

Representations and Reparations of Slavery in the Caribbean

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The twenty-first-century Atlantic world shows a growing interest in its slave past, although the way in which that past is remembered differs substantially on both sides of the ocean. Take the once two biggest slaving nations of Europe: Spain has nothing to commemorate that past while Portugal has a small museum in a harbour town and an unfinished monument in Lisbon. Meanwhile, the UK, France, and the Netherlands each have several slavery monuments and several permanent exhibitions in major museums; the UK even has a separate museum wholly dedicated to slavery in the UK and the Dutch are planning one of their own in the capital, Amsterdam. And it is like this in the Caribbean as well: a gigantic memorial centre in Guadeloupe on the one hand and hardly more than one room dedicated to slavery in the—privately run—Surinaams Museum in Paramaribo.

In this chapter the representation of slavery in Caribbean museums is inventoried and compared to the representation of slavery on the Dutch Caribbean islands of Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao. The question will be posed of whether and how the different kinds and scales of slavery representations in the Caribbean cultural heritage field are also representations of how the particular nations relate to that past. Eventually, this particular relationship is analysed from the angle of reparations: what is the role of Caribbean nations in articulating (or not articulating) a reparations discourse and how do the Dutch Caribbean nations fit into it?

Caribbean Museums and Slavery

The Caribbean has approximately four hundred museums in total, most being in Cuba and Puerto Rico (around ninety each).¹ This implies something like one museum for every 110,000 Caribbean inhabitants. In the Netherlands this figure is around twenty-five thousand,² four times more museums per capita. Given the Caribbean's wealth inequality with the Netherlands and that the latter is among the countries that have the world's highest museum densities, the Caribbean does not seem to score so badly. Until the end of the 1990s there was not a single museum in the Netherlands dedicating part of its permanent exhibitions to the country's

slavery past. That history had happened far from home and was not considered part of national history. That has been changing quite rapidly since the turn of the century, and this goes for other Western European countries as well, particularly those with large Caribbean migrant communities.

It would not be strange to suppose that this late acknowledgement did not exist in the Caribbean, where, after all, the slave past had taken place. But the reality is almost the opposite. This is because until the 1960 and '70s Caribbean museums were as colonial and Eurocentric as their counterparts in the colonial metropolises. The atrocities of the past were just that, the past, and museums existed to tell stories of pride, to civilise, and to show things of interest. Furthermore, Caribbean museums were actually only of interest to the middle classes and elites, not to the majority of the population. The latter actually had no time, no money, and often not the literacy to visit museums which did not connect or add meaning to the lives they lived. Such a museum was, as the Barbadian minister of information and culture stated in 1980 regarding the Barbados Museum, "not really representative of the various aspects of Barbadian life ... while the collection tells the visitor a great deal about Barbadian merchants and planters, their life-style and their adoption of European material culture, it says little or nothing about slaves, plantation laborers or peasant farmers"³

From the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century museums in general in the Caribbean had been private initiatives. Despite the strong rhetoric of the "civilising mission" of the colonial state, the educational mission of museums, which was in itself acknowledged, was left to private commercial societies, intellectual associations, and financial benefactors. Of course, they presented what was of interest to them and their alleged civilised class. Over time these museums often started out by presenting local progress—being part of the larger world—in agriculture and commerce, and later included local natural history and eventually made local and international (Western) art part of their collections. When forms of decolonisation became visible on the horizon after World War II, history and bits of local folklore also became part of the museum narrative but still as a part of colonial history. All kinds of colonial buildings, such as forts, plantation mansions, and town houses were musealised but only told the story of the colonisers. The history that mattered to and represented the majority of the population was ignored, as the focus remained Eurocentric.⁴

Only with independence, or at least when forms of local autonomy started to be realised, did anti- or even postcolonial nationalist governments start to become aware that they had responsibility for the education, unity, and national pride of this majority. Jamaica led the way, other countries followed, and a number of the larger museums became nationally subsidised institutions. But there were, and still are, enormous differences in the region. Of course, in Cuba most museums have

been government institutions since 1959. On the other hand, in Suriname, which became independent in 1975, there still is no national museum and all museums are private, although some do receive a (little) bit of state support.

Another incentive for more attention to local history and culture in many Caribbean societies, apart from nationalism, has been the rise of tourism. Tourists often want to delve into a country's individuality, which does not exclude sensitive parts of local history, such as slavery, but to a certain extent it has to fit into "the exotic" experience of holidays in the tropics. Even local visitors often have a longing for a kind of exoticism. For the first group it is the exoticism of the unknown aspects of "them"; for the latter group it is the kind of exoticism that identifies with expressions of the horrors experienced by blood relations, i.e. their forefathers and mothers. Both groups are catered for by many history museums and sites that present shackles, chains, buoys, and stories of severe punishment. Many telling visitor accounts can be found on the internet. Here's just one example from La Isabelica Plantation Museum in Cuba: "One of the few old coffee plantations still [stands] in the area. It has plenty to see as the archaeological finds are all housed here so we have not only the tools used in the coffee making process but the instruments of torture for the slave population. You can also see inside the owner's home. We had a fantastic local guide who was very knowledgeable and passionate on his subject and made it a great trip for us."⁵

