

A Perspective on Reparations and Transformative Justice

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“I personally did not experience slavery, but I can very well understand that it still bothers people. Because it still resonates to this day,” said a participant of Surinamese descent during one of the dialogues about slavery organized by the city of Rotterdam.¹ Such remarks show that slavery, although it dates back more than 150 years, is still part of many people’s memory. The descendants of the enslaved experience this history as communicative memory or living memory rather than cultural memory, which is only visible in archives, museums, and official commemorations.² The proximity to slavery felt by some is made possible by the traces that this history has left behind in the present. Painful personal experiences—only recently acknowledged in Dutch political debate as the result of institutional racism—continually confirm this legacy. Many descendants of the enslaved experience the structural and cultural continuation of colonialism and slavery in their daily lives. Most are no stranger to racism and discrimination based on their background and skin color. They can often give dozens of examples: being underestimated at school, having to work harder to obtain a diploma or receive recognition. While politicians like to tell us what historical injustices have or have not expired, what is or is not too long ago, and what topics do or do not deserve our attention, the experiences of slavery continue to affect many people in profound, yet often invisible and elusive ways.

How can the pain of this past be understood and acknowledged? What are the right tools to recognize and repair this historical injustice and its afterlives in today’s society?³ In recent decades, it has become clear that not every instrument for recognition and restoration is equally effective in

addressing historical injustices. To study the effectiveness of such tools, a new discipline emerged in the 1990s called transitional justice. Initially, this discipline focused mainly on experiences from World War II, examining how a society could come to terms with its violent past through measures such as criminal trials, truth and reconciliation commissions, apologies, restitution, reparations, the establishment of museums and monuments, commemorations, and discussion of the past in education and politics. Such research revealed that being recognized as a victim of World War II did little to make some groups feel like equal citizens. In these cases, recognition actually pushed people back into their marginalized position and reinforced existing social hierarchies instead of changing them and challenging perceptions. Therefore, social scientists began searching for ways to recognize past injustices while effectively helping to create equal citizenship for marginalized groups. Philosopher Nancy Fraser calls this “transformative recognition,” a form of recognition that substantially improves the position of marginalized groups in society, both socially and economically.⁴

Human rights scholars Paul Gready and Simon Robins popularized another important concept, transformative justice, which addresses historical injustice systemically. “It seeks a form of participation that engages with but transforms victimhood,” they wrote.⁵ Recognition should create agency, emphasize participation and relationship-building, and change the power dynamics. Reparative measures can only promote restoration if they put marginalized groups front and center and create equal citizenship. According to legal scholar Lisa Laplante, it is essential for successful recognition and restoration to first determine the type of justice desired. Is it about reparation for specific damages in the past with a causal link (reparative justice), restoring relationships between all stakeholders (restorative justice), or a broader idea of equality regarding participation and inclusion in society (civic justice), or socio-economic justice?⁶ If we look at the Dutch debate about slavery from this perspective, we can see that the stakeholder groups from Suriname and the Caribbean pursue civic justice and socio-economic justice by combating institutional misrepresentation, discrimination, and racism, while the government’s focus is more on reparative and restorative justice, taking a rather narrow victim/perpetrator-oriented approach that acknowledges misconduct and damage, but limits reparation mainly to symbolic gestures.⁷

This chapter discusses the ways in which the history of Dutch slavery is acknowledged in the public space and reflects on how slavery continues to have an impact on personal experiences today. In a family setting, other issues are discussed than in the public domain, particularly everyday insults and hurtful behaviors. This home or family perspective reveals a multiplicity of voices that goes beyond the public debate, which is oversimplified into a recognition of “Black” by “white.” If we want to talk about transformative justice, we need to listen to this multiplicity of voices.

Recognition of Slavery: The Public Debate

The views on recognition and reparation for historical injustice have changed significantly over the past two decades, partly because the descendants of the enslaved are making themselves better heard. For a long time, even as the descendants’ call for the recognition of slavery and reparations grew louder, the government failed to respond. Some steps were taken; a National Slavery Monument was erected in Amsterdam’s Oosterpark (which Queen Beatrix inaugurated in 2002, expressing “deep remorse” for the slave trade and slavery by the West India Company), and Ketí Koti celebrations evolved from a local happening for the Surinamese community to a widely attended public event broadcast on national television.

In 2013, the Dutch king attended this celebration, but to the disappointment of many, he did not apologize for slavery. The crown misjudged the moment and missed an opportunity. However, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Social Affairs Lodewijk Asscher, speaking on behalf of the government, called slavery an “inhumane practice” and a “blemish on our history” and expressed “deep regret and remorse.”

