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Dutch Cities in Global Slavery

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Pepijn Brandon, Guno Jones, Nancy Jouwe & Matthias van Rossum (eds.), *De slavernij in Oost en West: Het Amsterdam onderzoek*. Amsterdam: Spectrum, 2020. 448 pp. (Paper €24.99)

Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam*. Amsterdam: Boom, 2020. 487 pp. (Paper €34.90)

Alex van Stipriaan, *Rotterdam in slavernij*. Amsterdam: Boom, 2020. 496 pp. (Paper €34.90)

Francio Guadeloupe, Paul van de Laar & Liane van der Linden (eds.), *Rotterdam, een postkoloniale stad in beweging*. Amsterdam: Boom, 2020. 278 pp. (Paper €24.90)

Nancy Jouwe, Matthijs Kuipers & Remco Raben (eds.), *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht*. Zutphen, the Netherlands: WalburgPers, 2021. 328 pp. (Paper €12.99)

Eveline Sint Nicolaas, Valika Smeulders, et al., *Slavery: The Stories of João, Wally, Oopjen, Paulus, Van Bengalen, Surapati, Sapali, Tula, Dirk, Lohkay*. Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum/Atlas Contact, 2021. 350 pp. (Paper €27.99)

In the Netherlands, slavery is a contested issue that is closely connected with increasingly polarized debates about Dutch citizenship and identity. At the same time, precisely because it is (largely) a thing of the past and universally seen as a moral wrong, slavery has also become, to paraphrase historian Ira Berlin, a way to talk about race and discrimination in the present.[1] It is in this

1 American Slavery in History and Memory and the Search for Social Justice, *Journal of American History* 90 (2004):1259.

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context that the publication of the books under review here can be read. The first five were commissioned by the city councils of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht to investigate the role each of these cities historically played in the slave trade and colonial slavery in order to understand the postcolonial present and foster a sense of connection and belonging in these ethnically and culturally "diverse" urban conglomerates.

The "Amsterdam Investigation," to borrow the first book's subtitle, was launched on June 25, 2019, when the city council had adopted a proposition that called for a formal apology for Amsterdam's historical role in slavery. The council's call for apologies obviously implied that Amsterdam's deep involvement in slavery was already publicly known. Indeed, the volume commissioned by the council was largely based on existing historical research by the authors and editors. What this publication adds, however, is that for the first time it outlines the city's role in colonial slavery in both "East and West." In fact, with the exception of Alex van Stipriaan's monograph on Rotterdam, which focuses on Atlantic slavery, all the books discussed in this review include the much less familiar story of Dutch colonial slavery in Asia. Although slavery was not the core business of the Dutch East-India Company (*Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie*, VOC), as it *was* for the Dutch West-India Company (WIC), human trafficking, slavery, and other forms of forced labor were an integral part of its presence in Asia and Africa. While some 600,000 enslaved Africans were transported by Dutch slavers to the Americas, an estimated 660,000 to 1,135,000 enslaved people were transported to territories under the VOC charter, though usually as secondary cargo.

Amsterdam played a key role in the colonial enterprises of the VOC and WIC. In both public-private companies, the Amsterdam chamber was the most influential participant. Dozens of Amsterdam mayors and aldermen, as well as other members of the city's social elite, served as directors of the two companies, privately invested in slave ships and slave plantations, or had other vested interests in the global system of slavery. Various chapters show how they helped to develop aggressive expansionist policies, leading to the expansion of the slave trade and systems of forced labor. Moreover, from 1683 to 1795, the city itself owned one third (in the final 25 years even half) of the slave colony of Suriname through its participation in the Sociëteit van Suriname, the other two participants being the WIC and the van Aeerssen van Sommelsdijck family. Although the city did not directly receive any income from the production on the plantations, historian Karwan Fatah-Black calculates that between 1705 and 1772 the city received more than one million guilders from the taxes the Society raised on the transportation of goods and enslaved people to and inside the colony. By protecting and regulating the trade in and ownership of human beings on

the basis of race, the city was instrumental in legitimizing racialized slavery and thus helped to lay the foundation for the enormous expansion of slavery-related economic activities, West *and* East.

