

# Dutch Colonial Slavery and Its Afterlives: Introduction

*Rose Mary Allen, Esther Captain,  
Matthias van Rossum, Urwin Vyent*

When U.S. President Barack Obama visited the Netherlands in 2014, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte proudly showed him an extraordinary document known as the *Plakkaat van Verlatinghe*, which translates as “placard of desertion.” This Act of Abjuration is the official declaration from 1581 in which several Dutch provinces deposed the Spanish king, Philip II, as their ruler. As such, it can be considered the Dutch declaration of independence. Usually, this document is kept in the National Archives of the Netherlands in The Hague, but for this occasion, it was displayed on a cushion in the Great Hall of the Rijksmuseum for Obama to see. Although it “didn’t look very attractive,” as one Dutch TV commentator noted, its significance to the Netherlands is immeasurable. It marks the beginning of the Dutch Republic and served as an inspiration for the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, which is why Rutte so proudly showed it to the U.S. president during his visit.

Although it is unlikely that the two leaders discussed it, there is an inherent paradox in that historic denunciation of the Spanish monarch which continues to reverberate to this day: the Republic of the United Netherlands sprung from resistance to foreign domination that contemporaries, as well as the Act of Abjuration itself, likened to slavery. Yet, soon after achieving independence, the Dutch Republic went on to become one of the world’s largest colonial powers. In so doing, this country, which regarded itself as a haven of freedom, proceeded to impose slavery and other means of colonial domination upon others all over the world. The Netherlands now acknowledges that “slavery is a very painful, important, and until recently underexposed part of our shared history,” as the Dutch government stated in 2023, during the commencement of the Year of Commemoration of

Slavery. Shortly prior to that event, on December 19, 2022, Prime Minister Rutte publicly apologized on behalf of the Dutch government for its role in practices that sustained slavery worldwide.

This insight and the remorse expressed were the culmination of decades of awareness building initiated and promoted by activist communities of memory, a process which had recently gained significant traction. On July 8, 2021, for example, no less than six motions related to slavery were tabled in the Dutch Parliament. The motions included calls for an official apology for slavery and the declaration of a national day of remembrance and celebration on July 1. One of the motions, submitted by Don Ceder and others, called for an independent investigation into the history of Dutch involvement in slavery and the slave trade. The proposed aim was to gain insight into Dutch slavery and its afterlives (“the what”), to identify who had been involved (“who”), and to learn how slavery had affected people and societies (“how”), in order to “arrive at a process that strengthens societal unity within the Kingdom of the Netherlands.” The motion was adopted and this book, *Slavery & the Dutch State: Dutch Colonial Slavery and Its Afterlives*, is the result of the investigation that it proposed. The contributions included in this volume explore how the Dutch state and its predecessors were involved in colonial slavery and reflect on how slavery continues to affect lives in the present.

This book takes stock of and re-evaluates what we already know about slavery and its afterlives. Why do we know so much more about some aspects of slavery and its legacy than others? This book reviews not only what we know but also what informs that knowledge, thereby revealing which follow-up questions and research topics will help us to gain a better understanding of Dutch colonial slavery. *Slavery & the Dutch State* investigates in which geographical regions the Dutch were involved in slavery and the slave trade, not only in the Atlantic region, the Indonesian archipelago, and the Indian Ocean but also in the Netherlands itself. Slavery was imposed in large parts of the Dutch colonial empire for a very long period. By examining all these geographical areas and periods comprehensively, we lay bare their similarities and differences. This approach also reveals geographical connections and exchanges as well as continuities over time. However, this book stops short of providing a research agenda describing the new and fundamental research needed in order to understand various aspects of Dutch colonial slavery and its afterlives. That will take more time. This book does, however, serve as a baseline for further research. *Slavery & the Dutch State* provides a scientifically sound and accessible interpretation of

existing knowledge and contributes to the reflection necessary for further research and for possible forms of redress and healing. Thus, it can serve as a compass for society, politics, and science.

The following questions are central to *Slavery & the Dutch State*:

- In what socio-economic, political, and societal context did the Dutch become involved in slavery, and what were the contemporary and long-term consequences of this involvement, both in the Netherlands and in the societies that the Dutch colonized?
- How have various stakeholders, such as the enslaved, administrators, entrepreneurs, and others in the colonized societies, responded to and dealt with the issue of slavery up to the present day?
- How can we create space for redress and healing with respect to slavery and its continued impact?

