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Repentance and Reappraisal: Historicising the Defenders of Slavery in the Netherlands

KARWAN FATAH-BLACK AND LAUREN LAURET

In this introduction to a special issue on the history of anti-abolitionism in the Netherlands, the 160th anniversary of the Dutch abolition of slavery is discussed in relation to the culture of commemoration in the Netherlands and the international historiography of abolition. A reappraisal of the role of the State in the commemoration of slavery coincides with a more critical view of history and a change in perspective on the colonial past. The recent trend of cities and institutions investigating their ties to slavery and subsequently often apologising for centuries of compliance and collaboration necessitates a more integrated approach to the analysis of the ideas that shaped colonial policy. Each contribution in this issue adds to the rich historiography on Dutch abolitionism but redirects the attention towards politicians, governors, investors, publishers and authors who defended the trade in people and their enslavement. The case studies presented here range from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, which makes this special issue the first presentation of how the Netherlands normalised colonial slavery over more than 250 years.

In deze inleiding op het themanummer over de geschiedenis van anti-abolitionisme in Nederland bespreken we de 160-jarige herdenking van de Nederlandse afschaffing van slavernij in relatie tot de herdenkingscultuur in Nederland en de internationale historiografie over abolitionisme. Een herwaardering van de rol van de Nederlandse staat in de herdenking van slavernij valt samen met een meer kritische kijk op deze geschiedenis en een perspectiefverandering aangaande het koloniale verleden. De recente trend waarbij Nederlandse steden en instituten hun betrokkenheid bij de slavernij onderzoeken en zich vervolgens regelmatig

verontschuldigen voor eeuwenlange meegaandheid en medewerking maakt een meer geïntegreerde benadering noodzakelijk om de ideeën die het koloniale beleid vormgaven te analyseren. Elk artikel in dit themanummer levert een bijdrage aan de rijke historiografie over het Nederlandse abolitionisme, maar verlegt daarin de aandacht naar de politici, gouverneurs, investeerders, uitgevers en auteurs die bijdroegen aan de verdediging van de handel in en het tot slaaf maken van mensen. De hier gepresenteerde casussen bestrijken de zeventiende tot en met de negentiende eeuw en daarmee is dit themanummer de eerste collectie die aantoonst hoe Nederland koloniale slavernij gedurende meer dan 250 jaar normaliseerde.

Introduction

The Dutch State marked the year from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024 as the Slavery Memorial Year in all four countries of the Kingdom. Emancipation Acts abolished colonial enslavement in the Dutch East Indies (1860) and the Dutch Atlantic (1863). In commemorations across the Kingdom, the Dutch State figured as the perpetrator that for centuries withheld freedom from enslaved people in its empire.¹ This is surprising, since for many years national historical commemorations of the past almost exclusively referred to histories of Dutch victimhood and moments of restoring freedom after foreign occupation by the Habsburgs and the Third Reich. A reappraisal of the role of the State in the commemoration of slavery coincides with a more critical view of history and a change in perspective on the colonial past. At the national commemoration of the abolition of slavery on 1 July 2023, King Willem-Alexander underlined the change in perspective of the State by using a phrase from Sranantongo, the Surinamese language with roots in the history of slavery: *‘Ten kon drat’* – times can change.

References to a historical tradition of obtained or regained freedom are cherished parts of Dutch culture, but the interrelation between the history of resistance and resilience against oppressors, and national cultures of remembrance are receiving ever closer scrutiny. Recently, for example, historians Ethan Mark and Gert Oostindie used the 4 May lecture (2020)

1 Prime Minister Mark Rutte explicitly addressed this issue on 19 December 2022, stating that ‘for centuries, the Dutch State has violated human dignity in the most egregious manner’ (‘Eeuwenlang is onder Nederlands staatsgezag de menselijke waardigheid met voeten getreden op de meest afschuwelijke manier.’) Toespraak van minister-president Mark Rutte over het slavernijverleden, 19 December 2022.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the authors’. Full recognition, regret and an apology for the role of the State informed the annual commemoration of the abolition of slavery on 1 July 2023, when King Willem-Alexander reaffirmed the apologies by the State and asked for forgiveness for the lack of action of his predecessors and family members.



Figure 1. Frits Rolandus, Abraham Salas, Daniel de Sola, Hermanus Dania and Gerrit Vinck handing out alms on Curaçao to mark the 25th anniversary of abolition. Soubllette et Fils, 1888. © Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-60050755 449217, CCBY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

and the inaugural Cleveringa lecture (2022) respectively – traditionally commemorations of Dutch liberation of and resistance to foreign oppression – to point out that the State's role of colonial oppressor has been absent from this history.² In this broader trend of reappraisal, we argue that the time has come to add an analysis of those who defended slavery between c. 1600–1870 to the history of the abolition of slavery, expanding on an older literature that focused primarily on the activities of the abolitionists (see Figure 1).