Analysing Caribbean museums⁶ shows that there seem to be more museums and museum galleries dedicated to precolonial Taino cultures and archaeology than to slavery. An inventory of eighty-five slavery museums worldwide mentions only eight Caribbean museums dedicated to slavery.⁷ This, however, is not correct. It might even be stated that there is hardly a Caribbean historical museum that does not pay attention to the slavery past of the society of which it is part. Knowing the Caribbean's history, more substantial attention to slavery could have been expected. And despite all the care and energy put into these exhibitions, lack of money, staff, and training make most of them look rather alike, and predictable.⁸ A chronological timeline rules almost everywhere. For instance, the government-funded National Museum of Saint Kitts and Nevis pays substantial attention to slavery via three galleries. These are described on the internet as presenting "a small collection of artefacts, alongside images and text panels. The first gallery examines the indigenous populations of the island, alongside exhibits relating to natural history and ecology. The second gallery explores the arrival of Europeans to the island and the development of slavery and the plantation economy. There are artefacts showcasing the brutal nature of enslavement, including an iron slave collar. It also explains the processes involved in the cultivation of sugar, as used on the plantations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also provides a narrative of abolition and emancipation. The final gallery examines the colonial

governance of St Kitts post emancipation, through to independence from British rule in 1983.”⁹ This chronological design, starting with indigenous culture and ecology, plantation slavery, and (post) emancipation, can be found throughout the Caribbean. Sometimes permanent or temporary exhibits of African cultures and local popular culture are added. This is the case in the National Museum of Saint Kitts and Nevis, with a special gallery on the evolution of Carnival costumes, as well as temporary exhibits on a particular collection or artifact. The museum advertises itself as “not only having significance as a tourist attraction but [it] is more fundamentally a symbol of nationhood and an important educational facility.”¹⁰

Another example is the Suriname Museum. Suriname has no museum particularly dedicated to its history of slavery, which lasted from 1650 to 1863. However, the old fort, which is part of Paramaribo’s historic and UNESCO listed World Heritage colonial centre, houses a national, though privately owned, museum.¹¹ It is a cultural-historical museum that “aims to show the diversity of the Surinamese people and make it accessible to students and scientists, among others.”¹² The composition of the collection shows its colonial background in the vast number of “exotic” indigenous and archaeological and Maroon objects that form the original core. Furthermore, the sub-collections are cantered around the main ethnic groups: Creoles (i.e., non-Maroon Afro-Surinamese), Hindustani (former British Indians), Chinese, Javanese, and Europeans. The museum also has an interesting historical photograph collection of some ten thousand items as well as a smaller collection of visual arts (historical and some modern art).

One attractively arranged room of the fort, which contains neither too much nor too little, is the start of the “History of Suriname” tour through the museum and is partly dedicated to slavery. There are a number of objects on show, from a bottle painted with two enslaved men and their names, to clay pipes, Maroon wood carvings, drums, portraits of enslaved (Brazilian) men and women, and the inevitable shackles, manacles and slave collars. Five text panels explain the (abolition of the) slave trade, marronage, peace treaties with the Maroons, the British interim government (1799–1814), sugar and coffee production, and the plantation regime. Upstairs, some more buoys and cuffs can be found as well as a series of illustrations of the life of a plantation overseer around 1840, sketched by a Dutchman who had held that position for a short time himself in Suriname.¹³ That is about all that is presented on slavery.

Of course, the museum has set itself the task of telling the history of the diversity of cultures in Suriname, so there is little room for each of them. However, this is not the kind of presentation Surinamese identify with very much, despite many school visits. As a historiographer of museums in Suriname wrote: “[F]or many Surinamese the national equivalent of [Rembrandt’s] the Night Watch will probably not be a museum object but something immaterial like a dance, song,



Suriname Museum Paramaribo, slavery objects (photo Alex van Stipriaan)

tradition or poem ... Surinamese museums, therefore, never developed into a national symbol.”¹⁴ So probably the (traditional European) concept of museums as a display of material culture does not work well without substantial room for intangible heritage.

This is not limited to Suriname, and sometimes it is not even about what or how much is presented, but how it is presented. For example, it is surprising to read a comment of a Jamaican church minister who visited in 2016 the one-room Pompey Museum of Slavery and Emancipation in the Bahamas.¹⁵ This museum is in honour of Pompey, an enslaved rebel leader. On his return the minister stated that Jamaica needed such a museum as well. “The Pompey Museum is small but effective. It displays powerful artifacts such as instruments of punishment, but it does not have even one hundredth of the artifacts that Jamaica has stored in Port Royal.”¹⁶ The artifacts presented in the Pompey museum relate to and tell the story of the experiences of enslaved Africans, from their journey from West Africa to life on plantations in the Caribbean and their fight for freedom. “The museum has books on sale but again could not compare in quantity to the books on Jamaica’s slave history. We have a significant story to tell in a slave museum,” the minister said.¹⁷ Jamaica’s National History Museum, comprised of buildings on four separate sites, with a collection of around 19,000 artifacts, including a rich African collection as well as a slavery collection, is an icon. Still the Jamaican minister identifies more with the presentation of slavery in a micro museum in Nassau, because it focuses on the enslaved and their daily life, emancipation and beyond, and nothing else.

For most Caribbean nations slavery is recognised as an integral part of national history. At the same time, however, it seems to be treated less thoroughly than might be expected. The reason for this could be a fear of inciting anti-white sentiment,

which might not be favourable for national cohesion and/or the tourist industry. This almost certainly is the case in Cuba, where the revolutionary government officially abolished racism, but whose history is drenched in slavery, and race relations are still delicate.¹⁸ The outcome is clear in the only Cuban museum mentioned in the worldwide list of eighty-five slavery museums.