## A New Perspective

For decades, Dutch colonial slavery was relegated to the margins of the public domain, despite its deep significance for various descendant communities. Now, however, it is prominently in view. This book builds upon various projects that have brought the issue to the attention of a wider audience as well as the national government, as Nancy Jouwe shows in Chapter 2. Four previously published studies on how the cities of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague were involved in colonial slavery have had a ripple effect, heightening awareness and prompting more municipalities, provinces, museums, castles, and estates to examine their own historical involvement in slavery. Studies on the links of the Dutch central bank (De Nederlandsche Bank; DNB) and ABN AMRO Bank to slavery have prompted families, funds, and academic and financial institutions to commission similar research. And in December 2022, the Dutch royal family announced an independent investigation into the role of the House of Orange-Nassau in colonial and post-colonial history.

These investigations are linked to other issues and developments in Dutch society. They are both a result of, and a contributor to, many ongoing debates. These include the debates about racism and ethnic profiling, Saint Nicholas and his blackfaced helper, *Zwarte Piet*, the Dutch royal Golden Coach adorned with colonial scenes, the rise of *Keti Koti* [broken chains] commemorations marking abolition in Suriname, the Black Lives

Matter movement in the Netherlands, and the childcare benefits scandal (which left more than 25,000 mostly dual-citizen parents in severe financial hardship). It all goes to show that Dutch colonial slavery is not merely a thing of the past. Its legacy is felt today. This is also clear in the Caribbean parts of the Dutch kingdom, where the history of slavery plays a prominent role in the annual Tula commemoration in Curaçao honoring the leader of a historic slave revolt, and in the growing demands for reparations in Curaçao, Aruba, and Saint Martin, as well as in Suriname. This is the outcome of decades of efforts to raise political and societal awareness about slavery and its present-day impact in the current and former parts of the Dutch kingdom. In recent years, individuals with a personal connection to slavery, along with their allies, have worked hard to put these issues on the Dutch state's agenda. On December 19, 2022, the government publicly apologized for how the Dutch state had acted in the past. The apology was posthumously offered to all enslaved individuals worldwide who suffered from the Dutch state's actions, to their daughters and sons, and to all their descendants up to the present day.

The groundwork laid in recent decades remains relevant, and perhaps even more so in this post-apology era, because with the current momentum, we risk overlooking important insights or taking action based on one-sided or superficial ideas. We should, of course, make use of what we already know, but we should not forget that there are great gaps in our knowledge that must be addressed before we can make bold claims.

We hope that *Slavery & the Dutch State* will contribute to creating understanding and awareness, and perhaps even to creating space for redress and healing in every part of the current Kingdom of the Netherlands: Aruba, Curaçao, Saint Martin, Bonaire, Saint Eustatius, Saba, and the Netherlands. Our findings may also be significant for Suriname, Indonesia, and other countries affected by Dutch colonial slavery.

*Slavery & the Dutch State* focuses on Dutch colonial slavery, that is, the slavery imposed during the Netherlands' colonial past, and its afterlives (such as colonial forced labor). We limited the scope of our inquiry into slavery and the slave trade to the colonial era: none of the book chapters discuss modern slavery. The slavery referred to in this volume can be defined as an extreme form of deprivation of freedom and forced labor in which both the enslaved person and their labor are claimed as property. Slavery has existed in various forms for thousands of years in many places around the world.

In this book, colonial slavery refers to the forms of slavery that arose from European colonial expansion from the fifteenth to the end of the nineteenth century. This led to an unprecedented expansion of the slave trade and slavery, a practice in which Africans, Asians, and others were enslaved and traded as commodities in a legal system organized by European colonial authorities. In the areas colonized by the Dutch state and its predecessors, the local populations were also subjected to large-scale deprivation of freedom, enslavement, and forced labor. The colonial authorities deployed slavery alongside, and in combination with, other forms of forced labor. One important characteristic of colonial slavery was that enslaved people became the property of another human being and could be bought and sold. They could not exercise any rights and had no say over their own bodies and lives. Slavery was a lifelong status that mothers passed on to their children. This type of slavery is known as chattel slavery.

The design, functioning, and consequences of slavery and the slave trade have always been closely linked to the broader structures of colonialism through which the Dutch government exercised power in various parts of the world. Therefore, this book consistently takes that wider context into account when exploring the complicity of the Dutch state and its predecessors in slavery. Likewise, the history of slavery cannot be fully understood in isolation from the afterlives of slavery. The impact of slavery on politics, economies, culture, and society—particularly on enslaved individuals and other stakeholders—began during the enslavement in Africa, was exacerbated during slavery, and continued long after.