In the last few years, new studies have been looking more closely at those who instigated, managed and profited from enslavement and colonisation. Several Dutch city governments and provinces commissioned historians to take a close look at their predecessors' involvement in slavery.³ The financial sector soon followed. An investigation of the Dutch Central Bank (De Nederlandsche Bank, DNB) led the way for other financial institutions, such as ABN-AMRO, Van Lanschot Kempen, ING and insurance company Nationale Nederlanden.⁴ The Dutch royal family has initiated an

- 2 Ethan Mark, 'Half the Battle: Remembering the Netherlands as an Empire in the Second World War', Lecture 4 May 2020, Leiden, https://video.leidenuniv.nl/embed/secure/iframe/entryId/1_hemqn7vl/uiConfId/44110401; Gert Oostindie, 'Moed en miskenning', Inaugural Cleveringa lecture, 24 November 2022, Leiden, <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3486539>; Paul Brood and Raymond Kubben (eds.), *The Act of Abjuration: inspired and inspirational* (Wolf Legal Publishers 2011); Lotte Jensen, *Vieren van vrede: het ontstaan van de Nederlandse identiteit, 1648–1815* (Vantilt 2016); James Kennedy and Peter Romijn, "'Dat nooit meer' – 'Never again'. Discussedossier over Chris van der Heijden *Dat nooit meer. De nasleep van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Nederland* (Atlas Contact 2011)', *BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review* (hereafter *BMGN – LCHR*) 128:2 (2013) 71–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8548>; Chris van der Heijden, *Grijs verleden: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog* (Boom 2001).
- 3 Karwan Fatah-Black, Lauren Lauret and Joris van den Tol, *Geketend voor Hollands Glorie. Slavernij in de geschiedenis van Zuid-Holland* (Leiden University Press 2023); Martin van der Linde, Esther van Velden and Marco Krijnsen, *Overijssel & Slavernij* (wBooks 2023); Ineke Mok and Dineke Stam, *Sporen van slavernij in Haarlem* (Uitgeverij in de Knipscheer 2023); Jan Willem Boezeman, *Geraffineerd Dordrecht: Het koloniale en slavernijverleden van de oudste stad van Holland* (Documentatie en Kenniscentrum Augustijnenhof 2023); Henk den Heijer, *Het slavernijverleden van Zeeland* (Provincie Zeeland 2023); Nancy Jouwe, Matthijs Kuipers and Remco Raben (eds.), *Slavernij en de stad Utrecht* (Walburg Pers 2021); Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Colonialism and Slavery: An Alternative History of the Port City of Rotterdam* (Amsterdam University Press 2021); Barbara Henkes, *Sporen van het slavernijverleden in Fryslân* (Uitgeverij Passage 2021); Henk den Heijer and Gerhard de Kok, *Het slavernijverleden van Vlissingen* (Provincie Zeeland 2021); Alex van Stipriaan, *Rotterdam in slavernij* (Boom 2020); Pepijn Brandon et al. (eds.), *De slavernij in Oost en West: het Amsterdam-onderzoek* (Spectrumboeken 2020); Barbara Henkes, *Sporen van het slavernijverleden in Groningen* (Uitgeverij Passage 2016).
- 4 Karwan Fatah-Black, Lauren Lauret and Joris van den Tol, *Dienstbaar aan de keten?: de Nederlandsche Bank en de laatste decennia van de slavernij, 1814–1863* (Leiden University Press 2022); Pepijn Brandon and Gerhard de Kok, *Het slavernijverleden van historische voorlopers van ABN AMRO: Een onderzoek naar Hope & Co en R. Mees &*

investigation into both the origins of objects in their private collection and the involvement of the family in slavery.⁵

On the whole, we see that the gaps in our understanding of slavery in the economy and politics of the Dutch Republic and the Kingdom are being filled by thorough empirical research. This is changing the comprehension of the colonial empire in many ways, and adds to the momentum in studies of its history. In 2019, René Koekkoek, Anne-Isabelle Richard and Arthur Weststeijn called for increased attention to the relationship between the ideas and practices of the Dutch empire regarding, among others, the chartered companies, colonial courtrooms, and commercial and global visions of empire.⁶ The recent trend of cities and institutions investigating their ties to slavery and subsequently apologising for centuries of compliance and collaboration necessitates a more integrated approach to the analysis of the ideas shaping colonial policy.⁷ Therefore, this special issue moves from a history of policymakers and businessmen towards the ideological foundation of the empire and its participation and support for racial slavery in its colonies.

State of the art

The Netherlands was not only the last northern European imperial power to legislate for the emancipation of colonial slaves, it also took remarkably long for the Dutch abolition of slavery to surface in the historiography of the Dutch Caribbean and of anti-slavery in general. In her 1953 article, Johanna M. van Winter pioneered the study of the development of the nineteenth-century Dutch public debate on abolition.⁸ Achieving independence (Suriname, 1975) or revising its status (the Antilles) contributed to bringing the Caribbean into the academic spotlight in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹ In this journal in

Zoonen (IISG 2022); Karwan Fatah-Black and Gert Oostindie, 'Van Lanschot Kempen. Onderzoek naar het slavernijverleden' (Van Lanschot Kempen 2022).

- 5 The Dutch State and the royal family did not wait until publication of the studies into their historical role, making the apologies by the King slightly awkward. Because the King's speech preceded the outcomes of the ongoing research into his predecessors' and family members' ties to colonial slavery, he chose to only apologise for a lack of action of his predecessors: none of the Orange stadtholders, kings, consorts or extended family has figured prominently in the historiography of Dutch abolition.

- 6 René Koekkoek, Anna-Isabelle Richard and Arthur Weststeijn (eds.), *The Dutch Empire between Ideas and Practice, 1600-2000* (Palgrave Macmillan 2019).