The Cuban Museo Nacional Ruta del Esclavo (Slave Route National Museum) is housed in San Severino Castle, in Matanzas, and is part of UNESCO's Slave Route project. It receives few visitors because it is not located in tourist hubs such as Havana or Santiago and is too far from the city centre to make it attractive to locals. Nonetheless, its story is considered to concern all Cubans, because "the vast majority of the population is mestizo, so the subject painfully and in a special way touches the heart of the island's inhabitants," as the official tourist website states.¹⁹

The museum aims to showcase the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade in order to prevent anything like it from ever happening again.²⁰ It has three exhibition rooms with photographs and modern textiles from West Africa, archaeological items, historical photographs and paintings of Matanzas patriots of the era, poems, prints of slavery elsewhere in the Caribbean as well as in Cuba, drums, and other objects. Visitors can touch and weigh in their hands a slave's chain. Finally, a fourth and special room is dedicated to the fourteen main orishas of the Santería religion, presented as human sculptures, dressed in their symbolic clothes and colours and with their paraphernalia and musical instruments. The visitor leaves with no idea about the lives and histories of enslaved Cubans. The fifty-page visitor guide, both in Spanish and English, is only about the history of the castle itself.²¹

Probably the latest and certainly the largest Caribbean slavery museum—although it is called a memorial—is the Caribbean Centre for Expressions and for the Memory of the Slave Trade and Slavery, Mémorial ACTe (MACTe), in Guadeloupe. Erected on the former site of a slavery-era sugar factory, it is an impressive museum through its hypermodern architectural design. It is a museum as well as a centre for performing arts and debates, using several disciplines, materials and techniques to tell and discuss the history of slavery and the slave trade as well as its aftermath. It is also part of UNESCO's Slave Route project.

The more than eight thousand square meters of exhibition space "have permanent exhibitions on the history of slavery around the world from antiquity to the present, with a main focus on the transatlantic slave system, using objects, reconstructions, visual and audio installations, digital interactives and contemporary forms of artistic expression. The MACTe has a research centre where visitors can look into their genealogy, it has a library and a conference hall."²²

The genesis of this institution is quite complicated. Guadeloupe, still an overseas department of the French Republic, was promised over the years a slavery museum by several French presidents, but this was never realised. Eventually, in

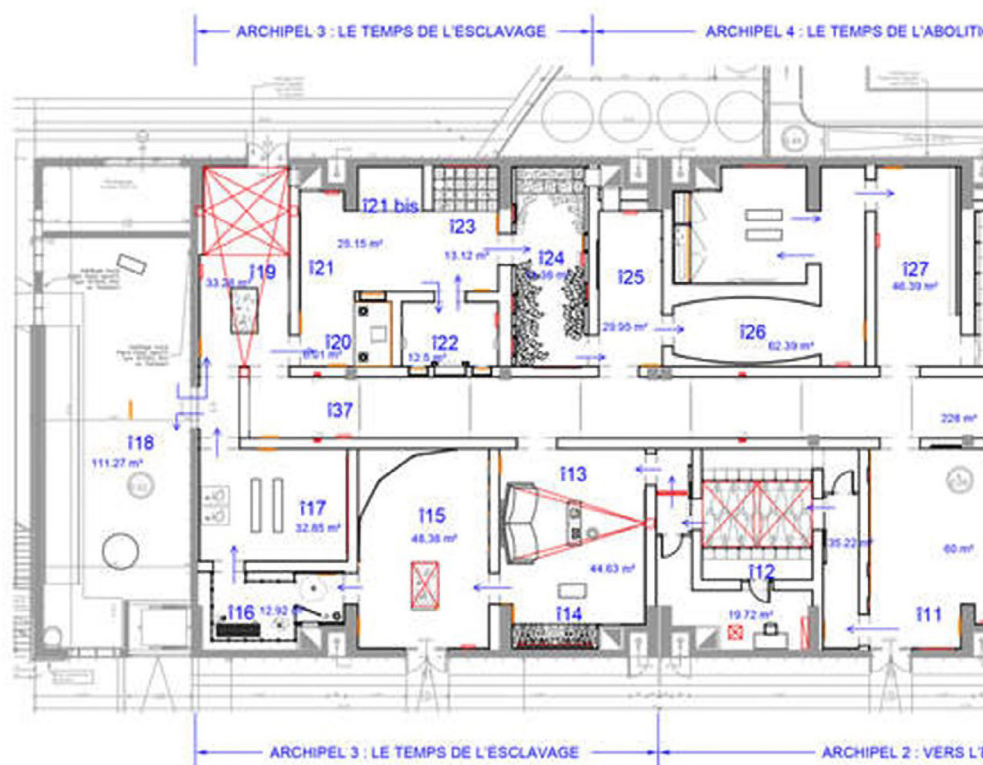
2006, an influential Guadeloupean politician, Victorin Lurel,²³ took the initiative and asked the French government to support him. Eventually, it became a prestige project for both Lurel and the French president François Hollande. About €85 million was spent on the project. However, Paris exerted its neocolonialist influence when it decided that the institution could not be called a museum, because the Guadeloupean director had not graduated from the *Ecole des Chartes*, which is a requirement in France. Therefore, MACTe is defined as the Caribbean Centre for the Expression and Memory of the Slave Trade and Slavery.²⁴

The museum presents six thematical so-called “archipelagos” (Figure 2): The Americas, Towards Slavery and the Slave Trade, The Time of Slavery, The Time of Abolition, Post-Abolition and Segregation, Today. These archipelagos consist of a number of thematical islands and a gallery containing two islands with visual art.