Any time this book refers to “the Dutch state,” this also includes its predecessors such as the Dutch Republic and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Similarly, any reference to slavery also includes its afterlives.

*Slavery & the Dutch State* bases itself on two understandings of the term “afterlives”: firstly, as ways in which colonial slavery affected people and societies economically, socially, culturally, and administratively, starting when the slave trade and slavery were legally permitted and continuing into the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Secondly, “afterlives” is understood as present-day approaches to colonial slavery, its long-term consequences, and ongoing effects. In both senses, the legacy of slavery can either be visible on its own or as a part of a larger complex of legacies of colonialism.

The complex interaction between the history of slavery and colonialism and their afterlives is what connects all the contributions in this book. The

deafening silence in the public domain about the ongoing consequences of these histories has finally been broken, thanks to the activism of the descendants of the enslaved and others with ties to the colonial past, as well as the contributions of others, including scholars and intellectuals. Although the public is no longer silent about this topic, it will take time to deepen and broaden our knowledge, awareness, and understanding of slavery and its effects. In many respects, society is just beginning to understand, re-interpret, process, and deal with colonial slavery and its legacy.

## Terminology

When studying the colonial past, it is crucial to critically examine perspectives and terminology, such as the distinction between “legality” and “illegality.” Slavery and the slave trade were facilitated by a colonial legal system in which structural inequalities between colonizer and colonized were codified. Colonial law provided the legal basis for a social order in which the enslaved person was denied recognition as a full-fledged human being and the status of person or citizen, but was bought and sold as a chattel. The assumption that slavery—until its legal abolition in 1860 and 1863—was legally permissible and therefore should be judged “in the context of its time” obscures the fact that the colonial legal system was precisely one of the means by which colonial organizations acting on behalf of the Dutch state controlled and disciplined people’s lives. Slavery was the means by which colonial authorities defined who could be reduced to property and who could not. Colonial *corvée* labor and the Cultivation System, two forms of forced labor, enabled the colonizers to determine which colonial subjects could be coerced to work. Even after slavery and the Cultivation System and *corvée* labor were all abolished, colonial law continued to provide the legal basis for racialized inequality between people.

In the violent histories of slavery and colonialism, many of the terms used bore—and when these terms are still used today, bear—a colonial stamp. In other words, the perspective of the colonizer as the wielder of power has often steered how people, regions, languages, and lifestyles were described in both official and informal documents that have survived in colonial archives. This also applies to novels, paintings, music, and other art forms. Such representations do not necessarily reflect reality but might reflect concepts that served the colonial administration. While words like “Negro,” “coolie,” “native,” and “chainganger” may have been common in

a colonial order, from a decolonial perspective, they were and are neither neutral nor unproblematic, but deeply subjective and derogatory.

In this book, efforts have been made to use reparative language, that is, terms that try to steer clear of colonial connotations and that respect the self-naming perspective of individuals, countries, or regions as much as possible. This was done with the full awareness that language is always evolving, that words are closely intertwined with authors' perspectives, and that positions therein are not fixed. To allow for diversity in background and approach, the editors have left the choice of terminology to the authors. Thus, *Slavery & the Dutch State* contains different writing styles and terminological preferences. This diversity allows a wide range of perspectives on the past and its repercussions to shine through, sometimes explicitly and sometimes in a more veiled way. For example, the term "enslaved" is used throughout the book instead of "slave" because it implicitly acknowledges that the coercion to which these individuals were subjected is not a natural position or situation. Although there has been fierce debate about the desire and necessity to use the term "enslaved" rather than "slave," the balance seems to have shifted in favor of the former. However, we do use words like "slavery," "slave trade," "slaveholding," and "slave owners" when referring to the slave economy, and the word "slave" when the author or source in question chose to use that word instead of "enslaved."

In keeping with the current journalistic and academic conventions in the United States, we write "Black" with a capitalized letter "B" when referring to a racial, ethnic, or cultural entity, based on a shared sense of history, identity, and community among people who identify as Black, including those in the African diaspora and inhabitants of Africa. We use "black" with a lowercase "b" to refer to the color, not to people.

