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## INTERVIEW

# Politically correct consensus is not for me: An interview with Gert Oostindie

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Gert Oostindie (GO), Professor of Colonial and Post-Colonial History at Leiden University and long-time Director of the Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies (KITLV) retired at the end of 2021.

Jessica Vance Roitman (JVR) and Wouter Veenendaal (WV) have worked and published with Oostindie. They sat down with him at his home in Leiden over a bottle of red wine and a fair amount of cheese to ask him questions and to converse about his reflections on his career. What followed was a sprawling discussion of changes in the historical profession, (post) colonial debates about slavery and the legacy of colonialism in the Netherlands, and a retrospective look back on the work done by this well-known historian.

The text has been lightly edited for length and readability.

*WV: Gert, you began your career at the KITLV in the early 1980s. You retired in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century! In this forty year-long career, you've seen a lot. How has history as a discipline changed?*

**GO:** In the Netherlands, history used to be really peripheral in societal debates. This is not true anymore; it has become far more relevant. Back when I was starting as a student at university in 1973, it didn't matter that much. In fact, I didn't even start out studying history myself. I studied some sort of applied social sciences with a focus on social work. I had this very naïve idea that with a diploma I would help in changing the world. And after two years of studying social work, I thought it was really boring and I switched to history because I really liked it. Actually, the thing that got me going was writing a research paper on the history of social work in the Netherlands.

This increased attention for history in the Netherlands has to do, of course, with identity debates, European integration, migration, etc. And that is the case all over Europe, surely in former colonial states. In Europe and certainly the Netherlands the debate about the past has become more relevant because it is acknowledged that history is a crucial part of the national identity, and that identity matters.

The other thing I would say is that there is more interdisciplinarity in terms of what you as a historian need to know about. In that sense, my first bachelor's, in social sciences, has helped me a lot as a historian. There is also more of an awareness of the need to reflect critically on your positionality as a researcher, to develop a critical take on the origins and contents of archives, and so on. So these things, I would say, have really changed. And of course digitization became big, but that came a bit later.

**WV:** *So that has probably also changed the role of the historian in society or even in how he or she does academic work?*

**GO:** Not to the same extent in all branches of historical enquiry, but surely in the fields of colonial and post-colonial history, and in histories of race/ethnicity and gender. These are the hotbeds where so many debates are centered. For these topics, history really matters in contemporary debates. And if you are in those fields, it is difficult not to engage in public debates. I am not altogether sure, however, whether this has impacted all historians working on all kinds of themes. If you specialize in, say, medieval European history or the Industrial Revolution, you may not encounter much of a demand to engage in public debates.

I have never judged researchers who don't take part in public discussions, and I still don't. It doesn't necessarily come naturally. It depends on what you are studying, but also on you yourself. There can be an opportunity, but there's not an obligation. For me, it increasingly seemed to be a sensible thing to do - to participate in the public debate.

**WV:** *And do you see the greater focus on positionality as a positive or a negative?*

**GO:** I don't go with the radical identitarian position that says that you basically cannot understand what you are talking about if you are male and you talk about gender issues and masculinity, or you are white and you talk about colonialism and racism. I think that is a dead-end street. I think very few historians would disagree with that point of view. But I think that much of the debate about these issues has also helped me to reflect on my own background and position. That's important. Everything that forces you to rethink what you are doing, including an awareness of your positionality, may add to the quality of your research and writing.

Part of my valedictory lecture (*De toekomst van het koloniale verleden*, 2021) was about this topic. So over the past forty years I did reflect a lot about my own position and what that means for my work. Probably I did so more in private than publicly. I hate how it comes across because, in the end, you talk about yourself, which I don't really like to do when we should be talking about history. But of course, me being from a privileged environment, white and male and so on, yes, of course that means that my initial perceptions and feelings about colonialism and race issues might have been naïve. Also in recent debates I am aware that participants from different backgrounds may have quite different views and emotions. I think this awareness is important, even if it shouldn't dominate the way historians 'reconstruct' the past.