The question is whether this museum actually is a Caribbean museum, or a European museum that happens to be in Guadeloupe. In any case, because of Guadeloupe’s non-sovereign French Department status, the MACTe was able to receive in 2017 the European Museum Prize of the Council of Europe. They judged it an “outstanding, stunning and innovative museum [that] fits precisely with the Council of Europe criteria. Initially conceived as a memorial, the museum has become not only a living, dynamic place for memory of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery (connecting Africa, the Americas and Europe), but also a commemoration of the resilience of human beings. It promotes tolerance and opens up in a creative way perspectives for the future.”²⁵ Again, it can be doubted whether this institute is something the local population identifies with, but it certainly is a part of Guadeloupe branding by the government.

It should be added that many museums, in addition to their exhibitions, have programs that offer different kinds of performances of immaterial cultural expressions from the (slavery) past. Particularly music and dance performances are popular among the local populations as well as tourists. All in all, it is surprising, generally speaking, how relatively unchallenging slavery exhibitions are: they offer much about physical punishment and violence but hardly any explanation of what it was like to be enslaved, to survive, to stay strong and mentally healthy, to rebel, or what emancipation exactly meant, what happened afterwards, and what legacies still exist today.

Considering those legacies in particular would perhaps translate into washing dirty laundry in public. Though there is no evidence that Caribbean nations censor national presentations of the slavery past, it is not hard to imagine that a more complex narrative of the past and the present is not considered by those responsible to be in the interest of national coherence, nor in attracting white tourists. There might be much truth in what Frith and Hodgson concluded for France as well as Haiti: “[T]he subjectification of slavery to state discourses governed by national



ARCHIPEL 1 : LES AMERIQUES

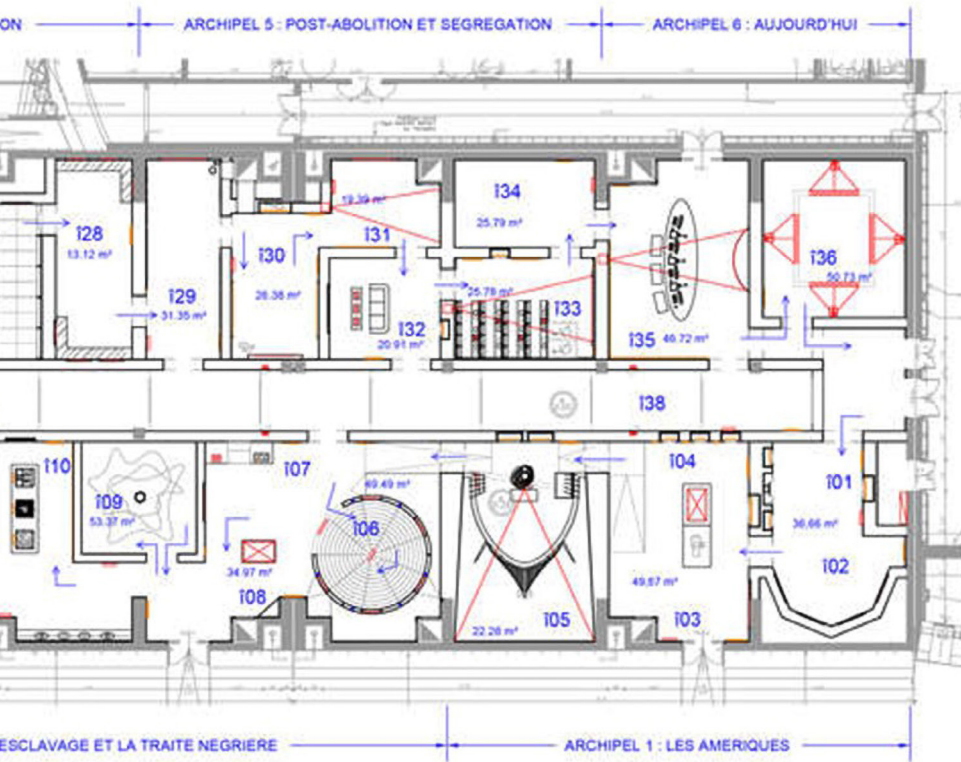
- Ile 1 : La Vierge Noire
- Ile 2 : 4 destins noirs
- Ile 3 : La conquête
- Ile 4 : Amérindiens et résistance
- Ile 5 : Pirates, corsaires et forbans

ARCHIPEL 2 : VERS L'ESCLAVAGE ET LA TRAITE NEGRIERE

- Ile 6 : Panorama de l'esclavage
- Ile 7 : Le doute de l'Occident
- Ile 8 : L'Afrique du 15e au 17e siècle
- Ile 9 : Ouidah, l'arbre de l'oubli
- Ile 10 : Commerce triangulaire
- Ile 11 : Les flux de l'esclavage
- Ile 12 : Le bateau, la traversée, la vente

ARCHIPEL 3 : LE TEMPS DE L'ESCLAVAGE

- Ile 13 : Le Code Noir
- Ile 14 : Répressions
- Ile 15 : La société de plantation
- Ile 16 : La société de plantation, Case d'esclave
- Ile 17 : Journée de 4 esclaves
- Ile 18 : Jardin et langue créole
- Ile 19 : Résistances des esclaves
- Ile 20 : Le rôle de la franc-maçonnerie
- Ile 21 : Cérémonie du saut d'eau
- Ile 21 bis : Autel de Santería
- Ile 22 : Eglise et esclavage
- Ile 23 : Les tambours
- Ile 24 : Mascarade



