or Black perspectives. The upgrade was completed and first presented to the public on June 1, 2023, in the Dom in Utrecht, where an international symposium on church and slavery was being held with high ranking representatives of churches and governments in the Netherlands and former Dutch colonies.¹⁷

The narrative of the exhibition focuses on Suriname. It works with the principle of less is more. It invites the visitor to engage with a brief historical overview on the complex relationship between churches, slavery, Suriname, and the Dutch powers. The exhibition focuses on details of several individual biographies in order to signal the importance of personal life stories within the larger narratives. The exhibition refuses to work with harsh graphic material in order to acknowledge that the repetitive presentation of violent images contributes to the perpetuation of violence at large.

The exhibition focuses on Suriname as one of the places impacted by the dehumanizing system of slavery. The case of Suriname reveals the complex entanglement of capitalism (entrepreneurship, exploitation), politics (extension of the empire), and religions (the ideologies supporting or at times questioning the system). Suriname is also an example of the diversity of migration dynamics: colonizers, religious leaders (ministers, priests, missionaries), entrepreneurs, and enslaved people forcedly brought into Suriname. The Dutch colonizers, realizing that the indigenous people did not supply sufficient labor resources, started to “import” a large number of enslaved people from Africa through the administration of the Dutch West India Company (van Galen 2018). The fact that the exhibition focuses on Suriname has much to do with the fact that, among members of the Lutheran Church in Amsterdam, there are people who identify as Surinamese or/and with Surinamese roots, a prominently present group of people within the Dutch society (Gowricharn and Schuster, John 2001, Wekker 2022).

The work of the workgroup through the exhibition has been accelerated by greater societal attention given to the issue of slavery in all segments of society. Preparations for commemorating and celebrating the 150th anniversary of the Abolition of Slavery in relation to the Netherlands (1863/1873) in 2023 called attention to slavery in all its historical relations and especially as related to xenophobia and racism. Slavery has also become a controversial topic within churches. Discourses on slavery mirror the polarization within society and within the churches.

It is beyond the scope of this contribution to describe and analyze the various aspects of the data I work with. Yet one particular issue still needs to be mentioned: within the unfolding identity, growing network, and impact of the workgroup, a research proposal on church and slavery, submitted to the Dutch Research Council (NWO), was funded. In January 2023 the research project “applied for with coordination and financial support of the PThU in collaboration with colleagues at the VU Amsterdam and the University of Curaçao” was launched under the name: “Church and Slavery in the Dutch Empire: History, Theology and Heritage”.¹⁸ The workgroup owns the exhibition related to this project, is a societal stakeholder, and receives financial support for the exhibition. Meanwhile the

17 Internationaal symposium: Slavernij, doorwerking en bevrijding. Stemmen uit de Kerken, toen en nu.

18 <https://www.pthu.nl/en/news-and-events/news/2023/01/church-and-slavery-research-project-launched/>.

workgroup became a legal entity, runs its own website and activities, and became a serious societal partner in matters of consultancy and collaboration on questions of slavery.¹⁹

So far, I attempted to create a link between two areas usually studied separately, labor migration and slavery studies, in order to deepen conversations on conviviality as colored by legacies of slavery systems and other migration dynamics. I now turn to the Anthropocene in order to see to what extent theories of the Anthropocene can further inform the conversation.

4 Theorizing with the Anthropocene on Conviviality Colored

As is the case with numerous innovative concepts through which scholars seek to understand and analyze worldwide processes of cohabitation, the notion of the Anthropocene has become increasingly popular. Anne Fremaux, in her book *After the Anthropocene* (2019), offers a critical reading of the theory behind this notion. She argues that the main problem with theorizing with the Anthropocene is the change in how the question of agency has been understood in relation to it. While the “Anthropocene” was initially meant to problematize human behavior in relation to the ecosystem, humans have once again become the center of theory formation, shifting the conversation towards the ability of humans to use and shape the earth (humans being the ones who can destroy and restore the earth). Fremaux argues that,

[t]he Anthropocene, considered as an ecological predicament, is therefore rather an era of ‘nonknowledge’ or rational ignorance linked to uncertainties and ontological indeterminacy than a period of human mastery and domination of earth systems. But further, it also displays the helplessness (impotence) of already accumulated scientific knowledge to trigger necessary changes. (2019: 46;48)

This era of “nonknowledge and rational ignorance” have their emotional manifestations as well: trust, hope, and love are challenged by fear, desperation, and hate.