Twenty-five years ago, in my book *Het paradijs overzee* (1997), I critically observed that recent debates about Dutch national identity simply ignored the colonial past. In that context I also criticized the fact that there was not one single Dutch monument commemorating the Atlantic slave trade and Caribbean slavery. About that time, though, the debate about slavery finally took off in the Netherlands, mainly because of successful lobbying by Afro-Surinamese activists. And so in 2002 a national monument for slavery was erected. I thought at the time that in my work I had been helping towards that goal of greater awareness and recognition. But at some point, I found myself confronted with people who said "Who are you as a white person to interfere in that? You just want to jump on the bandwagon." I never thought of what I was doing in that way, and I reacted angrily at times. Today I understand the resentment better. It is not that people from an African or Caribbean background in the Netherlands necessarily know more about this history than white historians. But they do have very different questions, which historians should take seriously, and in the end the struggle for recognition was primarily theirs. This remains a sensitive issue. There is far more societal and political recognition today about this shameful national slavery past, hence there is also more money available for

research, exhibitions, and the like. Consequently, there are far more historians and museum people working in this field than before. But the greater part of these are white, and I do understand black Dutch resentment about the study of slavery being a money maker for white professionals. I think it is only wise that established institutions take this criticism seriously, and act on it. But that is no reason to go with the idea that we are all in our own boxes, and we can only understand history within the limitations of our own box: that is clearly a dead-end street.

*WV: You mentioned that these shifts have helped you to clarify your position. But can you give an example of a position that changed or that was clarified over time?*

**GO:** After studying slavery for many years, I moved on to the study of decolonization, particularly in the Dutch Caribbean. Of course, the situation here was completely different from the way Indonesia got rid of the Dutch in 1945-1949, after the Japanese occupation. At the time, the Dutch were willing to engage in a bloody war simply because one way or another they wanted to retain as much as possible of their former colonial power. All that was because Indonesia was extremely important to the Dutch, economically, geopolitically, but also culturally and emotionally. There was nothing of that when it came to the Dutch Caribbean, and from 1970 onwards Dutch governments were doing what they could to convince their counterparts in Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles to accept independence. This was basically a self-serving 'gift'. The Dutch were all too happy to get away from the Caribbean. They saw few benefits and serious costs, so they just wanted to get out of there. I still think this analysis is valid. But the way I wrote and particularly the way I have talked in public about this was sometimes understood as unduly dismissive. It's not that I didn't take the Dutch Caribbean seriously or that what I was saying was historically inaccurate. But I am more aware today that it was painful for people from the Dutch Caribbean to hear such a rather crude analysis offered by a white Dutchman. That would apply to pro-independence activists from Suriname who spoke of their country's independence in 1975 as a hard-won victory over colonialism. But no less for Antilleans who until today vote against independence out of pragmatic reasons, but nevertheless harbor strong resentment about colonialism and its legacies.

When I moved as Professor from Utrecht to Leiden and gave my inaugural address here about slavery (2007), one of the issues I discussed was a possible inter-generational trauma transmitted from the times of slavery to the present-day black diaspora. I spoke of racism and tried to discuss this theme as cautiously as possible, yet I couldn't help observing that empirical evidence was missing, and I wondered how to tackle this, if this were possible at all. I tried to discuss that very subtly, but it still came off badly, or at least, some understood this as a dismissal of present pain. I don't think I would have completely different ideas now if I were to delve into this matter again, but I might have chosen a slightly different tone. But then again, a scholar shouldn't be overly occupied by what others may find of your work. Perhaps if you become overly aware of all possible sensitivities you don't dare to say anything anymore. And that is not the way I want to go.

*JVR: There has been this debate about positionality and empirical or positivist traditions; what is truth? And it becomes all very philosophical. Do you still believe that we as historians can make factual statements?*

**GO:** History is obviously not rocket science. It's not like  $2 + 2 = 4$ . We are producing reconstructions of the past, not facts. And yet we do strive for a measure of consensus amidst all the space we allow for multi-perspectivity, multivocality, and the like. So-called 'hard facts' are hard to come by, but they're there, at least in the sense of intersubjectivity among historians. Six million Jews murdered in the *Shoah* is not an arbitrary narrative, neither is 12.5 million Africans enslaved and transported across the Atlantic. These are sort of hard facts.