ARCHIPEL 4 : LE TEMPS DE L'ABOLITION

Ile 25 : Saint Domingue
Ile 26 : Période révolutionnaire : la
tère abolition
Ile 27 : Le rétablissement de
l'esclavage en Guadeloupe
Ile 28 : Le début du 19ème siècle et
les abolitions

ARCHIPEL 5 : POST-ABOLITION ET SEGREGATION

Ile 29 : La post-abolition
Ile 30 : Les Etats-Unis d'Amérique
Ile 31 : Du retour d'exil à la terre
promise
Ile 32 : Conquêtes coloniales en
Afrique
Ile 33 : Mutation de l'image du Noir
Ile 34 : Rastadream

ARCHIPEL 6 : AUJOURD'HUI

Ile 35 : Aliénations modernes
Ile 36 : Pluralités guadeloupéennes

GALERIE

Ile 37 : Groupe Nègro-caribbes
Ile 38 : Art contemporain

Fig. 2. Map of the structure of spaces in MACTe, Guadeloupe

interests results in a recognition that paradoxically fails to recognize slavery and its complex meanings for society today.”²⁶

Representation of Slavery in Museums in Curaçao, Aruba, and Bonaire

Beginning in the 1990s, according to Valika Smeulders, Curaçao generated “an exceptionally high density of slavery presentations.”²⁷ This is in sharp contrast to the other Dutch Caribbean islands, which have hardly any (permanent) slavery presentations at all, except for a small one in the Sint Eustatius Historical Foundation Museum, mainly showing old maps, drawings, and some archaeological artifacts. Aruba had an interesting temporary exhibition on slavery in the National Archives in 2008. To the surprise of many, Aruba turned out to have a slavery past! However, the slavery narrative has not found a permanent place in Aruban heritage institutions.

In Bonairean museums such as the Bonaire Museum of Natural History, the Washington Park Museum, and the Museo Mangasina di Rei, all three housed in colonial buildings, slavery is referred to mainly via cultural traditions such as the Simadan harvest festival. The youngest museum on the island is Terramar Museum. It opened in 2016 and was a precondition set by the government for winning the tender to build a shopping mall in Bonaire’s capital, Kralendijk. The museum presents seven thousand years of Bonairean history, of which slavery is a (small) part.²⁸ In fact, that part is more general than it is Bonairean, exhibiting large prints and art works depicting slavery throughout the Americas, including Suriname and Sint Eustatius. The museum actually is a typical example of nation-branding, in the sense that it was a government initiative and that it works for tourists. Locals, however, generally do not seem to have much affection for the museum, which is supposed to tell their history.

Also, the small stone slave quarters near the salt pans are visible to everyone, presented in every single tourist flyer, and even described as “a grim reminder of Bonaire’s repressive past of slavery from 1633 to 1862.”²⁹ Obviously, this forms part of Bonairean nation-branding too. However, a more coherent story or comprehensive narrative of Bonairean slavery is nowhere to be found in heritage presentations.

In Curaçao the representation of slavery is complex. Not only are museums small, understaffed, underfinanced, and largely unsupported by the government, it also seems Afro-Curaçaoans generally have mixed feelings about their links to the slavery past. They are proud of the culture they built, but they generally do not want to be connected with African origins or the humiliations of the past.³⁰ Tourists often seem to be more interested in the slavery narrative than locals do.³¹ And to top it off, there is or at least was quite some Dutch influence in where and



Room in Kura Hulanda Museum, Curaçao (photo Alex van Stipriaan)

how it is or was (re)presented. For instance, the oldest museum, probably with the best claim to a national status, is the Curaçao Museum. It was founded in 1948 by a Dutch medical doctor and artist, Dr. Chris Engels, and his Curaçaoan wife, Lucila Boskaljon. It is one of the very few heritage institutions that is structurally supported by the government. The most visible reference to the slavery past is the Klok di Katibu (Slave Bell) in the museum garden, which was used to call plantation slaves to work. Since 2004 the museum's basement has housed an exhibition on Afro-Curaçaoan culture since emancipation.

The latter theme is what can be found in a number of museums. Among these are the Tula museum, opened in 2007 and housed in the mansion of the plantation where the famous rebellion led by Tula in 1795 began, and the Museo Kas di Pal'i Maishi, housed in a traditional Afro-Curaçaoan peasant home and yard. Both are managed by an Afro-Curaçaoan historian and activist. The same attention for specific aspects of Afro-Curaçaoan culture can be found in the small Museo di Tambú Shon Cola as well as the much larger institute known as National Archeological and Anthropological Memory Management (NAAM). The former tells the history and culture of the Afro-Curaçaoan dance and drum called *tambú*, which developed during the slavery era and has always been one of the main targets of the Roman

Catholic Church; the latter presents exhibitions on the national material and immaterial collections, including a lot of oral history, but not very much on slavery itself.

Finally, the Savonet Museum, housed in the mansion of one of the largest former plantations of Curaçao, was turned into a modern museum by Curaçao-born artist Felix de Rooy, whose career was made in Suriname, the Netherlands, and Curaçao. The museum, located in Christoffel Natural Park, is dedicated to the natural environment and visual art and also shows the historical culture of those who used to live on the plantations, enslaved as well as enslavers.