Meanwhile, in public debate, greater demands were made on the government. The actions of dozens of people in civil society were sparking increasing dialogue in society. The Mapping Slavery project, the Ketí Koti dialogue tables, and The Black Archives are just some of the many initiatives that show how great the need was to raise awareness of slavery and integrate it into the public consciousness. Cities and municipalities also started investing in research, awareness raising, monuments, and apologies. Some private companies also investigated and expressed regret for their part in slavery. It became clear that slavery was all-pervasive in Dutch society. The many initiatives showed a willingness to investigate the close ties

between past and present and to make the entanglements between stakeholders more visible; instead of “their” history, we began to speak of “our” history.



A Ketikoti celebration in the Amsterdam Museum. Ketikoti tables are organized as a commemoration ritual of shared remembrance, dialogue, and healing.

On July 1, 2020, the debate between the government and interest groups seemed to take a turn. People were looking for a new narrative that could form the basis for a “shared past,” according to Linda Nooitmeer, chair of the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and Its Legacy (NiNsee). The emphasis, it was felt, should be less on regret and shame and more on connection. The government also appeared to put in a greater effort to understand the interest groups. After the 2020 Ketikoti celebration, a debate on institutional racism took place in the Second Chamber of Parliament, and Prime Minister Rutte established the *Adviescollege Dialooggroep Slavernijverleden* [Slavery History Dialogue Group Advisory Board] to determine what needed to be done to acknowledge the history of slavery. The advisory board’s report *Chains of the Past* (2023 [2021]) recommended that the Dutch government acknowledge that slavery is a crime against humanity, offer national apologies, establish a national museum, institute a national day of remembrance on July 1, conduct more research

on slavery and its legacy and incorporate this into education, and establish a Kingdom fund to finance reparation on a structural and sustainable basis, also in the Caribbean islands.⁸ On December 19, 2022, then Prime Minister Rutte responded to this report by formally apologizing for slavery and figuratively extending a hand to the descendants of the enslaved. Before a society is ready for the conversation about reparation, it must first fully realize that there was something wrong in the past that continues to affect the present. That is why the Dutch government's apologies were considered crucial. As historian Hilary Beckles put it in 2021: "There must first be awareness and recognition that there is a problem before reparatory instruments can be offered."⁹

Over the past decades, there has been a significant shift in the debate on how historical wrongs can be addressed. While the term "reparations" initially played a key role, since 2020, the debate has shifted to legal redress.¹⁰ As Kenneth Donau, who lobbies for reparations for the descendants of the enslaved, explained: "The Dutch word for reparations—*herstelbetalingen*—contains the words "paying money," which narrows down the idea of reparations and creates resistance. ... If you talk about redress, the conversation gets easier and it also becomes easier to gain support."¹¹ In other words, "reparation" is a term mainly focused on the past, while "redress" concerns the future. Barryl Biekman, chair of the National Platform on Slavery, spoke about the "Reparation Decade" and emphasized that it is about "restoring every aspect of the rights of people of African descent."¹² The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-Zwarte Piet activism made the transition to new terms focused on claiming rights more visible in the public domain in the Netherlands.

Additionally, the focus shifted to a different kind of narrative. In the words of cultural anthropologist, Francio Guadeloupe: instead of trauma, victimhood, and slavery (the "cultural trauma narrative"), activists focused on the struggle for freedom and equality against a system of oppression, a theme already common in the Caribbean.¹³

Recognition of Slavery: The Family Perspective

Since the 2000s, interest groups and activists have called for more dialogue about the history of slavery and for an effort to achieve equal citizenship. This call for transformative justice was inspired by the personal experiences of Black people in the Netherlands. To better understand its importance, it

is essential to consider the experiences of descendants in the Netherlands: what are the issues at play in the family sphere? What is discussed in private and not in public?

The legacy of colonial hierarchy has also imprinted a colonial mindset on various communities of descendants of the enslaved, leading to racism and discrimination within those communities. Thus, in addition to external racism, there is also internal racism between and within these communities, and even within families. To conform to Western white norms, people straighten their hair, bleach their skin, and deny their heritage by refusing to speak their parents' language or by remaining silent about the past. This can result in feelings of displacement and other internal conflicts.