What we understand today of what happened in the past is a construction by definition. There are no one-to-one copies of what happened. But it's not like the constructions historians make – if done well – are interchangeable among one another.

I was thinking of this apropos of one of my first public lectures, some forty years ago, titled, "Slave of the sources" ["*Slaaf van de bronnen*" in Dutch]. I meant that the slave that you find in the sources is very one-dimensional, and that I, as a historian, am all too dependent (hence, a slave) on these sources. I'm dependent on this tantalizingly one-sided paperwork for what I know. And this was a deep frustration as I was writing my PhD thesis. "I can't invent something to present a different perspective," so I said. Both my supervisors, anthropologist Harry Hoetink and economic historian Peter Boomgaard, got the point, even if Peter complained that I said this annoyingly often in my dissertation. The fact is that I couldn't write the social history I had wanted to write simply because I didn't have the sources. So with these sources there was no chance to write a thesis from the perspective of an enslaved person. I might have thought differently about using words like "enslaved" instead of "slave" if I had to do it again. But this idea that you hear so often from people that with oral history research you can enhance your sources on early modern history, no, I don't think so. Oral traditions may be helpful. But oral history research about early modern slavery might help you understand later memories and interpretations of the past, but little about the past itself.

**JVR:** *My research on the Lesser Antilles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was criticized by a researcher as being "Eurocentric" because it's based it on sources from the archives. I did try to engage with this person and asked, "Ok, what would you suggest?" Her view was that oral history was valid, that people's memories of the memories of the memories are still a valid contribution to the research. What do you think? Would you change your research process? Your methodology basically?*

**GO:** I wouldn't. The fact that people transmit traditions over time makes these traditions an excellent subject for research, but not necessarily a rich source of reliable information. There are of course important exceptions. Richard Price's seminal 1983 book, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an African American People*, combines oral history with archival research. But this research is about one very closed Maroon community in this specific place in Suriname, the tropical forest, that has been fairly isolated for generations and generations. Of course, they have these oral traditions that really serve as a direct counterweight to the archival records! But except for these few exceptional cases, oral history simply doesn't matter for historians of the early modern period.

If you do more contemporary research, then yes of course, you can have interviews and all that. It works. I've done a lot of those myself and I really liked it. It's also a thing we need to teach our students to do, and to tell them the do's and don'ts. When I applied for my first job at KITLV they told me that within a year there needed to be a book about the history of Antilleans and Surinamese in the Netherlands [*Land van de Overheersers*, 1985], up to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. I wrote that book together with a colleague from Curaçao working at the Institute, Emy Maduro. She did the Antillean part. I took care of the Suriname part. She was older and was doing most of her interviews in her native Papiamentu. If I look back, I was young and embarrassingly unexperienced. And there I was interviewing all these older Surinamese – mainly men – who had been here in the 1930s and 40s and 50s. Incidentally, my wife Ingrid's father happened to be among them. I had heard of his reputation as a military man in World War Two and later as the owner of a jazz club, Porgy & Bess, in the southern part of the Netherlands, long before I met her. Anyway, here I was: I had never been in Suriname, was born and raised in a nearly entirely white environment – what did I know? So they all started with "Jongen, ik ga jou vertellen." ["Young man, I'm going to tell you how it was"]. And they talked about their lives,

often really moving stories. I asked about racism in the Netherlands, and most of them answered that it was okay, 'back then'. That fit in very much with my, in hindsight, rather naïve ideas about Dutch society, at the time, and perhaps I was all too happy to write that down. Now I would be just as respectful as I tried to be at the time, but slightly more critical on this issue.