That leaves one more relevant museum, which is particularly dedicated to African culture and the history of slavery, the Kura Hulanda Museum, in the heart of Curaçao's capital, Willemstad. It was privately developed in the late 1990s by a Dutch millionaire, Jacob Gelt Dekker, in a then run-down and drug-infested neighbourhood. Thanks to his efforts and other initiatives the neighbourhood is now in every tourist guide. Tourists, particularly (African) Americans, are the main group or market for this museum, which is a spacious annex to a hotel of the same name. It has an art garden, a life-size replica of Djenné's city entrance, and fifteen large rooms with hundreds of artifacts and replicas. The theme is a journey from the cradle of civilisation in Africa through the horrors of centuries of transatlantic slavery to the present. Its focus is on West African art and cultures and the story of the slave trade and slavery. A basement of one of the buildings is a reconstruction of the hold of a slave ship, into which visitors can descend and get a feel of how it must have been for the enslaved. While this museum presents a general history of slavery, it is mainly about Suriname, the British Caribbean, and North America. There is hardly anything with which Curaçaoans, or Dutch Caribbean people in general, can identify as specifically "theirs." This stresses the idea that slavery was not very important to Curaçaoans or to their history. In fact, the museum targets African Americans, who can combine a Caribbean holiday with a sort of pilgrimage without going to Africa.

In a recent survey and series of dialogues in the Kingdom of the Netherlands,³² initiated by the Dutch Parliament, local Dutch Caribbean authorities admitted that in education the attention paid to the slavery past is too limited and that (re) presentations of slavery in museums are too general, with hardly any room for—or much knowledge of—the local narrative. Respondents in the Dutch Caribbean agreed that they struggle with negative imaging, including in museums, which hinders personal as well as political emancipation. The small government annual budget of less than half a million euros allotted to cultural heritage aims at "the advancement of Nation Building, Social Cohesion, Identity Development and Preservation and Protection of Material and Immaterial Heritage."³³ However, it seems as if the slavery past is not part of that officially recognised heritage, because the heritage institutions that do address the slavery past are not part of this

structural governmental financial infrastructure.³⁴ Generally speaking, all three islands present indigenous archaeological objects to a much greater degree than they do a coherent narrative of slavery.

Reparations

In September 2013, when CARICOM celebrated its fortieth birthday, this organisation of Caribbean nations announced it was going to demand reparations from eleven former European slaving nations. The CARICOM Reparations Commission (CRC) was installed in order to “establish the moral, ethical and legal case for the payment of reparations by the Governments of all the former colonial powers and the relevant institutions of those countries, to the nations and people of the Caribbean Community for the Crimes against Humanity of Native Genocide, the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and a racialized system of chattel Slavery.”³⁵ The result was the 2014 CARICOM Ten Point Plan for Reparatory Justice. Among the fifteen full members of CARICOM are Suriname, a former Dutch colony, and Haiti, the Caribbean’s first independent nation. The other thirteen are all former British colonies, as are the five associated members. Recently, Aruba and Curaçao, without being completely sovereign nations, have become observers with CARICOM.

In 2019, the much broader Association of Caribbean States (ACS), consisting of thirty-five countries in the Greater Caribbean, declared their support for CARICOM’s call for reparations for the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. Its former secretary general (2016– 2020), Dr. June Soomer, stated that despite “not all governments seeming to be on the same page there is ‘consensus’ on this subject.”³⁶ The consensus being, of course, that something should be done about the legacies of slavery; a consensus that has been very much stimulated since the Black Lives Matter movement gained worldwide momentum after the police murder of George Floyd in the US. The position the ACS is in, is more complicated than that of CARICOM, since it also counts France and the Netherlands among its member states, for the former on behalf of Saint Barthelémy and French Guiana, for the latter Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Saba. The other French- and Dutch-related territories are autonomous members. This implies that these two European countries are at the same time demanding reparations and the subject of these demands. It is unclear whether they fully realise this paradoxical situation, but it has not been (publicly) debated so far.

History is at the heart of the claim for reparations, of course, but the claim itself has a long track record too. Even during the slavery era and, after abolition, increasingly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly the descendants of enslaved Africans fought for reparations in many different ways.



Caribbean demonstration for reparations by European nations

Among them were illustrious Caribbean intellectuals such as C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, Aimée Césaire, Anton de Kom, and Walter Rodney. Often these claims accompanied anti-colonial or other kinds of liberation struggles. An example of this in the Dutch sphere happened the year after the 1969 Curaçao labour revolt. One of its leaders, Amador Nita, who after the revolt became minister of social affairs in the first Black majority government of the Netherlands Antilles, visited the Dutch queen in 1970. The story goes that he demanded \$500 million from the Dutch government for a fund to repair the damage of slavery and colonialism.³⁷ Even if the story itself is not accurate, the fact that people are (re)producing it is telling in itself.

The second of the ten points in CARICOM's 2014 reparations action program—after “apologies”—echoes the long history of the reparations struggle: repatriation to Africa.³⁸ This issue has been on the agenda at least since the times of Marcus Garvey and the activities of the Rastafarians after him. At the same time, it shows that reparations are much more—and not even primarily—than financial compensation, although money is required to reach the goals expressed in the ten points. The other eight points are: 3) an indigenous development program; 4) investments in cultural institutions; 5) fighting the health crisis; 6) eradication of illiteracy; 7) an African knowledge program; 8) psychological rehabilitation; 9) technology transfer, and 10) debt cancellation. So, these are not demands for money to repair damage inflicted by the slave trade and slavery as such. These are claims to compensate

for the current state of underdevelopment of Caribbean societies as a consequence of this horrific history. Their actuality make the claims even more relevant and urgent, of course, but it is also a means to circumvent the problem of historical crimes being too far in the past to take to court.