Part of this internal racism is the prolonged silence about the history of slavery. For a long time, families with roots in the Dutch colonies barely spoke of the past. Internalized shame about the colonial past fostered a culture of silence. As Marcel van Kanten, author of the book *Wortelzucht* [A Longing for Roots] (2020), explains:

I come from a Surinamese family of teachers. We never spoke about slavery in our family. Only later did I understand this “Surinamese silence.” The question is, why was it a taboo? To understand that, you have to know how Surinamese colonial society was structured. There was a social hierarchy: at the top, the white upper class, below that the Creoles, then the Chinese, then other contact laborers (Hindustanis, Javenese), and at the very bottom, the Maroons. What did you do in such a hierarchical society? There was tremendous downward discrimination. So, even in the 1950s, this colonial mentality still prevailed in my family, where we looked down on uneducated people. By speaking Dutch at home, the language of the colonial rulers, and pursuing good education, my Creole family tried to resemble the white upper class as much as possible. There was no reason to delve into slavery; people were ashamed of it.¹⁴

It was especially the first-generation migrants for whom internal racism and so-called “white-passing” became the norm. They saw this as the only way to lead successful lives in the Netherlands. People who migrated to the Netherlands also felt shame in relation to those who stayed behind in the

former colony, and felt “double-blooded,” for instance—belonging neither in one’s country of origin, nor in one’s country of residence. The children of these first-generation migrants, on the other hand, have often sought to reconnect with their roots and now demand more visibility for their past (“I want to contribute to reducing the colonial amnesia of the Netherlands and give space to the stories about my hidden family history”). Other feelings that surface are gratitude towards ancestors and pride in their resistance (“I am proud of my ancestors’ fighting spirit and am grateful that I can still draw strength from it today”). As it turns out, not only public attention to the history of slavery was needed to discuss the painful aspects of family histories; generational and geographical distance were also key.

The public debate on the recognition of slavery is dominated by overly simplistic frameworks. Personal experiences like the ones quoted above show how the past and present are interconnected and that the history of slavery is not a matter of Black against white, victims against perpetrators, minority against majority, diaspora against government. Personal experiences are much more complex, just as post-colonial communities are hybrid and intricately entwined with Dutch society. As Urwin Vyent, director of NiNsee, put it: “We do not fully realize how the history of slavery still affects contemporary society, among both white and Black people and in their mutual relationships. But also in the relationship between Black and Black.”¹⁵ Personal experiences at home show that the term “redress” must be understood more broadly; it is not only about reparation for past suffering but also about restoring present-day social relationships as well as the dialogue between and within communities. Personal perspectives disrupt the essentialist arguments and polemics that dominate public and academic debates on the “politics of recognition.”

Reactions to the Apologies from the Communities

Personal stories make it clear that the debate on recognition should not only be about apologies but also about recognizing the inequity of the economic and social system. This economic system originated during slavery but still persists even if the natural resources are different. While the Netherlands once benefited from the sugar produced in Suriname during slavery, it now profits from gold produced there under very similar conditions. As one interviewee put it: “You should not offer apologies. You should ensure that we [in Suriname] can also achieve a normal standard of living,

someday. You [the Netherlands] try to push everyone away: Curaçao, Aruba, Saint Martin. And you decide that they don't get any money. Because they have no power. You have the money. But where did that money come from in the first place?"¹⁶

Awareness and reform of this economic system are seen as ways to put apologies into practice; otherwise, it is just an empty gesture. It is important that the parties—organizations and companies—that made the most profits back then apologize for the past. It is not about individual citizens, though. Responsibility should be borne by those who were responsible for slavery as a structure. Reparations are not seen as money going from one party to another, but as a way to develop the economy in Suriname and the Antilles, which were left in a bad state by the Dutch colonizer. Reparations are therefore a form of structural redress. It is also important that Suriname and the Antilles decide how to spend the money instead of the former colonizer earmarking it for particular goals.

There is a deep-seated sensitivity to the Dutch government's paternalism in the formerly colonized countries. It shone through in the resistance and frustration expressed by several Caribbean island governments and Suriname in the run-up to the Rutte IV Cabinet's apologies on December 19, 2022. It also came to the surface in Surinamese and Antillean organizations in the Netherlands. The same frustration was palpable during various "city dialogues" held in Rotterdam and other major Dutch cities—long before the official apologies of December 19, 2022. "And yet again, my [Surinamese-Antillean] community is not represented!"¹⁷ Many communities came away with the sense that they were not truly included in the public debate. Many experienced the city dialogues as a symbolic and highly selective participatory process where the same people were invited to speak over and over again, but were then ignored when it was time to make decisions.