In Depesh Chakrabarty’s observation, paradoxically, the point where the human, the Anthropos, becomes an agent within the earth’s system, also signals a loss in the ability to grasp what it means to be human (Chakrabarty 2009). Relating to the labor-migration-slavery intersection, I argue that such dehumanization (not knowing what it means to be a human) happens in several ways: by perceiving people only as a labor force or/and by criminalizing acts of migration without a complex epistemological analysis of migration. From a theological point of view, one should remember past theories about the unknown other, e.g. how European science asked questions about Black human beings and whether they had a soul (Lupieri 2018). Again, questions about humanity cannot be addressed without relationality in all its complexity, starting with discourses, beliefs, sources, and practices related to the God question (Nagy 2021). From a theological point of view, building critical historiographies of Christianity’s involvement in the questions

19 <https://slavernijerfenis.com/about/>.

of human agency, God, and cohabitation, and how these questions happen today, is of primary importance because Christianity takes form (in times and places) through different ideologies, it becomes embodied and lived out by communities and members of communities who shape and transform life together for better or worse.

4.1 The Link Between Labor-Earth-Migration and Racism and Xenophobia

Kathryn Yusoff, professor of inhuman geography, works with the Anthropocene as a heuristic tool to decolonize geography as a discipline. In her book *A-Billion-Black-Anthropocene-Or-None* (2018) she formulates a number of claims which echo decolonizing claims made in other disciplines as well e.g. ethnology, anthropology, literature studies, and perhaps even theology. Yusoff calls for awareness of how one conceives of the Anthropocene:

As the Anthropocene proclaims the language of species life- anthropos- through a universalist geologic commons, it neatly erases histories of racism that were incubated through the regulatory structure of geologic relations. The racial categorisation of Blackness shares its natality with mining the New World, as does the material impetus for colonialism in the first instance. This means that the idea of Blackness and the displacement and eradication of indigenous peoples get caught and defined in the ontological wake of geology. The human and its subcategory, the inhuman, are historically relational to a discourse of settler-colonial rights and the material practices of extraction, of place, land, and person cut from relation through geographic displacement (and relocation through forced settlement and transatlantic slavery). [...] To redress how geology makes property relations and properties a relation of subjugation is to challenge the incompleteness of address in the Anthropocene. (Yusoff 2018: 2)

Terence Keel goes even a step further in his *Divine Variations* (2018) by claiming that Christian thought facilitated the development of the concept of race in Euro-American science to the extent of shaping how human biology is still taught and researched. As a missiologist, I am sensitive to how theology and missiology, both in terms of “playing science” and missionizing people, became complicit in dehumanization, racism, and nurturing xenophobia.

Creating theological sensitivity to racism and xenophobia through the Anthropocene implies the ongoing task of calling attention to such things as the afterlife of slavery and new forms of slavery, the “democratization of consumption” (Chakrabarty 2019: 62), the great acceleration linked to so-called decolonization processes and the period after WWII (Lewis and Maslin 2018), and “the capitalist agriculture” which keeps exploiting not only natural resources but also human beings as “gendered and generational as well as racialised difference for profit” (Rogaly 2020: 84).

Rogaly’s argument on the relationship between capitalist agriculture, slavery, and human exploitation through labor is powerful for my argument because it shows how xenophobia and racism, related to descendants of enslaved people and present day “economic migrants” either working on the fields of western Europe or living in exile from the lands of Africa, share roots in the power relations that regulate life, labor, and welfare

in a society. Scholarship conceptualizes these shared roots as racial capitalism (Robinson 1983, Melamed 2015, Bhattacharyya 2018).

For me, as a theologian engaged in migration studies, the question is not so much, “[c]an humans flourish on a rapidly changing planet, or is the future one of grim survival, or even our own extinction?” (Lewis and Maslin 2018: 5) but how can theology and missiology somehow contribute to the peaceful cohabitation of numerous creatures in a specific place and time, even when the nomenclature of defining a specific time and place remains captive to an applied ideology, in this case that of the nation-state.