There is, however, an ideological dimension to this as well. Some have it that a distinction should be made between backward-looking reparations and forward-looking reparations.³⁹ The difference between the two seems to fall in line with the views between those who demand full recognition of and apologies and reparations for the horrors of the past and those who say, "Let's see what we can do now for the future." The latter is often the stance of former slaving nations. For example, in response to CARICOM's ten-point plan, a British government spokesperson stated, "Slavery was and is abhorrent. The United Kingdom unreservedly condemns slavery and is committed to eliminating it." However, the spokesperson stated reparations are not the answer. "Instead, we should concentrate on identifying ways forward with a focus on the shared global challenges that face our countries in the 21st century."⁴⁰ In fact, CARICOM's ten-point plan is a mix of both backward-looking and forward-looking goals, which might explain the problem discussed hereafter.

A substantial part of the fourth point of the reparation program, investments in cultural institutions, has to do with (slavery) museums and education. An explanation of the ten-point plan states, "The reparations claim takes into account what its authors say are slavery-related chronic diseases such as hypertension and Type 2 diabetes, widespread illiteracy, the *lack of museums and research centers for Caribbean history, the lack of respect for African culture and identity*, continuing psychological effects of centuries of slavery, and the lack of scientific and technical know-how to compete in the global economy."⁴¹

The first part of this chapter showed that there are quite a number of museums in the Caribbean that have exhibitions on slavery and some museums are even completely dedicated to the history of slavery. However, those histories, generally speaking, don't go very deep, and they concern just that: history. It is an exception when contemporary issues, which are rooted in slavery, are addressed, let alone the question of exactly how they should be addressed, in other words the question of reparatory justice. Only Guadeloupe's MACTe is clear on this. It "aims to preserve the memory of those who suffered during slavery, as well as to act as a *space for discussion on the continuing repercussions*."⁴²

Furthermore, MACTe "will continue to contribute to the construction of a collective memory of slavery and to finally heal its abhorrent wounds and hurts, through historical awareness, values of tolerance and contemporary creation. Guadeloupe's ambition is to use MACTe on an international level as a place for meeting and dialogue among all those who played a part in this dark history."⁴³ So

this goes beyond the museum; it is Guadeloupe's ambition. However, never is the term "reparations" used and the whole text breathes "healing and reconciliation," rather than a fight for equality and repair. It is exactly the kind of ambition that could be expected of a modern and engaged European museum. But it's in the Caribbean, the arena where it all happened and where legacies are most vivid. The museum's vision is phrased in the following terms: "fertilize the encounter"; "disseminate the history"; "sensitize"; "develop a taste"; "encourage"; "pacify relations between communities by recombining memories."⁴⁴ Actually, it's the European Council Museum Prize jury that seems to be more outspoken when it praises MACTe for its role "to make the act of remembrance a means of producing a new society, with the goal of providing intellectual tools for the fight against the social and societal consequences of slavery such as racism, social exclusion, inequality and contemporary forms of infringement of human rights."⁴⁵ This shows the complexity. On the one hand, European fora praise Caribbean institutions for providing space to fight for reparatory justice; on the other hand, European states are very reluctant to use phrases that genuinely apologise for slavery and thus justify substantial reparations.

Reparations in the Dutch Caribbean

Although Aruba and Curaçao are ACS associate members and on their way to gaining the same status with CARICOM, reparations is hardly an issue on these islands. Bonaire, as a special municipality of the Netherlands, cannot even have a policy of its own in this regard. What's more, when the author asked Aruban government officials via email about Caricom's (and ACS supported) ten-point plan, the Aruban authorities answered that they know nothing about it, so obviously there is no official standpoint on this subject. Moreover, they added, they are not aware that the Aruban state officially recognises Aruba has a slavery past at all. Nor are they aware of groups or movements in Aruba striving for reparations.⁴⁶ Of course, there are individual Arubans who are, but indeed, there is no organisation working towards this end. Neither is there one in Bonaire.⁴⁷

In Curaçao the situation differs from the other two, although the national government does not take a formal stand and it's hard to discern a national debate on the issue. Nonetheless, there is one political party that fights for emancipation from mental slavery and for reparations. This *Movementu Kousa Promé* (which loosely translates as *The Cause First Movement*) was founded in 2015 and is led by former Minister of Education René Rosalia. The party is clearly outspoken on these issues but won less than three percent of the vote in the 2021 elections, which was insufficient for a seat in Parliament.⁴⁸ Apart from a few small civil organisations,

just one substantial organisation in Curaçao campaigns for reparations, the *Plataforma Sklabitut i Herensha di Sklabitut* (Platform Slavery and Legacies of Slavery), founded in 2009. Its leaders are well-known intellectuals and activists who have been active in the field of emancipation since the 1970s.⁴⁹ One of them, Jeanne Henriques, is also on the board of the Caribbean Pan African Network,⁵⁰ which follows the recommendations of Sir Hilary Beckles and CARICOM.