In *Het paradisijs overzee* I included a chapter on Caribbean migration where I also talk about my wife's family history. One observation is that the longer I knew them, the more I was struck by the diversity of their stories. Certainly, this also applied to their recollections of racism in the Netherlands. Their father was black, married to a white woman, and with their children they formed the only family of color in the small city they lived in. Over the years, and of course not only because of what I learned from my family-in-law, I have become more realistic about racism in this country. The Dutch traditionally had this idea of being a super-tolerant nation with little racism. We didn't think *Zwarte Piet* [Black Piet, the controversial black-faced figure who accompanies St. Nicholas in Dutch celebrations] was a problem, but most foreigners thought it was really weird and offensive. It took a long time and it took black activism for *Zwarte Piet* to become an embarrassment that we need to get rid of. That is in the works now. Not back then though and looking back I really missed some obvious pointers when I did this first round of interviews. I would ask things differently, and I would pose different questions today.

**JVR:** *Speaking of methodologies, there has been a lot of hype about digital humanities and digitization. You also had to deal with that as Director of the KITLV. What is your take? Are they really the Holy Grail that we have been told they are? Are they adding anything to your work? Of course, here I am referencing the whole attempt to shut down the KITLV eight or ten years ago, because the basis of the attempt was to make the KITLV part of a digital humanities center.*

**GO:** Yes, between 2010 and 2014 – four years long; the struggle to keep KITLV afloat. Let me first tell of a personal experience with digital research. My book *Soldaat in Indonesië* [Soldier in Indonesia, 2015] is based on a corpus of some 100,000 pages which was not digitized. We worked on that with a host of interns and MA students. It was a lot of work, really, and then, when the book was published and sold very well, I used the royalties to have the entire corpus digitized. And then we went through the same corpus again, now digitally. Honestly, I should say that the added value was limited, and hence disappointing. There were no new findings. Much of what we found simply confirmed the early conclusions. Partly this was due to digital complexities, but there are always digital complexities. The longer you go back in time, the more difficult it gets to have texts properly digitized. But I do not refer to this single experience to say that digital humanities won't fly. It will. It in fact does. But it's no solution for all questions we as historians want to tackle. And I am sure that if we would have had the whole corpus digitized *before* I started writing, I could have made a more systematic and hence more accurate analysis. And with the help of more experienced digital humanities scholars, I could also have delved more into emotion mining and the like. In fact, historian Stef Scagliola is now working with this corpus, and I am looking forward to refreshing findings.

I have no doubt that we should make future generations of historians familiar with the basics of digital humanities. And of course there's great promise in the enormously increasing numbers of digitally available sources. Whenever available, I obviously use those too. For the The Hague project [history of the colonial and slavery past of The Hague] that I am still in, I did look at some of the digitized archives, just out of curiosity. And yes, I did find things through a digital search that I could not have found in another way. The promise of digital humanities is that if you have a large corpus of data, that computers will help you not just to work more efficiently than you could doing it "old school," but that it will also enable you to do more sophisticated analyses, such as emotion-mining



and so forth. Yes, I think that could be exciting. I really think so. It's just that I have not yet seen much in my particular field where this has really materialized as yet.

Making huge amounts of data available and researchable is great, of course! I just don't think it is the solution to all things we are interested in. And surely, I don't think this should be done at the expense of developing other expertise and skills. This is the struggle we had with the Royal Netherlands Academy of Science (KNAW) and specifically this one Director who really thought that digital humanities were the only future way to go and didn't care about anything else. That was stupid of course, and the KNAW acknowledges that now. But unfortunately, he was the one in charge of the Institutes, including the KITLV.

*WV: Now that the KNAW has been mentioned . . . In addition to being a historian you have also been a [Research Institute] Director for a long time, and some would say even almost a politician – using your extensive network in The Hague and elsewhere to save an institute. How do you look back now, ten years later, on that whole episode, the four-year struggle with the KNAW?*

**GO:** Well, I wouldn't want to do it all over again of course! I think that it shows how big bureaucracies have, on the one hand, their own logic, which is basically to make things not better but bigger. But also how within these bureaucracies, individuals matter.