Similarly, we have included various preferences for designations, geographical and otherwise, whose roots can be traced back to the colonial past. Examples of this are the use of "the East" and "East Indies" for Indonesia, and "the West" and "West Indies" for Suriname, Curaçao, Bonaire, Aruba, Saint Eustatius, Saba, and Saint Martin. Some authors deliberately avoid these terms because they are "Netherlands-centric." And while some authors use the term "local population," others prefer "original population" and still others "indigenous people." The use of terms requires careful consideration. While "indigenous" or "native" might be problematic for some because these words imply a colonial perspective, others deliberately use them with the activist aim of promoting certain population groups' visibil-

ity. The decision whether to use a particular term is often context-specific. For example, the use of the term “genocide” outside the context of the victims of the Nazi regime is sensitive. At the same time, it is undeniable that the arrival of European and Dutch colonizers in North and South America and Asia was accompanied by land conquests, the displacement of local inhabitants, and systematic depopulation for the production of colonial goods. Therefore, some authors use the term “genocide” when describing the 1621 massacre led by Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen that practically wiped out the population of the Banda Islands in the Moluccas.

## Reading Guide

The scope and complexity of Dutch colonial slavery and its afterlives require an approach that factors in multiperspectivity and multivocality. The design, deployment, and effects of slavery in the societies that the Netherlands colonized and in the home country itself, were not only political, administrative, and economic but also legal, religious, social, cultural, psychological, and even physical. The contributions included in *Slavery & the Dutch State* attempt to identify these different aspects of the topic and connect them where possible. The texts not only bring together historical knowledge about Dutch colonial slavery, but also relevant knowledge from other disciplines and from experts outside academia.

*Slavery & the Dutch State* contains contributions from authors from various disciplines and expertise based on their knowledge and innovative ideas and insights. Their backgrounds range widely; some are established scholars, others young researchers and non-academic experts. They come from the Netherlands and elsewhere. We made specific efforts to include authors in this book who originate from, reside in, work in, or have previously worked in the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, in Suriname, and in Indonesia. We succeeded only partly in this goal.

*Slavery & the Dutch State* does not take a “traditional” chronological approach to the history of Dutch colonial slavery. The book’s point of departure, dealt with in Section 1, are the issues we are currently facing. In Section 2, the book outlines the changes and repercussions stemming from the abolition of slavery and the slave trade. Section 3 focuses on how the basis for these repercussions was laid by the impact of Dutch colonial slavery on societies in Africa, Asia, and North and South America. Section 4 looks at the role of early colonialism and slavery in this process. Each sec-



tion is preceded by artwork produced by Iris Kensmil, patricia kaersenhout, Theo Frids Hutabarat, and Brian Elstak, respectively. The editors invited these artists to create a work that reflected on the topic of a particular section. Kensmil, Hutabarat, and Elstak created a new piece of art for this; kaersenhout asked us to include one of her pre-existing works. We decided to ask for artistic contributions because we realized that while words are of great importance, they may also fall short—especially when it comes to a sensitive topic like colonial slavery. Where words fail, art may be able to present different perspectives on the history of slavery. Each artwork is accompanied by a brief artist’s statement.

The book contains twenty-nine chapters on important subfields that deal with the history of Dutch colonial slavery and its legacy. These academic subfields are not equally well developed. In some, where a lot of research has been done, we need to take a critical look at the state of this knowledge in terms of certainty, perspectives taken, possible blind spots, and underdeveloped subtopics. For subfields where little research has been done, it can be more important to discuss why this area has remained underdeveloped, what assumptions are made about certain topics, what insights can be derived from the research that is available, and what questions, (new) sources, and methods might be important for future research.

The chapters are interspersed with short texts that highlight particular aspects of this book’s subject matter. These informative interludes address topics that have not been sufficiently researched and deserve more attention. For example, they address the role of taxes in slavery and colonialism, the debate about the ceremonial use of the Golden Coach by the Dutch royals, and the early presence of enslaved individuals in the Netherlands. Some of these texts also discuss how methods such as oral history and digital technology can provide new insights and broaden perspectives on Dutch colonial history. An interview series with prominent experts explores present-day tensions and views. This firmly positions the book in the current zeitgeist, amidst rapidly shifting social and political stances toward the past, after the Dutch government’s apologies but before whatever comes next. After all, in that historic apology speech in late 2022, the Dutch prime minister did acknowledge that the final word had not been said on the subject when he declared, “So, with this apology, we are writing not a full stop, but a comma.” In response, the authors of *Slavery & the Dutch State* have taken a pause following that comma to look back, and to look around.