In Conclusion

While activists and descendant communities are discussing reparation, the mainstream political and public debate on the subject remains limited to symbolism, such as apologies, July 1 as a holiday, and the establishment of a national slavery museum. Even now, the debate barely touches on measures and resources to address misrepresentation, discrimination, and racism at the institutional level. One promising development came from De Neder-

landsche Bank. On July 1, 2022, when the Dutch central bank apologized for its past role, it also put forward a list of steps that it intends to take in the future. Another promising move was the government's announcement that it is going to establish a EUR 200 million Kingdom Fund for awareness raising and other measures, based on the idea that consciousness of the history of slavery, the Dutch role, and its repercussions, will eventually lead to new practices.

Within the descendant communities, we see a clear vision of what redress truly entails. Rather than a narrow "victim-perpetrator" or "guilt-reproach" framework, which the term "reparations" seems to invoke in the public debate, it is about a collective process and about realizing that the social and relational dimensions are essential for restoration. You could even say that the term "reparations," which is prevalent in the public domain, and the broader idea of legal or social redress in the descendant communities, are diametrically opposed. Reparation is born from the perspective of damage, while redress is born from the perspective of justice; the first pertains to individuals or groups, the latter pertains to society as a whole.¹⁸

There needs to be greater sensitivity to the descendant communities' need to "participate in decision-making processes" and their call for "redress" (two needs that are closely intertwined). This will enable a broader debate about restoration that aligns more closely with the idea of transformative justice: a form of radical participation that addresses but also transforms victimhood. In this quest for recognition, the parties must be aware of, and sensitive to, questions of power: who determines what recognition and restoration entail? Recognition issues are deeply intertwined with power issues and there is a significant risk that recognition will confirm existing power dynamics rather than change them. The danger is that a politics of recognition simultaneously (consciously or unconsciously) reproduces a racial discourse, hierarchical relationships, or positions of superiority and inferiority. It is important that those for whom the measures are intended are the ones who determine the process and substance.

Apologies are necessary to address what it is really about: seeing the colonial past with all its dark sides as part of Dutch history and acknowledging its afterlives in our society. After all, the legacy of the colonial past is present in many ways, albeit more visible and tangible for some than for others.

Notes

- 1 Naomi Lachman, "De meerstemmigheid van ons gedeelde verleden: Een intergeneratieel onderzoek naar de betekenis en doorwerking van het slavernijverleden in verschillende generaties en hoe dit zich verhoudt tot het publieke debat over slavernijexcuses" (MA thesis, University of Humanistic Studies Utrecht 2021).
- 2 Artwell Cain, "Slavery and Memory in the Netherlands: Who Needs Commemoration?", *Journal of African Diaspora Archaeology and Heritage* 4, no. 3 (2015): 234.
- 3 Janna Thompson, *Intergenerational Justice: Rights and Responsibilities in an Intergenerational Polity* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2009).
- 4 Nancy Fraser and Alex Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A political-philosophical exchange* (London / New York: Verso Books, 2003).
- 5 Paul Gready and Simon Robins, "From Transitional to Transformative Justice: A New Agenda for Practice," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 8, no. 3 (November 2014): 358.
- 6 Lisa Laplante, "Just Repair," *Cornell International Law Journal* 48, no. 3 (2015): 513–78.
- 7 Nicole Immler, "What is Meant by 'Repair' when Claiming Reparations for Colonial Wrongs? Transformative Justice for the Dutch Slavery Past," *Slaveries & Post-Slaveries, Special Issue on Reparations & Enslavages* 5 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.4000/slaveries.4650>.
- 8 Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations. Slavery History Dialogue Group Advisory Board, "Chains of the Past", Report of Findings, 2023 [originally published in Dutch in 2021] <https://www.government.nl/documents/reports/2023/07/20/chains-of-the-past---report-of-findings>.
- 9 Hilary Beckles, Ketu Koti lecture, June 30, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uWFe4t3FPZU>. The Ketu Koti lecture is organized by NiNsee.
- 10 Armand Zunder, *Herstelbetalingen: De "Wiedergutmachung" voor de schade die Suriname en haar bevolking hebben geleden onder het Nederlands kolonialisme* (The Hague: Amrit Consultancy, 2010).
- 11 Attendee at the Reparation Summit in New York in 2015, interviewed by the author on June 14, 2018, interview Dataset Narrated (In)Justice research project, <https://doi.org/10.17026/dansze8yg84>.
- 12 Barry A. Biekman (Civil Society Speaker), *General Assembly of the United Nations*, www.un.org/pga/69/101214_statementbiekman (December 14, 2014).
- 13 Francio Guadeloupe, "Reparaties als een hedendaagse uiting van de permanente revolutie: Een standpunt," *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (2014): 106–17.
- 14 Hester Buwalda, "Wat is dialoog? Een onderzoek naar de praktijk van de interculturele dialoogbenadering en hoe deze zich verhoudt tot de dialoogbenadering van filosoof Isaacs" (MA thesis, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, 2020).
- 15 Harriët Salm, "Het slavernijverleden drukt nog altijd een stempel op de samenleving, zegt organisator herdenking," *Trouw*, July 1, 2020 <https://www.trouw.nl/binnenland/het-slavernijverleden-drucht-nog-altijd-een-stempel-op-de-samenleving-zegt-organisator-herdenking~b2e82cof/>.
- 16 Lachman, "De meerstemmigheid."
- 17 Lachman, "De meerstemmigheid."
- 18 Immler, "What is Meant by 'Repair'."