It mattered a lot that at that point you had two of probably the most brilliant presidents the KNAW ever had, both in the hard sciences, who really didn't care that much about the nuts and bolts of the Academy. So the two KNAW Directors – basically just senior staff members, executives – were inadvertently given a very free rein to pursue their own preferences. By 2010, the one in charge of the research institutes was consumed by the idea that in ten years' time, all humanities and social sciences would be digital or otherwise they wouldn't exist. Of course, that was nonsense, as we can all see today. But things can go wrong, especially if you give somebody like that all the opportunities to continue on that path. KITLV was an obstacle, it seemed, and colonialism in Indonesia and the Caribbean were not considered of much interest. Again, all wrong. If the President of the KNAW would have had different ideas and a firmer hand, the actual breakup of the KITLV might not have happened. Fortunately, we did prevent its closure. I am happy and also slightly proud that KITLV survived as a research institute, but without its own collections and the KITLV Press. Under the circumstances, this was the best possible outcome. Incidentally, let me emphasize again what I said time and again, lastly at my farewell lecture: I really did not save the KITLV on my own. That was a huge collective uphill battle.

It would have been much better for the KITLV if the huge [KITLV] library and special collections department were still a part of the Institute, because your sense of community is stronger, but also because we had people coming from all over the world to work in this library. Now we invite fellows to work in our Institute and then they move on to the other side of the Witte Singel [canal in Leiden on which both the KITLV and the Leiden University Library are located] to work in the [Leiden University] library where the KITLV collection is now housed and managed. So it has not killed the KITLV, but has made it more of a challenge to be an institute, and about that I am still not at all happy.

Of course, there is another side to this as well and here I think the Leiden University Libraries do a great job. Being a really modern library and being up to date requires intimate expertise in legal and technical issues: copyright, open access, repositories, all that stuff. There I do understand that an institute such as we were is too small. I see that. I know that many of our own staff did not agree and still do not agree with the management of the KITLV Library being moved to the Leiden University Library. Actually, I just got a nice letter from a former staff member who said that it is such a pity that we don't have the Library in the Institute anymore, and I have received many more in

the past. I always say, “Yes I agree, KITLV was a more complete Institute at the time but we should also face up to the fact that we were perhaps not up to date enough to do this, and anyway we had to move on.”

For those who remained at the Institute after its reorganization in 2014, it became an altogether different Institute. Research was now the only core activity. Ten people moved on to the Leiden University Library and another ten lost their jobs. And new research staff was hired, mainly young people, on a temporary basis. The average age dropped by twenty years or so. There was an altogether new dynamic, and we all liked that. And actually we were doing quite well, attracting serious outside funding, doing exciting projects. In an international peer review, we were given an “excellent,” better than ever before. But with the Corona crisis it also became difficult to keep the Institute cohesive. I think that if you engage not only in research but also in education or collections management, it is easier to retain a sense of community. So that has been a real challenge in the past few years.

**WV:** *You said that according to the KNAW, one of the reasons they thought that there was no future for KITLV is that they didn't think there was a future for area studies. And I guess this is one of the challenges for KITLV: that there is a group of people focusing on the Caribbean and a group of people focusing on Indonesia. How would you respond to the question: Is there a future for pure area studies, focusing on one particular corner of the world?*

**GO:** Area studies in itself is not a very strong proposition. Disciplines are far more important than areas. We have always said that to work at KITLV, surely to have a permanent position, you need to be really strong in one of the disciplines we're working in, whether history, anthropology, linguistics, or political sciences. At KITLV you need to deal with people who are working in different disciplines, and we have always encouraged interdisciplinary work – in teams, but also for individual researchers. Surely there is no place in the Netherlands where you have such a concentration of people working either on Indonesia or the Caribbean in various disciplines. I think this has worked and I am confident the KITLV will remain a center of excellence in this field. And really, what is the alternative? That the knowledge of the regions just dissipates and is all over the place and there is no center? For focus and concentration, having a dedicated institute definitely works.