- 7 Johanna Kardux, 'Review: Dutch Cities in Global Slavery', *New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 96:3-4 (2022) 332-338.

- 8 Johanna M. van Winter, 'De openbare mening in Nederland over de afschaffing der slavernij', *De West-Indische Gids* 34:1 (1953) 61-90. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134360-90000111>.

- 9 Gert Oostindie, 'Historiography on the Dutch Caribbean (-1985): Catching Up?', *The Journal of Caribbean History* 21:1 (1987) 1-18, 2.

1978, Maarten Kuitenbrouwer was the first to study Dutch abolition in a comparative perspective. The following year, Surinamese historian Jozef Siwipersad meticulously reconstructed the long-winded political process leading up to the final vote on abolition in parliament in 1862.¹⁰ In the early 1990s, Seymour Drescher made a seminal contribution to the rethinking of the Dutch involvement in slavery in the Americas and late abolition. In 'The Long Goodbye: Dutch Capitalism and Anti-slavery in Comparative Perspective', Drescher concluded that there was no causal connection between the rise of capitalism and abolition. He included the period of the Dutch Republic in his analysis to illustrate that abolition failed to emerge in the Republic's economic heyday.

In 1993, a group of Dutch scholars gathered to discuss Drescher's 'The Long Goodbye'. Combined, the article and the subsequent discussion formed a response to one of Eric Williams' *Capitalism and slavery* (1944) theses. It was also an attempt at application (if not refutation) of the Marxist analysis that the rise of industrial capitalism and the fate of the Atlantic plantation complex were entwined. Their book *Fifty years later. Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* concluded that neither the social-cultural nor the economic relationship between capitalism and abolition were evident in the Dutch case. In the volume's closing remarks, Gert Oostindie offered another explanation of the tardiness of Dutch abolition. He argued that the limited economic importance of the slave-based colonies in the Atlantic led to colonial neglect and a lack of interest.¹¹ The issue of slavery in the Atlantic colonies was, according to Oostindie, too marginal to make it a central issue on the Dutch political agenda in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

Oostindie's claim that the Dutch were simply indifferent to the question of slavery contrasts with older Dutch historiography and historians abroad who have argued that economic interest drove pro-slavery advocates.¹² In his 1974 study on Dutch revolutionaries and the colonies, G.J. Schutte concluded that fears about economic losses contributed to the patriots' omission of the abolition of slavery from the first modern Dutch constitution.¹³ According to Bert Paasman's extensive 1984 study on Dutch

10 Jozef Siwipersad, *De Nederlandse regering en de afschaffing van de Surinaamse slavernij, 1833-1863*. (Bouma's Boekhuis 1979); Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, 'The Dutch case of antislavery. Late abolitionist and elitist abolitionism', in: Gert Oostindie (ed.), *Fifty Years Later. Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity in the Dutch Orbit* (Brill 1995) 67-88; Idem, 'De Nederlandse afschaffing van de slavernij in vergelijkend perspectief', *BMGN – LCHR* 93:1 (1978) 69-100. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.2018>.

11 Seymour Drescher, 'The Long Goodbye: Dutch Capitalism and Antislavery in Comparative Perspective', *The American Historical Review* 99:1 (1994) 44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/99.1.44>; Gert Oostindie, 'Explaining Dutch Abolition', in: Idem, *Fifty Years Later*, 1-23.

12 Eric Williams, *Capitalism and slavery* (Chapel Hill 1944, reprint 2014) 7.

13 G.J. Schutte, *De Nederlandse patriotten en de koloniën. Een onderzoek naar hun denkbeelden en optreden, 1770-1800* (H.D. Tjeenk Willink 1974) 145-149.

Enlightenment literature, most authors accepted slavery and the slave trade as necessary evils in times of economic hardship. But they combined this pragmatic notion with appeals to Enlightenment and Christianity to improve treatment of the enslaved.¹⁴ Although recent studies by Henk den Heijer and Alex van Stipriaan disagree on the extent of the acceptance of slavery in Dutch society, they both reaffirm the importance of economic arguments to trump moral qualms.¹⁵

Not everyone agrees that economic logic determined the outcome of debates on slavery. In the Netherlands, Angelie Sens has criticised the often used economic argument to understand the late abolition: ‘The narrowing of the slavery issue and the one-sided focus on economic aspects distracts attention from a broader colonial “ideology” that emerged in the eighteenth century’.¹⁶ Research into the debate in the United States, which in the 1830s saw the emergence of one of the most outspoken pro-slavery movements in history, also shows that the pro-slavery camp defended a larger view of society than simply the economic interests of the plantation owners.¹⁷ Studies on the defence of slavery in the United States and Great Britain have increasingly focused on the adaptability of the defenders of slavery and how they incorporated the issue into a broad and also modern view of society.¹⁸ This was a view that could be shared by defenders as well as opponents of the institution of slavery. Both plantation owners and abolitionists believed