4.2 The Anthropocene as a Critical Perspective on Ongoing Exploitation

As stated above, research on racism and xenophobia within European societies has intensified in the last decades or so. Perceptions of migration dynamics seem to be one of the major components leading to more racism and xenophobic behavior within these societies. In the context of the Netherlands: In 2021 the Racism and Technology Centre was launched in Amsterdam with the aim of researching how new technologies facilitate new forms of racism and “mirror” “existing racist practices in Dutch society” (<https://racismandtechnology.center/about/>). What I rarely see in migration and racism studies is an exploration of links which connect present behavior in a given society with the “processing” of past and existing traumas, rooted in the constants of violence and dehumanization. Understanding slavery and its present forms within the dominant economic ideologies requires critical engagement with e.g. how is labor is conceived of, organized, and practiced within a society. What is the role of “black labor” and “black market” and who is involved in them? The legality or illegality of labor is another question that touches on inclusion and exclusion. Why are asylum seekers prohibited from working? Why are labor migrants underpaid and exploited? What colors of skin dominate which spheres of the labor market? These questions, seen through the Anthropocene, shed light on ongoing processes of exploitation, domination, reification of human beings, and even demonization of human beings.

In a recent study, Kevin Bales and Benjamin K. Sovacool (2021) report on how modern slaves (an estimated 40 to 46 million people who fit an operational definition of modern slavery) around the world are “compelled to destroy their own livelihoods” and how environmental destruction increases the rate of enslavement. Their studies’ results are reminiscent of sugar plantations and other monoculture practices which forced enslaved people to destroy their own environments or, in the case of forced deportation, to destroy other lands. Bales and Sovacool, as “exact scientists”, also arrive to the conclusion that the “separation of cultural, social and legal from the natural and environmental is a false and potentially fatal dichotomy” (2021: 8). Theorizing with the Anthropocene raises further theological questions such as: what is it to be a human? What hierarchical structures and structures of domination and extraction are active in a particular context, in a particular society? After so-called decolonization or the abolition of slavery systems by the big European powers, the question of belonging, also through church membership and citizenship, shapes cohabitation. How do these relate to faith-communities/churches? Who are “we humans” of the Anthropocene? What kind of hermeneutics of habitation does theology offer, based on what sources? How do these same churches, which host

the mobile exhibition on slavery and church, relate to labor exploitation and xenophobic manifestations towards the “working other” in their midst?

5 Some Insights on How the Mobile Exhibition Might Become a Tool in Combating Racism and Xenophobia

Facing the past is necessary in order to *live peacefully* in the present. Based on the reception of the mobile exhibition, it can be said that there is an explicitly formulated desire by the churches to critically look at their relation to the system of slavery. The churches, which so far have hosted the exhibition, have also expressed their desire to meet “the other”, meaning those with different skin color. The desire to encounter the other is there. The challenge remains to create spaces in which encounters between Black and White Dutch residents are possible and happen.

The exhibition reveals *a large color gap within society*. It seems that, in the ecclesial landscape of the Netherlands, Whites still rarely meet Blacks in forms of cohabitation. Their parallel worlds have societal consequences for perceiving and dealing with the other in all levels of cohabitation. Black persons must repeatedly explain that racism and xenophobia, as well as the economic injustices related to it, have their roots in the enslavement of people. White people are often willing to learn more from their Black neighbors by reciting the claim that “about these things we have hardly ever heard in the past. We heard about the Golden Age but did not realize that that was the age of slavery as well.” At the same time, Black people also acknowledge that the lack of memory about slavery is due to not being informed about the past.²⁰

The exhibition highlights the *importance of the physical space for in- and cohabitation*. Material objects (graves, paintings, archives) recall the stories of slavery in the past. In various cases the localities (rooms) were the same places where the church’s ancestors debated and decided about their involvement in trade, missions, and other forms of worldwide connectivity. Today, the same churches debate actual issues of migration. Like in the times of slavery, today theologies, when shared from the pulpit, in liturgies, and during Bible studies, also guide believers in their social engagement. Most of these churches have a high rate of societal (political, diaconal, missional) involvement yet are by no means communities whose members share a uniform vision about politics or the role of churches in society. The challenge remains: how do churches create pedagogies that see different societal issues both in their actuality and as embedded in historical processes?

The exhibition raises questions about *citizenship and societal participation*; thus it raises questions about exclusion and inclusion at large. Discourses on cohabitation and its arrangements within the Netherlands are diverse. Perhaps one of the shared understandings is that the Netherlands is one of the most diverse multiethnic, multireligious, and multicultural societies in Europe. The historiography of the diversity of its population is

20 The mobile exhibition continues to bridge the color gap: it even made it to the 2023 convening of the Inspiration Festival. For the first time in the history of the Festival a group of young Black people visited the Festival as well. Writing on color gaps in 2023.

more contested, but there seems to be agreement that different types and processes of migration have fueled this superdiversity. Its history is both as a colonial power (the political predecessors of the nation-state), thus allowing and carrying out a large variety of migration processes (e.g. trade including the slave trade, entrepreneurship, and mission) outside of Europe, as well as a territory that includes the history of the arrival of political and religious refugees during the time of Reformation. The processes of decolonization, marked by two world wars, also shaped the demographic composition of what is now the inhabited (not cohabited) political administration called the Netherlands. The encounters of Blacks and Whites, though crucial for addressing the societal evils of xenophobia and racism, often occur at the level of rather homogenous groups of people from both sides: such as those who share a similar social position or belong to the middle class. To what extent could both Black and White people, who are experiencing economic injustice, become part of the conversations in these encounters, remains an open question.