So, I think that has worked in the case of KITLV, but that is not in itself a very strong defense of area studies writ large of course. Modern area studies originated in the US in a Cold War situation in which the Americans suddenly needed to have a lot of expertise on countries such as Vietnam. The caricature is that at one point you had these people who knew all kinds of “exotic” languages or had delved into one or another fishing community in this particular place for years on end, and suddenly they were requested to advise the American army on military strategies. This is not the kind of area studies that you want to engage in. And by the way, in the Dutch case, that subservience was more typical a century ago than it was in postcolonial times. But we do need to understand both Dutch colonialism and its legacies in the former colonies as well as in the Netherlands, and just as much we need to understand the social and political dynamics in states such as Indonesia, Suriname, and the Caribbean islands that still form part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. And all of that requires a long-term scholarly engagement, interdisciplinary, and comparative expertise. So, I am convinced that there is a strong argument for an institute like KITLV, as long as it innovates itself. And yes, I think the move to engage in political debates has been very important for surviving as an institute.

**WV:** *Because you could say: it is about the Caribbean and Indonesia, but actually also about the Netherlands, right?*



**GO:** Yes. I think that much of the debates about colonial history in the Netherlands are primarily about the Netherlands and not about Indonesia or the Caribbean. That is of course one of the things that has changed. Your opening question was about what has changed in history as a discipline. Forty years ago, colonial history seemed totally peripheral, and now it is in the newspapers every day. And now we say that to get this colonial history back is important, but then we need to get it back in a proper way with the right expertise.

There is a lot of national soul-searching going on, and rightly so. Look at all the projects about the involvement of major Dutch cities in the history of slavery and colonialism, some of which the KITLV has taken on, such as for Rotterdam and The Hague, and more are in the making. And indeed, this huge project that we are now finishing, with the NIMH [Netherlands Institute for Military History] and NIOD [Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies] “[Independence, decolonization, violence and war in Indonesia, 1945-1950](#),” derives primarily from a long overdue need to critically reassess the way the Dutch army fought a war that shouldn’t have been started in the first place. And then we are talking extreme violence deployed on a structural basis, war crimes, political, military and judicial responsibilities, and a long post-War history of silencing and denial. It’s very important that as a nation we are willing to face up to all of that, and for that reason alone I am happy that the Dutch government finally financed our research, and I am looking forward to the official reaction once we publish our work. [note: Shortly after this interview, the KITLV-NIMH-NIOD report was presented, 17 February 2022. That same day, the Dutch government embraced the conclusions about the structural employment of extreme violence and apologized to Indonesia.] But let’s not pretend that it is primarily about Indonesia or that it is for Indonesia. No, we are doing it to address our own concerns, and that is important in and of itself. Anyway, again, to do that kind of research and also to understand what the possibilities and limitations are, it is really important to have a set of people who really know these places and are also able to look at them from different perspectives and disciplines.

From a purely academic view it may be risky for individual researchers to linger at an institute such as KITLV, for one because of career opportunities, which are not too good in a small institute, but also because you run the risk of getting lost in always looking at the same places. On the positive side, it may enable you to have really broad questions, informed by different disciplines. And it should be comparative; if you are not comparative, it won’t work. I am happy to see that several of our researchers – actually, like the two of you – have moved on. But I am equally happy that most of those that have tenured jobs at the KITLV indeed work in this interdisciplinary tradition.

**JVR:** *When I first came to Europe, I was a bit surprised and confused by the whole research institute structure. In the US there may be someone’s lab or an institute within a university, a very well-funded university, but the notion of having a place like KITLV, which is also common in Germany and France, is not part of the landscape. Do you think there is a future for purely research institutes, not specifically KITLV, but the research institute structure? Or do you see the future more like in the US where they are somehow part of a university? I am thinking about the Afrika Studiecentrum [Africa Studies Center, formerly independent institute that is now part of Leiden University] for example.*

**GO:** Well, Leiden University has always said, “We are glad to take you over!” All KNAW and NWO [Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research] institutes are evaluated not just for their quality, but also their portfolio. What is their contribution to the academic infrastructure in the country? And only if they can demonstrate that they are doing something that no one else is doing, is there an argument for their existence. What I can say is that once an institute becomes part of a university, it becomes dependent on students. And Indonesian or Caribbean Studies do not attract a lot of students. So, if you would

incorporate these without any protective clause in a university, they would close down within ten years, or fewer, simply because they don't attract students.