- 14 Bert Paasman, *Reinhart: Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (Nijhoff 1984) 109-121.
- 15 Henk den Heijer, *Nederlands slavernijverleden: Historische inzichten en het debat nu* (Walburg Pers 2021); Alex van Stipriaan, ‘Het Nederlandse slavernijdebat in de zeventiende en achttiende eeuw’, in: Brandon, *De slavernij in Oost en West: Het Amsterdam-onderzoek*, 300-307.
- 16 Angelie Sens, ‘*Mensaap, heiden, slaaf*’: *Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800* (SDU uitgevers 2001) xii.
- 17 Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*, First Printing edition (Harvard University Press 2016) 153; Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Louisiana State University Press 1981).
- 18 Paula Dumas, *Proslavery Britain: Fighting for Slavery in an Era of Abolition* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137558589>; Robin Blackburn, ‘The scope of accumulation and

the reach of moral perception: slavery, market revolution and Atlantic capitalism’, in: Catherine Hall et al. (eds.), *Emancipation and the remaking of the British Imperial world* (Manchester University Press 2014) 19-35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7228/manchester/9780719091834.003.0002>; Alfred L. Brophy, *University, Court, and Slave: Pro-Slavery Thought in Southern Colleges and Courts, and the Coming of Civil War* (Oxford University Press 2016); Michael Sugrue, ‘South Carolina College and the Origins of Secession’, *Slavery & Abolition* 39:2 (2018) 280-289. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1446809>; Jody L. Allen, ‘Thomas Dew and the Rise of Proslavery Ideology at William & Mary’, *Slavery & Abolition* 39:2 (2018) 267-279. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1446783>; Lolita Buckner Inniss, ‘“A Southern College Slipped from Its Geographical Moorings”: Slavery at Princeton’, *Slavery & Abolition* 39:2 (2018) 236-250. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2018.1446785>.

the enslaved belonged to an inferior race, as noted by Emilia da Costa and Catherine Hall.¹⁹

Matthijs Lok's work on counter-revolutionary writing across Europe paid attention to religiously motivated support for colonial slavery. The Jesuit journalist and encyclopedist François-Xavier de Feller (Brussels, 1735-1802), for example, defended Spanish imperial conquests to spread the Catholic faith, which in his view made the anti-slavery movements a *philosophe* plot to undermine the authority of both Church and King. By contrast, Feller 'was much more critical of British and Dutch – Protestant – colonial explorations that, in his opinion, took place only for financial motives and pure greed'.²⁰ Lok's work shows that, although the defence of slavery also rested on the economic importance of its preservation, this was certainly not the only way to defend the institution. Both colonial indifference and colonialist paternalism resulted from a racialised perception of the imperial heartland and its colonial dependencies.

Recent studies of the Dutch case have suggested that consent to slavery had been part and parcel of political thought in the Dutch Republic.²¹ Arthur Weststeijn has pointed out that the States General's decision-making awaits systematic research from a personal, institutional and ideological perspective regarding colonial slavery.²² With regard to the discussions among historians on why slavery was not abolished at the foundation of the Republic in 1795, René Koekkoek found arguments that Dutch revolutionaries would suffer from a 'blind spot' or failed to 'live up to their own ideals' to be unconvincing. Instead, Koekkoek argues, Dutch revolutionaries 'drew on available conceptual resources about consent to slavery versus resistance against oppression, and about exclusionary notions of a minimum baseline of civilization and enlightenment, so as to render their own ideological position consistent'.²³

An important part of these conceptual resources that revolutionary thinkers relied on were developed in the seventeenth century, when the nascent Republic was in need of legitimization for its transition from a

19 Emilia da Costa, *Crowns of glory, tears of blood: the Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford University Press 1997) 34; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867* (Cambridge University Press 2002) 435-436.

20 Matthijs Lok, *Europe Against Revolution: Conservatism, Enlightenment, and the Making of the Past* (Oxford University Press 2023) 266-267.

21 Karwan Fatah-Black, *Slavernij en beschaving: geschiedenis van een paradox* (Ambo | Anthos 2021) 15-28.

22 Arthur Weststeijn, 'Slavernij van overheidswege: de Staten-Generaal tussen 1581 en 1796', in: Rose Mary Allen et al. (eds.), *Staat & slavernij. Het Nederlandse koloniale slavernijverleden en zijn doorwerkingen* (Athenaeum 2023) 341-342.

23 René Koekkoek, 'Liberty, death and slavery in the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, 1770-1790', in: Hannah Dawson and Annelien de Dijn (eds.), *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge University Press 2022) 153. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108951722.010>.

Habsburg territory to an independent State, coloniser and slave trader. Although slavery was not a legally enshrined practice in the Dutch provinces, jurists deemed slavery a necessary and legitimate institution in the colonies, as observed by Gustaaf van Nifterik and Tim van Polanen.²⁴ Legal and political thinkers alike favoured the right of property over the idea of personal freedom. In the 2023 edited volume *Staat & Slavernij* – which explored the state of knowledge about Dutch colonial slavery and how it had come into being – Weststeijn concluded that, until recently, scholars had been more interested in interpreting the resulting legal framework the States General had built in support of the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, voc) and the Dutch West India Company (*West-Indische Compagnie*, wic) from an economic perspective, at the expense of the military and political support for colonial slavery this legal framework inevitably entailed.²⁵

On the occasion of *BMGN – LCHR*'s 50th anniversary, Agus Suwignyo, Alicia Schrikker and Susan Legêne discussed the role of the journal's articles published over 50 years in the historiography of Dutch colonialism, and found that colonial history has become integrated into Dutch historical research since 2006.²⁶ In 2013, a special issue of this journal pleaded for the integration of the study of the metropole and the colony for the history of the Dutch Atlantic and nineteenth-century metropolitan political culture.²⁷ Whereas several generations of historians have questioned the traditional Dutch 'exceptionalist' self-perception as a non-imperialist colonial power, the challenging of the Dutch self-image in relation to colonial slavery is fairly recent and very much ongoing.²⁸