In November 2017, Rotterdam was the first Dutch city to formally call for an investigation into the city's involvement in colonial slavery, at the initiative of Peggy Wijntuin, a councilwoman of Afro-Surinamese descent. As Rotterdam had previously played only a marginal role in academic research on Dutch colonialism and slavery, the three books resulting from the city's commission are groundbreaking. The first three chapters of *Het koloniale verleden van Rotterdam* outline how the city's colonial trade in slave-produced sugar and tobacco, though much smaller in scale than that of Amsterdam, laid the basis for the city's economic and industrial expansion. From the early seventeenth century sugar refineries, and from the mid-eighteenth century the tobacco-processing industry, offered significant employment opportunities, as did the city's shipping and shipbuilding industries, which were given a boost by the trade in these and other colonial products. Initially Rotterdam traders brought the raw sugar and tobacco from the French Caribbean and from Virginia and Maryland, but by the early nineteenth century these products came mostly from the Dutch East Indies, entangling the city in a global trade network. The wealth the colonial and other trade enterprises brought the city and its elite families, whose members frequently served in the governing bodies of the city and the VOC and WIC, has left its traces in the architecture and urban planning of Rotterdam. One of the buildings attesting to a later phase of Rotterdam's colonial history is the headquarters, completed in 1930, of the British-Dutch company Unilever. However, Unilever's complete dependence on palm oil from Asia and Africa for the production of its original main products, soap and margarine, is not the only link with the city's colonial past. Its location on a street named after a scion of the Rochussen family points to a different, but interconnected side of that history.

The name Rochussen is indelibly tied to the Atlantic slave trade. Of the 68 slave ships that left Rotterdam between 1750 and 1780, more than 80 percent were outfitted by the shipping company Coopstad & Rochussen (C&R). C&R, the second largest private slave trading company of the Netherlands, also participated heavily in the so-called *negotiatiestelsel*, highly popular investment funds introduced in the early 1750s, which made possible the rapid expansion of Suriname's plantation economy that benefited slave traders such as C&R. In his monograph about Rotterdam's links with Atlantic slavery, Alex van Stipriaan zooms in on one of C&R's slave ships, the *Willem en Carolina*. Compiling the documentation of the ship's five trans-Atlantic slave voyages, he meticulously reconstructs one such voyage from Rotterdam to West-Africa to Curaçao

and back to Rotterdam. The structure of both Van Stipriaan's book and its individual chapters follows a recurrent pattern of zooming out to the larger context and zooming in to the microhistories of, for example, slave plantations and surrounding Maroon communities in Suriname. Thus he succeeds in the goal of showing the complexity of the history of slavery, demonstrating on the basis of log books that there were more (attempted) slave revolts on Dutch slave ships than found their way into historical databases, but also that there were multiple rational and emotional reasons for plantation slaves *not* to join the Maroons or even to defend their plantations against them. The conclusions to the chapters and to the book as a whole insert a personal voice and engage current debates.

Personal voices and stories are at the center of *Rotterdam, een postkoloniale stad in beweging*, which aims to portray contemporary Rotterdam as a "superdiverse" and dynamic postcolonial city. The mostly young and ethnically diverse authors' enthusiasm and hopeful commitment to building a better future from awareness of the past is very engaging. The emphasis is on the cultural legacies of the city's colonial past, intersecting with family memories and stories. Subjects range from food culture to the role of music, art, and religious practices in coming to terms with colonial legacies. One jarring note is struck in the introduction, where the editors casually hold the (50!) "Pilgrim fathers" who left Delfshaven to sail for America on the *Mayflower* in 1620 responsible for contributing to "the enslavement of Africans and American segregation after taking care of the continuing genocide of precolonial peoples in the New World" (p. 14, my literal translation). This evident hogwash undermines the book's credibility and contrasts starkly with the other Rotterdam volumes' nuanced method of presenting historical evidence in a politically sensitive way. Given the innovative nature of the Rotterdam investigation, the English-language summary of the three Rotterdam volumes under review here—Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Colonialism and Slavery: An Alternative History of the Port City of Rotterdam*, (2021)—is a welcome addition.