The theoretical argument is that if you are an institute with guaranteed funding for a long period of time, you can make a long-term plan for your research, which is really impossible at a university. If I look back at KITLV, this Indonesia research project started in 2012 because we argued that it was really important, but we only properly started with significant government funding, over 4 million Euros, in 2017. In the years in between we invested funding in it to create energy and keep it on the agenda. A university would not have done that, and an individual university researcher would not have had the prestige to do so. In that sense KNAW institutes like KITLV or NIOD are really different.

On the other hand, I need not tell you that attracting research funding at an institute like KITLV is no different from attracting research funding at a university, and looking at the fierce competition, success is rather haphazard. In this context KITLV or NWO institutes are not one bit less opportunistic about finding financing than the rest. If you look at sister institutes like the NIOD, the IISG [the KNAW International Institute for Social History] or the Meertens Institute [KNAW institute for Research and Documentation of Dutch Language and Culture], they are doing all kinds of research that regular universities do as well. But as long as they have their own collections, they have a rightful claim to be special, and they have a crucial extra claim to fame. When we lost our collection, we lost this claim. So, we were very much aware in 2014, after the loss of the Library, that we were in a very, very fragile position. Of course, what we did very well is that over half of our budget since then did not come from the KNAW but from external research funding. But if you fail there, you are very easily swallowed up because you are so small and you have no unique assets such as a collection.

*WV: In your farewell lecture you mentioned the difference between doing research in the Caribbean and doing research in Indonesia. And I think you also said something about how the Caribbean hasn't really changed that much since you started doing research there. But what has changed is the way you do research in the Caribbean, right?*

**GO:** No! I don't think I said that the Caribbean didn't change that much, but I did say that when I looked at the themes that I addressed in my inaugural address at Utrecht University thirty years ago, I would address all of them again as being fundamental for the Caribbean. Except that thirty years ago, I did not discuss climate change. So yes, I think that all of these other themes, which are: ethnicity, problems of nation building, non-sovereignty, migrations, small-scale, therefore governance issues, they're all still relevant. The challenges have remained the same, but of course the Caribbean has changed. The transition to monoculture in tourism has only accelerated, and the differences within the Caribbean in terms of rich and poor have increased, so a lot of things did change. Of course, Cuba was already in 1993 not a shining example, but is now no longer even there as a point of reference. So those things have changed. And climate issues have become crucial.

But doing research in the Caribbean . . . Yes, that is true, and I think that the politics of ethnicity have become even stronger, far more than in Indonesian Studies, and I need not tell you why that is difficult. In this respect I have experienced that the difference between Indonesia and the Caribbean is very strong. As a white Dutch scholar, in the Dutch Caribbean, you somehow represent colonial history, and this is so much less the case in Indonesia! Anyway, then you are back at the limitations as a white person doing research in a Caribbean context which now more than ever is not only located "over there," but equally "here." Again, I take this seriously, and I do understand complaints about the advantages researchers at relatively well-endowed "white" institutions have. I have struggled to find my way in this context. But not by just keeping silent. And sometimes an outsider is welcomed to say things insiders in small-scale societies cannot

easily say. This is actually what Boeli van Leeuwen, the Curaçaoan novelist, once said to me, quite literally, and he was not the last one to encourage me in that sense.

**JVR:** *You have generated a lot of controversy by some of the things you said or written.*

**GO:** Well, at lot, really? I don't know. But some, surely. Sometimes you hear people accusing you of all kinds of colonial mindsets and the like and then you think, "Please try to finish reading a book first before you attack me on whatever." But I do try to take criticism seriously, also the emotions that come with these subjects. Actually, this is also why I had this idea for my farewell symposium that unfortunately was canceled because of Corona. I didn't want a *liber amicorum* in which everybody who is already overworked has felt obliged to write another essay. Nobody has time! Instead, I just wanted people to choose one artifact, a song or whatever and explain in only five minutes why this item speaks to them about what colonialism has done. So more a symposium about feelings and emotions than about "hard history." That is one thing that I did learn along the way: that in this field emotions are so important. And that it's very difficult to tell how to deal with them.