More recently, studies of the mentality of empire builders and of the defenders of slavery have focused on complicating the traditional

- 24 Gustaaf van Nifterik, 'Arguments related to slavery in seventeenth century Dutch legal theory', *Tijdschrift Voor Rechtsgeschiedenis* 89:1-2 (2021) 158-191. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718190-12340005>; Tim van Polanen, 'Snak, Claas and Bastiaan's Struggle for Freedom. Three Curaçaoan Enslaved Men and Their Court Cases About the Free Soil Principle in the Dutch Republic', *BMGN – LCHR* 136:1 (2021) 33-58. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10746>.
- 25 Rose Mary Allen, Esther Captain, Matthias van Rossum and Urwin Vyent (eds.), *Staat & slavernij. Het Nederlandse koloniale slavernijverleden en zijn doorwerkingen* (Athenaeum 2023).
- 26 Agus Suwignyo, Alicia Schrikker and Susan Legêne, 'How Generations Matter. BMGN and the Problem of Writing Histories of Colonialism',

BMGN – LCHR 136:2 (2021) 72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51769/bmgn-lchr.9942>.

- 27 Remco Raben, 'A New Dutch Imperial History?: Perambulations in a Prospective Field', *BMGN – LCHR* 128:1 (2013) 5-30. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8353>; Karwan Fatah-Black, 'A Swiss Village in the Dutch Tropics: The Limitations of Empire-Centred Approaches to the Early Modern Atlantic World', *BMGN – LCHR* 128:1 (2013) 31-52. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8354>; Maartje Janse, 'Representing Distant Victims: The Emergence of an Ethical Movement in Dutch Colonial Politics, 1840-1880', *BMGN – LCHR* 128:1 (2013) 53-80. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.8355>.
- 28 Suwignyo et al., 'How Generations Matter', 72.

conceptualisation of binary definitions of opponents and defenders of colonialism and slavery. In this journal, Michael J. Douma has challenged the view that Dutch Americans were natural opponents to slavery in the nineteenth century. Instead, as Douma argues, Dutch immigrants' engagement with the antebellum and Civil War-American political tradition produced views ranging across the pro-slavery and abolitionist spectrum.²⁹ Many of the positions taken on slavery cannot easily be classified as either in favour of or against the institution. The positions taken vis-à-vis slavery were malleable, changeable, highly dependent on the context in which they were uttered and moreover often remained implicit. Pepijn Brandon has argued that Dutch politicians gradually constructed a new ideology from the late eighteenth century onwards, in which they verbally expressed abolitionist views while their policies de facto ensured the long-term use of slave-based colonial production in the Atlantic.³⁰ In theatres, as observed by Sarah J. Adams, Dutch audiences became acquainted with this contrast between philanthropist rhetoric and colonial practice. The work and life of Dirk van Hogendorp is a case in point. Although he published an abolitionist play in 1800, he ended his life as a slave owner in Brazil.³¹ We set up this special issue based on the premise that the divisions between pro-slavery, anti-abolitionism and abolitionism were less clear than hitherto assumed.

Our aim of reappraising the history of the defence of slavery in the Netherlands signifies that this issue revisits episodes better known through the works of scholars interested in the abolition of slavery. It is understandable that historians have mostly worked on abolitionism, since abolitionism is correctly understood to be an exceptional ideological position and a new phenomenon in political history (see Figure 2). A complicating factor is that many anti-abolitionists donned the cloak of abolitionism or humanitarianism. The case studies presented here range from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, which makes this special issue the first presentation of how the Netherlands normalised colonial slavery over more than 250 years. Each contribution represents an addition to the rich historiography on Dutch abolitionism but redirects the attention towards politicians, governors, investors, publishers and authors as complicit in defending the trade in people and their enslavement. Their speeches, tracts, petitions, newspapers and private letters are the main sources for our discussion. The long-term impact of these defenders should be added to the known economic, social and cultural factors contributing to the relatively late abolition of slavery

29 Michael J. Douma, 'A Dutch Confederate. Charles Liernur Defends Slavery in America', *BMGH – LCHR* 132:2 (2017) 27–50. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgH-lchr.10339>.

30 Pepijn Brandon, "'Shrewd Sirens of Humanity': the changing shape of pro-slavery arguments

in the Netherlands (1789–1814)', *Almanack* 14 (2016) 3–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2236-463320161402>.

31 Sarah J. Adams, *Repertoires of Slavery. Dutch Theatre Between Abolitionism and Colonial Subjection, 1770–1810* (Dissertation, Universiteit Gent 2020).



Figure 2. Headscarf (angisa) with a pattern commemorating the centenary of the abolition of slavery, keti koti, the chains broken. Collection ing. S.A. Bruijning, 1963. © Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, TM-6384-43, CCBY-SA 4.0, <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/498612>.

in the Netherlands. Furthermore, where possible, the contributions point to the transnational nature of anti-abolitionist rhetoric to underline the international relevance of Dutch history.³² As a final note before introducing our contributors, we want to show our awareness that by bringing slavery's proponents back into the historiography of Dutch slavery, abolitionism and empire, this special issue goes somewhat against the current trend of understanding resistance by victims of colonisation and enslavement and their struggle for emancipation and citizenship.³³ We believe, however, that studying how slavery was defended in the past will ultimately help to understand its history and to deal with its legacies.