The exhibition invites people to *reflect on identities*. The exhibition shows that Dutch citizens, whose ancestors were active agents in accelerating globalization processes (and even these categories are not clear-cut), become potential agents themselves for creating different discourses on migration through the histories of encounters among people with their quest for living and how this quest deals with xenophobia and racism (the migrant reference). Xenophobia and racism within in- or cohabited places are practices rooted in manifold historical processes of human encounters. The construction of so-called hybrid identities, in the particular case of the Dutch churches, includes people who have among their ancestors both enslaved women and slave-owner fathers and reveals even more of the complexities involved. Xenophobia and racism then become internalized mechanisms of managing and coping with inter-human relationships and constructing and maintaining identities.

The exhibition calls attention to *hierarchies of migration histories*. The question of to what extent the exhibition can further address the question of conviviality in the complexity of various migration processes (and not only those related to past enslavement) remains an open question. The question of agency however is a complex one: E.g. church membership also implies a form of political participation. When looking at how churches participate in transforming in- or cohabitation, one needs to speak about churches in the broadest ecclesiological terms, namely churches being composed of humans who are social and political agents e.g. their political belonging (citizenship) and social status. Churches in this sense are always more than “mere” legal persons or institutions. For example, a church member, through his/her other belongings and affiliations, may be influential for conviviality in a particular context. An elder might work as a lawyer, a member of the church might be in charge of an NGO, another member might have a leading position in a political party, and yet another one might run a business or work for the Dutch Immigration Department. In a similar way, in the past, a church elder could be a plantation owner or play an integral role in the slave trade. How church belonging is part of living an ordinary life in all its aspects becomes relevant when looking at xenophobia and racism in contemporary Europe. From this approach arises the question: where is church? The answer is also where its members are (live, work, and interact) during but above all beyond church services. Church is there where its members live their lives in relation to other human beings and their environment.

6 Conclusion

The observations resulting from the case of the mobile exhibition demand a more complex and holistic ecclesiological approach to addressing xenophobia and racism. They call attention to the historical components of theologies which also guide societal behavior. I have argued that xenophobia and racism, like migration, cannot be studied as single societal issues. Ideologies and worldviews, which fuel or combat xenophobia and racism, penetrate all components that make up a society and regulate living together.

I have proposed working with theories of the Anthropocene in order to address racism and xenophobia and to study the link between systems of slavery and economic migration. I have argued that the relevance and urgency of slavery studies has to do with the fact that descendants of enslaved people continue to experience xenophobia and racism, especially when they live as citizens of the former colonizers' societies. Nevertheless, there is hardly any awareness of the fact that the above mentioned experiences are shared by people with more recent and perhaps somewhat different migration histories such as those of so-called migrant workers, guest laborers, asylum seekers, and refugees. The link I have established discloses the constant in each context, namely, the relationship between land exploitation, power relations, migration, and the quest for a better life (including a life without racism).

I invite theologizing with the Anthropocene through migration studies: to take up the task "to position mobility justice as both a powerful methodological and normative alternative to those who would approach the relationship between the impacts of climate change and migration as a problem that warrants technical solutions" (Baldwin, Fröhlich, Rothe 2019: 290–291). The ideas sketched out above might lead to methodological and normative alternatives to canonized forms of Christian education on relationality, starting with problematizing two entrenched dichotomies within Christian theology: nature and culture (see again Chakrabarty 2021) and gospel and culture. Theorizing with the Anthropocene helped me to establish links between past systems of slavery, as systems rooted in exportation, capitalism, and dehumanization, and forms of exploitation, capitalism, and dehumanization in present times.

I have argued that Neil's invitation to take the "normality" of migration as a common denominator might help to identify such links as those which guide these reflections. Doing so helps to identify manifestations of xenophobia and racism in their larger interconnectivity e.g. in contemporary European societies but also helps to combat xenophobia and racism in an interdisciplinary fashion for the sake of peaceful forms of conviviality.

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