Research Method: Oral History

For a long time, historians relied on written sources to reconstruct the past. Since the second half of the twentieth century, a wide range of academic disciplines have recognized the value and importance of oral history as a means of recovering, representing, and interpreting the voices and memories of individuals and communities. This method literally and figuratively gives voice to those who are absent from mainstream historiography. More and more museums, libraries, neighborhood communities, churches, trade unions, and other groups are making use of oral histories passed down from previous generations.

Oral history is a method that records oral testimonies and traditions for use as historical evidence. It stems from a cultural tradition of orally passing down information that is important for the community from one generation to the next. Especially oral cultures—which for a long time did not use written language—have used the spoken word to pass on genealogical information, etiological narratives, legends, myths, songs, proverbs, prayers, poems, theater, and riddles. Some examples of such oral traditions include *odos* (expressions and sayings) of the Maroons and Afro-Surinamese which concisely retell their history; the *guritan* (folk poetry) of South Sumatra; the stories in *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) from Java and Bali; the *kantika di makamba* (traditional work songs) in Curaçao and Bonaire and their counterparts, the *shanties* of the Antillean Windward Islands. These oral sources are sometimes considered the oldest form of historical research, as they predate historiography based on the written word. Since 2003, UNESCO has paid special attention to these oral sources as a form of intangible cultural heritage, which has led to increased protection, knowledge, and awareness.

In oral history research, researchers interview people and give them time and space to talk about their lives, memories, and experiences. Interviews are typically focused on historical topics that have been overlooked or sidelined. One angle that oral historians currently pay a lot of attention

to is the role of trauma in a life story. Not only can these interviews be used to document unknown or neglected memories as historiographical sources, but they can also be used to explore how and why people use their recollections to position themselves in, and making sense of, the present.

As the attention to oral history increases, historians are actively compiling collections of sources in databases and archives. In the Netherlands, for instance, there are various archives that store recordings of people's personal memories about the colonial past on sound carriers, videotape, or film.¹ A well-known example is the archives of the *Stichting Mondelinge Geschiedenis Indonesië* [Indonesian Oral History Foundation], which contain summaries of 1,190 interview sessions with 724 people who talked about the Dutch colonial presence in Asia from 1940 to 1962. In Curaçao, ethnographers Paul Brenneker and Elis Juliana have been collecting a large amount of oral history since 1958. Most of the information that they gathered is stored in the *Zikinzá* collection, a database holding 1,400 songs, narratives, and life stories. The Saint Eustatius Historical Foundation has saved the voice recordings of children of the enslaved, which had been collected by American journalist Vivian Graham in the 1970s. More recently, journalist and author Boi Antoin collected a large number of videotapes, audio tapes, and other sources in Bonaire, all of which have been digitized and are now easily accessible in the *Archivo Boneiru*. Part of this collection is included in the archives at *Beeld en Geluid* [Sound and Vision], the Dutch institute for media culture. In Suriname, the Amazon Conservation Team, in collaboration with local communities, has documented the history of the Matawai Maroons by means of oral history, interactive maps, old photographs, and archival records.

Storing oral history sources and making them digitally accessible preserves them for future research, reinterpretation, and analysis. These sources thus become verifiable for research and available for educational use. Despite the heightened interest in oral history as a means of uncovering Dutch colonial history, a great deal of material is not yet accessible to researchers and the general public.

Note

1 See Data Archiving and Networked Services (DANS), <https://mediasuitedata.clariah.nl/nl/dataset/dans-oral-history>.