Surely, at one point you start thinking "What can I say and what should I not say?" And at that point this may clash with your intellectual integrity. That is something I mentioned in the valedictory lecture. I think it is important to talk about colonial history, also because I think it can bring people together and be socially inclusive. But what if you have an analysis that doesn't contribute to social cohesion? Well then in the end as an historian it is your task to give the information you've got. The outcome of the Indonesia project is a case in point, with angry reactions from some circles of the veterans and the 'Indische' [people of Indonesian descent living in the Netherlands] community. An example relating to slavery is this piece I published three decades ago in *Slavery and Abolition*, about Surinamese slavery and the idea that it was the worst ever. I thought, "Well that doesn't stand up to historical enquiry."

**WV:** *This was about how slavery in Suriname was better or easier compared with other places?*

**GO:** Yes: I take thirty pages to explain why it's a myth, and then two pages to say that this doesn't mean that slavery was good. But, of course, I could have realized that I was taking away something from people who identify strongly with the Surinamese slavery past. So that's a kind of thing that I don't think I would do again. Was this really what I should have been doing? I think it is a really thin line, because it is true empirically. It is true, and so that is where you waver.

**WV:** *And about the reaching out - the bringing people together - is that even possible in such a polarized landscape, because I also remember that for the Indonesia project you organized a whole meeting, that was even live streamed, with critics of the project. Do you think it is possible to try to find common ground with these people, or do you think at some point it's a lost cause?*

**GO:** At some point it stops being useful. My basic attitude is always: let's try. And by the way, this was a joint decision of the Directors of the three Institutes involved. But indeed, this was a waste of time. I was there, but if you have seen it then you see I didn't say a word. They had already said that I was a racist, and so I thought: "Why bother?"

I was surprised when *Itinerario* told me that they wanted this interview. It was a bit of coming full circle. My first article ever was in *Itinerario* about Cuba. My first reaction was, "Is that really of any interest to the readers? As an historian I am really more interested in people who are at the vanguard and going in new directions in historiography." If I look back at my career, I have been very productive and all that - true - and I don't think I wrote any stupid things, but if I look at what I have been doing all over the place in terms of topics and approaches, I have always been spreading myself a bit thin. I think

in the end that worked well. But if you look at the many books, is it all that innovative? No, definitely not.

An excuse may be that I have spent so much time on either being part of the public debate or being a manager that developing a really independent line of scholarship and being a group leader and all that didn't happen. But either way, I wouldn't consider myself to be a particularly innovative historian. This is not false modesty. This also goes for intellectual leadership. I have never thought that as a Director of KITLV or as Professor either in Utrecht or Leiden I needed to be the one intellectually leading the way. And I had the privilege of always having a lot of really bright and creative people around me, so why bother playing prima donna? And I don't think that I really did that. You were all in a project with me. I think what I usually said was, "These are the red lines in which we can all work, and then let everybody do it, and if I can be of help, let me know." That is not building a research group, and I really feel that I never built a research group in which I said, "All of us are going to work towards that objective and here is my intellectual leadership." And of course, if you're only looking at history, here my somewhat unusual career didn't help either. Both at Utrecht University and in Leiden, a good part of the PhD theses I supervised were not in history but rather more in the field of anthropology.

**WV:** *Is there anything we haven't talked about that you still would like to share with us?*

**GO:** As you know, I started my academic career in Cuba. And one thing I did learn in Cuba is what it does to you as a person, and also to your colleagues who are from that country, if you are working in a totalitarian state. This is something I really picked up. Four years after my initial research trip to Cuba in 1981, I returned. By then I had published an article based on my research on 19<sup>th</sup> century railroads in Spanish. I argued that it was really the Cuban bourgeoisie that pushed the development of the railroads, not Spain. Little did I know that this conformed very well with the new ideological line of the Communist Party. And so I was at the Association of Caribbean Historians conference in Havana in 1985, and all the Cuban historians came to congratulate me on my magnificent paper. It wasn't really that smart a paper. I didn't get it until one of them gave me a hint and then I realized. Hilarious! But again, this is why politically correct consensus is not for me.

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