Contributions

Similar to debates among French and British political and legal thinkers, in the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic the question arose of how enslavement could be defended as an overseas practice when it remained both metaphorically and practically undesirable in the home country.³⁴ In this special issue, Esther Baakman shows that this question was also answered in Dutch newspapers between c. 1637-1795, alongside the political and juridical tracts that have already been studied by Koekkoek and Van Nifterik. Baakman demonstrates that newspapers used the term 'slavery' primarily as a metaphor for domestic power relations, while the enslavement of Africans in the colonies was described in other terms, such as '*neger*' and later '*negerslaaven*'. In this way newspapers avoided an overlap between the metaphorical use of the term and the overseas practice, providing the Dutch readership with information and the vocabulary to discuss domestic politics and colonial policy. By the time of the Berbice slave rebellion in 1763, contemporaries had no qualms in referring to enslaved persons as movable 'property', belonging to either plantation owners or investors. Rebellions such as this, however, made Dutch commentators more aware of the vulnerability of chattel slavery in the Atlantic. Moreover, as wars and revolutions engulfed the British and French empires in the second half of the eighteenth century, the functionality of slavery was increasingly questioned. Yet, as argued by Baakman elsewhere, whereas in Great Britain the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) and Tacky's rebellion in Jamaica (1760) engendered a public debate about the merits of

32 Wim van den Doel, 'The Dutch Empire: An Essential Part of World History', *BMGN – LCHR* 125:2-3 (2010) 179-208. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.7119>.

33 *International Review of Social History. Special issue: Urban Slavery in the Age of Abolition* 65 (2020); *Journal of Global Slavery. Special issue:*

Freedom from Below: Enslavement, Bondage and Emancipation in Comparative Perspective 2:1-2 (2017); *Slavery & Abolition. Special issue: Ireland, Slavery, Anti-Slavery and Empire* 37:3 (2016).

34 David Richardson, *Principles and Agents: the British Slave Trade and Its Abolition*. The David Brion Davis series (New Haven 2022) 104.

slavery, ‘the Berbice rebellion, with few exceptions, did not provoke a debate on the institution of slavery itself’ in the Dutch Republic.³⁵

Although the slave revolts in the French colony Saint-Domingue between 1791 and 1804 became important to wider ideological debates over the merit of African enslavement in the American colonies, it did not lead to abolitionist legislation in the Netherlands. Dirk Alkemade looks at political debates as well as literary texts to study the intellectual and political mindset of Dutch revolutionaries at the turn of the eighteenth century, to offer a different explanation of the failure of the first attempt to abolish the slave trade and slavery. Whereas Paasman, Den Heijer and Van Stipriaan stressed the importance of economic arguments to trump moral qualms about slavery and Koekkoek showed how Dutch revolutionaries ideologically aligned their consent to slavery and resistance against oppression,³⁶ Alkemade demonstrates that discussions about ‘*menselijkheid*’ (‘humanity’) offered a way to avoid talking about the more fundamental issue of ‘*regten van den Mensch*’ (‘human rights’). In doing so, he formulates a different answer to the central question of why the abolition of slavery was eventually not included in the first Dutch constitution (1798).

In his contribution, Karwan Fatah-Black deals with how during the Saint-Domingue slave revolts and the subsequent Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) the fear of violent revolution became an important part of the Dutch discourse about ideologically inspired abolitions and progressive social policy in general. The defenders of slavery remained hegemonic and the references to the conservative narrative about the catastrophic nature of the events in Saint-Domingue managed to restrict the bandwidth of the public debate in the nineteenth century. In the first decades of this century, the Dutch positions only ranged from a cautious gradualism as its most progressive position to anti-abolitionism on the more conservative side.

Because the eighteenth-century discussions left the legal status of slave ownership intact, nineteenth-century slave owners inherited not only plantations (or shares) but also important ideological instruments to postpone abolition once it returned to the Dutch political agenda in the 1840s. Owners needed these instruments, since Dutch abolitionists organised themselves in extra-parliamentary pressure groups inspired and supported by their British counterparts, as shown by Maartje Janse.³⁷ The current

35 Esther Baakman, “‘Their power has been broken, the danger has passed’. Dutch newspaper coverage of the Berbice slave revolt, 1763’, *Early Modern Low Countries* 2:1 (2018) 67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18352/emlc.61>.

36 Paasman, Reinhardt; Den Heijer, *Nederlands slavernijverleden*; Van Stipriaan, ‘Het Nederlandse

slavernijdebat’; Koekkoek, ‘Liberty, death and slavery’.