In 2019, Utrecht was the third Dutch city, after Amsterdam and Rotterdam, to commission a study of its slavery history. Despite its lack of maritime links, this most provincial of the three cities was not lacking in colonial ambitions. From the 1640s, the local elite dreamed of digging a canal to give Utrecht access to the open sea and thus to the colonial trade. Plans to realize a canal never came to fruition, however. With the foundation of the Utrecht Company in 1720, the city's political and business elite sought other ways to empower and enrich themselves. The company received a monopoly on the exploitation of a sugar refinery in the city and bought a coffee plantation in Suriname, named Utrecht. Investments were also made in two slave ships, which between 1738 and 1746

transported 1,094 enslaved Africans to the Americas. Eventually none of these enterprises were very profitable and the Utrecht Company folded in 1752.

More profitable were the Utrecht elite's investments in, and employment by, the VOC and, to a lesser extent, the WIC. Utrecht did not have its own chamber in either company, but it did have the right to appoint an "extraordinary" director in the VOC's Amsterdam chamber. Several chapters of *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht* are devoted to the careers of Utrecht residents as VOC administrators in Asia and Africa. These high-ranking VOC employees all owned enslaved people and many privately traded in them. After serving the VOC, many of them settled in Utrecht or spent the capital gained overseas on mansions along the Vecht River.

The research on Utrecht sheds new light on Belle van Zuylen, the celebrated eighteenth-century champion of women's rights. The capital that made it possible for her to enter the circles of Europe's intellectual elite derived largely from the extensive shares she owned in the WIC and VOC. Although she addressed colonialism in her work and some of the Enlightenment figures in whose circles she moved sharply denounced slavery, Van Zuylen never criticized the institution in her writings. In this respect, she differed greatly from some of her Dutch contemporaries, for example the Utrecht poet Petronella Moens, author of a 1798 antislavery pamphlet. In the 1840s, Utrecht even became a center of abolitionism, but the movement was marginal and far from radical. Utrecht's leading role in it ended abruptly in 1848.

If there is one thing the investigations into these three cities' roles in slavery demonstrate, it is that slavery is an integral part of Dutch *national* history. The fact that this is hardly a new insight makes the virtual absence of slavery and colonialism in the permanent collection of *the* national museum only the more conspicuous. It was not until 2017 that the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam officially announced plans for a major slavery exhibition. Delayed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the exhibition was finally opened by King Willem-Alexander in May 2021 and ran until September 2021. Published in Dutch and English, the richly illustrated catalog, which merits independent reading, sets a model for making visible to a broad audience the lives of people who had been rendered invisible. Making the historical personal, *Slavery* tells the stories of ten men and women—enslaved and free, Black, Asian, and White—whose lives offer a microcosm of the history of Dutch colonial slavery.

Both the exhibition and its catalog were (implicitly) created in the spirit of African American artist Fred Wilson's groundbreaking 1992 installation *Mining the Museum*. Like Wilson, the Rijksmuseum's curating team, led by Eveline Sint Nicolaas and Valika Smeulders, who also edited and contributed to the book, "mined" the museum holdings to bring to light slavery-related stories and voices

"buried" in the collections and the archives. The two examples that probably appealed most to museum visitors are Rembrandt's 1634 portraits of Marten Soolmans and his wife Oopjen Coppit, the acquisition of which, through joint purchase by the Netherlands and France in 2016, was a source of national pride. The chapter on Coppit reveals that the wealth of the newly-wed couple, displayed in their attire and quasi-regal portraiture, was at least partly based on income from slave labor in the sugar colonies. Soolmans's father owned the largest sugar refinery in Amsterdam, part of which Coppit inherited after her husband's death in 1641. In 1647 she married Maerten Daey, a former military officer in Dutch Brazil, who 12 years earlier (and presumably unbeknownst to her) had been found guilty of imprisoning and sexually abusing an African woman in his house in Brazil and fathering a child with her.