The theme of reparations is not recent in Curaçao. The late author, linguist, and pedagogue Frank Martinus Arion almost two decades ago pleaded for such a program. In the 1990s he demanded that the Netherlands erect a national monument in Amsterdam to commemorate slavery.⁵¹ His demand coincided with the actions of a large Afro-Dutch activist movement, the National Platform Slavery Past that managed to realise this goal in 2002. In 2003 Arion, together with Dutch activist Piet Reckman, launched “A Plan for Reparation and Quittance,” which was nothing less, he stated, “than a moral ransom for the politically, socially and educationally negative sides of colonialism.”⁵²

In Curaçao July 1, Emancipation Day, is hardly the day slavery is commemorated. That is August 17, the day Tula began his 1795 revolt and liberated almost half of the island from slavery, before being betrayed, captured, and cruelly put to death by the colonial authorities. In 1998 on that day a monument was unveiled to celebrate his fight. In 2010 Tula was officially declared a national hero. In 2019 the *Plataforma* sent a letter to the chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Prime Minister Mark Rutte, asking for “reparation and rehabilitation” and stating, “The Dutch state as the successor of the colonial administration in 1795, will ... have to correct the bad mistake [of criminalizing Tula] by restoring Tula and his fellow fighters, so that Tula, as our national Hero, can actually function as a source and symbol of inspiration and motivation for the development and emancipation of the Curaçaoan human being and the Curaçao community on its way to actual sovereignty.” Gradually, Tula is becoming a symbol of nation-building and eventually could become a symbol of nation-branding. The *Desenkadena* (Unchained) monument, which is dedicated to Tula’s uprising, appears in many publications and tourist brochures, although it is far from a hot spot.

The complexity of Curaçao’s position towards the slavery past and reparations was very well articulated by Gilbert Bacilio when he stated that the past as well as the continuing relationship with the Netherlands “have put the Curaçaoans and Curaçao in the confusing and syndromatic situation of being and victim and survivor and especially a situation of love and hate for the Dutch state which has, as her colonizer, dominated her for many years and has kept her in a political-psychological state of unfreedom, inequality, subordination and dependency.”⁵³

This statement, published in a government report, spurred the Dutch Parliament to organise a Kingdom-wide dialogue in order to inventory the impact

of the slavery past on the present. The dialogue's recommendations, presented in a July 1, 2021 report to the government, are crystal clear: state recognition, established in law, that slavery was a crime against humanity; sincere apologies by the prime minister, the king, and Parliament for the slavery past; followed by reparations. Reparations cannot be financial compensation for all the damage done in the past, the report states, and the new law must be formulated in a way that there can be no question of liability, but there should be an appropriate structural financial regulation constructed "to counter the harmful effects of that past in the present."

Conclusion

It seems as if Curaçao differs somewhat from the rest of the Caribbean in that it has a substantial museum dedicated to slavery, the Kura Hulanda Museum, which is not at all government-related or funded, whereas the few comparable slavery museums in the rest of the Caribbean are. Moreover, most (mixed) history museums in the Caribbean pay attention to their national history of slavery, whereas in Curaçao they either don't or only do so indirectly. However, generally, the slavery narratives being presented do not confront what their meaning is to present-day society. The slavery past seems to be more of a common historical and thus binding societal factor, so in this sense it's obviously part of nation-building, but since then society has moved on. Moreover, although the indigenous have mainly disappeared from the islands, the overwhelming presence of their archaeological and cultural remains in Caribbean museums seems to be very much a part of national identification and binding processes. Everyone seems to feel comfortable with Indigenous roots. As national heritage it is hardly contested. Therefore, to many, certainly in the Dutch Caribbean, it functions as a point of identification that distracts from the simultaneously shameful and horrific slavery past. At the same time the slavery narrative is often presented via Afro-Caribbean cultural legacies and traditions, and sometimes also via stories of uprisings and resistance.

The latter two observations go for Aruba and Bonaire as well. Aruba has a state-owned, up-to-date archaeological museum, founded in 1981, for conserving and presenting artifacts, particularly those of indigenous ancestors. Other heritage institutions have paid temporary attention to the island's slavery past, but, as stated before, the state doesn't even formally recognise Aruba's slavery past. Heritage institutions in Bonaire, on the other hand, do recognise its history of slavery, but their recognition is limited to protected and cherished cultural legacies and thus hardly refer to a more complete narrative. The only exception may be the slave houses near the salt pans and their connection to the village of Rincon. On both islands that leaves no—or hardly any—room for a reparations discourse.

Taken together this suggests that in most parts of the Caribbean, including Curaçao and to a certain extent Bonaire, a polished kind of history, which in itself is horrific, is considered something of the past. This allows for using that past as a means of nation-building and even nation-branding, considering its presence in many tourist brochures and film clips. This is a less confrontational approach in very unequal societies where racism and colourism still play huge roles. And maybe, to a certain extent, the narrative of slavery is even an exotic attraction for tourists; it is certainly the main source of income in most Caribbean societies. The feelings of shame some European tourists express after being confronted with these representations of slavery can at the same time be a way for them to identify with the particular society and support local sociocultural or economic initiatives. Tourists have become very much a part of nation-branding, as these museums, forts, plantations, and other slavery sites often cater to them and their hard currencies than to the local population or its educational institutions, which often seem to come second. The role of the state in this differs per country.

It also seems as if the debate and policies on reparatory justice for slavery and its negative legacies is too political for museums, and therefore not addressed. Outside museums, reparations is sometimes part of political discourse and rhetoric, particularly in the Anglophone Caribbean, where the first emancipation from transatlantic slavery took place. Politically, the Anglophone Caribbean is more decolonised than the Dutch or French Caribbean.⁵⁴ It has a majority of African origin, unlike the majorities of most Spanish Caribbean societies, and is more focused on participating in a North American reparations discourse owing to the shared language and migration tradition.