37 Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers: publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland 1840-1880* (Boom 2007); Idem, “Holland as Little England”? British Anti-Slavery Missionaries and Continental Abolitionist Movements in the Mid-Nineteenth

understanding in Dutch historiography is that ministerial indifference and the slow working of the governmental apparatus allowed a lobby group of Dutch entrepreneurs with West Indian interests to be successful in delaying abolition, despite their marginal economic importance.³⁸ Obviously, the plantation owners did not desire the end of slavery, as has been emphasised by Edwin Horling's study of the state of Surinamese plantations in the nineteenth century.³⁹ Although the Surinamese plantation economy no longer represented a major economic interest, a small lobby group could prevent change. Historians agree that the arguments presented (and exaggerated) by the shareholders and plantation owners about the negative economic effect of abolition easily found resonance with administrators, without the economic importance of the slave colonies being significant.⁴⁰ In short, Dutch anti-abolitionism is usually dismissed as an economically motivated defence of the status quo, led by a small Amsterdam interest group with excessive political influence.⁴¹

However, acknowledging the marginal economic yet excessive political influence of these shareholders does not fully explain their impact on the legislative process towards abolition and the resulting Emancipation Act. Lauren Lauret shows in her article that Dutch shareholders in slavery resorted to pro-slavery policy from the Company era and relied on British anti-abolitionists to protect their West Indian interests. Based on the examination of anti-abolitionist petitions, she argues that Dutch shareholders pleaded for financial compensation and labour immigration in exchange for emancipation to ensure the future exploitation of the Dutch Caribbean without slavery.

While the Dutch Colonial Office also prioritised colonial profit over the well-being of its colonial subjects, it was equally concerned that if slavery were abolished, it needed to be done under the strict guidance of the colonial State. In turn, anti-slavery became a building block of the colonial empire at large, as Philip Post finds in his study of the interactions between colonial officials and indigenous rulers in the Dutch East Indies between 1817-1879. Similar to its British counterpart, the Dutch colonial State transformed itself into an

Century', *Past & Present* 229 (2015) 123-160.

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24544878>; Idem, 'Representing Distant Victims', 53-80.

38 Pepijn Brandon and Karin Lurvink, "'With the Power of Language and the Force of Reason': An Amsterdam Banker's Fight for Slave Owners' Compensation", in: Pepijn Brandon et al. (eds.), *Navigating History: Economy, Society, Knowledge, and Nature* (Brill 2017) 228-248. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004381568_012.

39 Edwin Horling, 'An Economic Explanation of the Late Abolition of Slavery in Suriname', in: *Oostindie, Fifty Years Later*, 105-116.

40 Susan Legêne, *De bagage van Blomhoff en Van Breugel: Japan, Java, Tripoli en Suriname in de negentiende-eeuwse Nederlandse cultuur van het imperialisme* (Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen 1998).

41 Siwipersad, *De Nederlandse regering*, 170-174; Brandon and Lurvink, "'With the Power of Language'".

anti-slavery empire, and in the process expanded its power and use of coerced labour under the guise of global abolition.⁴²

Including the East Indies in this issue stresses that the abolition of slavery in the Dutch orbit involved colonies in both Asia and the Americas, as noted by Reggie Baaij, Ulbe Bosma, Matthias van Rossum, Alicia Schrikker and Nira Wickramasinghe.⁴³ Schrikker and Wickramasinghe credited ‘the momentum that the study of Indian Ocean slavery currently has in Dutch academia’ for their edited volume *Being a Slave: Histories and Legacies of European Slavery in the Indian Ocean* gravitating ‘towards locations in the Indian Ocean that have had a Dutch history, such as Ceylon, Cochin, Batavia, Cape Town and Mauritius’ before being colonised by either France or Great Britain.⁴⁴ Because the historical political discussion on slavery in the Netherlands focused on the Atlantic orbit from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, it naturally takes centre stage in this special issue. Given the growing international momentum in the study of Indian Ocean slavery, we look forward to further studies of the implications of the Atlantic-centred political debate for policies and practices regarding slavery and forced labour in Dutch East Asia, as is showcased by Susan Legêne in her dissertation and Philip Post in this special issue.⁴⁵

160 years later

As guest editors of this special issue, we aim to make a meaningful contribution to the historiographical debate on abolition and slavery and help to shape a more integrated understanding of the ideas shaping colonial policy. This will aid deeper reflexion on the changing traditions of public commemoration of this past. We have invited Matthew Smith, Professor of History and Director of the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery, to provide concluding remarks on the contributions presented in this issue. In his recent inaugural lecture, Smith considered what collective

42 Alan Lester and Nikita Vanderbyl, ‘The restructuring of the British Empire and the colonization of Australia, 1832-8’, *History Workshop Journal* 90:3 (2021) 165-188. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbaa017>; Kate Boehme, Peter Mitchell and Alan Lester, ‘Reforming Everywhere and All at Once: Transitioning to Free Labor across the British Empire, 1837-1838’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 60:3 (2018) 688-718. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417518000233>.

43 Reggie Baay, *Daar werd wat gruwelijks verricht: slavernij in Nederlands-Indië* (Athenaeum 2015);

Ulbe Bosma, *The Making of a Periphery: How Island Southeast Asia Became a Mass Exporter of Labor* (Columbia University Press 2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7312/bosm18852>; Matthias van Rossum, *Kleurrijke tragiek. De geschiedenis van slavernij in Azië onder de VOC* (Verloren 2015); Alicia Schrikker and Nira Wickramasinghe (eds.), *Being a Slave. Histories and Legacies of European Slavery in the Indian Ocean* (Leiden University Press 2020). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24415/9789087283445>.

44 Schrikker and Wickramasinghe, *Being a slave*, 17.

45 Legêne, *De bagage van Blomhoff*.

and political remembrances reveal about the evolution of Caribbean history making. Smith opined that ‘reggae music carried the torch of freedom and linked the memory of slavery much more efficiently to the present and future than politicians ever could’.⁴⁶ The arts clearly offer vistas encompassing the past, collective memory and the developing historiography. They can also highlight incongruities between forms of historical knowledge.