Following Wilson's method of juxtaposition, the curators/editors piece together rare historical objects testifying to life in slavery, excerpts from historical documents, and artworks to tease out new meanings. From colonial court hearings in connection with a slave uprising on the Palmeneribo plantation in Suriname in 1707, for example, the voices of Wally and his brothers are retrieved. Put in dialog with a kettle for boiling sugar cane juice and foot stocks designed to constrain multiple enslaved people, these voices allow the enslaved brothers' lives to be fleshed out—lives marked by back-breaking labor and dehumanization, but also by resistance. As a group of enslaved men set out to cut sugar cane, we hear Wally admonish them, "you fellows shouldn't work so hard, [for] our old master in Holland is dead, [and] our new master [Amsterdam city clerk Jonas Witsen] is rich enough" (p. 86). What provokes the slave uprising, we learn, is Witsen's injunction to impose further restrictions on the private lives and mobility of the enslaved. Moreover, the court hearings give new meaning to Dirk Valkenburg's idyllic paintings of sugar plantations. Sent by Witsen to make paintings of his three plantations in Suriname, Valkenburg actually helped to suppress the 1707 slave uprising at Palmeneribo. In the hearings, he brazenly testifies that he slapped Wally in the face and called him a "dog" for causing the "troubles." Valkenburg's romanticized images of plantations and the merrymaking of their enslaved labor force are exposed as a cover-up for an inhumane colonial regime: Wally and his brothers were burned alive and their heads were put on stakes to deter their fellows.

Collectively, the six books demonstrate that colonial slavery was entrenched in Dutch society, that men and women from all walks of life directly or indirectly profited from it, and that its impact and legacies are still shaping the lives of many today. Taking to heart the conclusions of the Amsterdam investigation, Amsterdam Mayor Femke Halsema formally apologized for the city government's active participation in colonial slavery and the global trade in

enslaved human beings on July 1, 2021, during the annual commemoration of the abolition of slavery. The mayors of Rotterdam and Utrecht have likewise offered apologies for those cities' historical role in global slavery. Marking the 400th commemoration of both the establishment of the Dutch WIC and the 1621 massacre during the conquest of the Banda islands in the Dutch East Indies by VOC Governor-General Jan Pieterszoon Coen and the subsequent enslavement of the islands' entire population, 2021 might have been an appropriately symbolic year to offer *national* apologies for Dutch slavery in West and East, as the three mayors urged the government to do.

Although in 2020 Prime Minister Mark Rutte rejected the call for national apologies, arguing that it would only lead to further polarization, by the summer of 2022 the government seems to have shifted position. Following the example of the three cities discussed, not only did more Dutch cities start investigating their involvement in slavery in 2021 and 2022, but so did De Nederlandsche Bank, as well as two major commercial Dutch banks. Particularly after the president of De Nederlandsche Bank publicly apologized for the Dutch Central Bank's historical role in trans-Atlantic slavery during a speech at the national commemoration of Dutch slavery on July 1, 2022, and announced the establishment of a fund to help repair the historical wrongs of slavery and its legacies, it has become virtually impossible for the Dutch government not to follow suit. A Dutch minister (of Surinamese descent) who, on behalf of the government, also spoke at the 2022 national commemoration announced that before 2023 the government would formally respond to a (government-commissioned) report by the "Dialogue Group [on the] Slavery Past." As the main advice in this report, presented in 2021, was that the Dutch government should offer recognition of and apologies and reparation for slavery, it is expected that national apologies will be made by 2023, 160 years after the abolition of Dutch colonial slavery in 1863 and 150 years after the end of the ten-year period during which the formerly enslaved were required to work for their former owners in 1873.