Artistic imagination indeed played an important role in the apologies of the Dutch government delivered in the National Archives in The Hague on 19 December 2022, and the royal apologies six months later. The Prime Minister and the King both raised the stakes by promising real change: not merely a change in perspective that made the apologies possible, but also a new awareness of the legacies of enslavement. Besides saying ‘*Ten kon drai*’, the King added ‘*Den keti koti, fu tru*’ – the chains have truly been broken. Saying this in a language formerly despised by the Dutch coloniser added to the symbolic weight of the King’s words. Many of the older people in the audience still remembered the physical punishments they had to endure in school if they dared to speak Sranantongo (see Figure 3).

Yet, in many ways, the expression of the apologies also showed that the racial legacies of the past have not been dealt with. On the surface, Prime Minister Mark Rutte seemed to acknowledge that the past had not yet been overcome, by stating that ‘the history of slavery is followed by a comma rather than a full stop’. It was deeply ironic that the sentence itself originated from the Dutch-Curacaoan artist Serana Angelista, whose words were not attributed in the speech, as so often happens with the work of intellectuals of colour.⁴⁷ While the government had profusely stated that it wanted to listen to slave descendants, it refused to grant simple wishes regarding the time, place and dignity of the expression of apologies. Moreover, despite the words of the Prime Minister and the King, the Dutch State remains unable to resolve issues around institutional racism, both in its policies and within its ministries.⁴⁸ It seems that, indeed, the history of slavery and racialisation is followed by a comma rather than a full stop.

46 Matthew Smith, ‘A Troubled Freedom: Power & Caribbean Memory of Slavery’, Inaugural Lecture, University College London, 4 March 2022, <https://youtu.be/uovs2xRdOy4> (consulted 22 December 2022).

47 Marianne Klerk, ‘Achter het Rotterdamse slavernijverleden staat geen punt maar een komma’, *Vers Beton*, 1 juli 2019; Fatah-Black, *Slavernij en beschaving*, 18.

48 Adamantia Rachovitsa and Niclas Johann, ‘The Human Rights Implications of the Use of AI in the Digital Welfare State: Lessons Learned from the

Dutch SyRI Case’, *Human Rights Law Review* 22:2 (2022). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/hrlr/ngac010>; The Dutch *toeslagenaffaire* (subsidies affair) revealed how the tax office unjustly targeted minority groups, specifically from the Caribbean in its investigations and wrongfully accused thousands of people of fraud. ‘Kenmerken van gedupeerde gezinnen toeslagenaffaire’ (CBS 2022); A study revealed systemic racism in the Foreign Office, for which the minister apologised. Jurriaan Omlo et al., *Racism at the ministry of Foreign Affairs* (Utrecht 2022), <https://www>.



Figure 3. Surinamese in the Netherlands commemorated the centenary of the abolition of slavery, 1 July 1963.

Photographer: Jacques Klok. © ANP, National Archives, The Hague, 2.24.05.02, inv.nr. 075-0687, <http://hdl.handle.net/10648/ae1819cc-dob4-102d-bcf8-003048976d84>.

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Lauren Lauret completed her dissertation at Leiden University, where she also holds an assistant professorship in Dutch History. Currently she is a Dutch Research Council Rubicon post-doctoral fellow at University College London. Her research focuses on how the political elite (re)claimed power after experiencing disruption, with a particular focus on the impact of colonialism on Dutch and British political practice. Among others she published *Serving the chain? De Nederlandsche Bank and the last decades of slavery, 1814-1863* (Leiden University Press 2023) with Karwan Fatah-Black and Joris van den Tol; 'Four Founding Fathers on the Road: New Government Design in the United States and the Netherlands, 1776-1815', *Revue Française d'Études Américaines* 173:4 (2022) 78-96 with Dirk Alkemade; *Regentenwerk. Vergaderen in de Staten-Generaal en de Tweede Kamer, 1750-1850* (Prometheus 2020). E-mail: l.b.lauret@hum.leidenuniv.nl.

government.nl/documents/reports/2022/12/12/report-racism-at-the-ministry-of-foreign-affairs-an-exploratory-study; In 2023, it was revealed that the Ministry of Education specifically targeted migrant-descendant students in fraud investigations. Sumeyye Ersoy and Salwa van der Gaag, 'Studenten met migratieachtergrond opvallend vaak beschuldigd van fraude, minister wil systeem grondig nagaan' (NOS 21 June 2023); From the Caribbean islands, complaints continue to be made about unequal treatment by the Ministry of Domestic and Kingdom Affairs (BZK). The Ministry of Defence actively sought

to defend its right to use racial profiling at the borders, while it was revealed that it was unable to adequately deal with right-wing extremist infiltration in its ranks. Anti-black racism and references to colonial enslavement were explicitly part of the propaganda used by extremist elements in the armed forces. Karel Berkhout, Andreas Kouwenhoven and Esther Rosenberg, 'Hoe onderzoek naar nazi-uitingen binnen het leger werd gesaboteerd', *NRC*, 28 June 2023. The Ministry of Justice and Security was confronted with several incidents of openly racist comments made by police officers both on and off duty.