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MAPS - PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS: UMA CARTOGRAFIA PÓS-COLONIAL | **MAPS** - EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES: A POSTCOLONIAL CARTOGRAPHY

Saturday, 14 August 2021



Romuald Hazoumè | *La bouche du roi* (1997-2005) | (British Museum Col., courtesy of the Rijksmuseum)

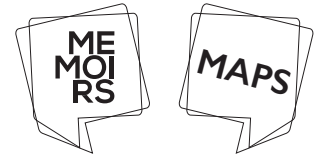
THE FIRES OF PURGATORY

Paulo de Medeiros

‘[T]he single most uncontroversial thing one can say about the institution of slavery vis-à-vis contemporary time, is that it haunts us all’

Toni Morrison. *Mouth Full of Blood*.¹

Planned since 2017, scheduled to open in February 2021 but delayed by the pandemic, the exhibition on ‘Slavery’ at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam drew a long list of expectations. It was finally inaugurated by King Willem-Alexander on 18 May, though it remained for the most part a virtual exhibition,² except for arranged school tours, until the museum could open its doors on 1 June to the general public. Not

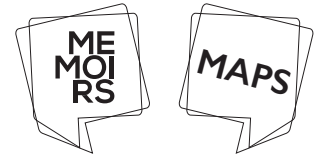


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least in that list of expectations was the attempt at seriously engaging with a subject often shunned by many, the founding role of slavery in all of its cruelty and inhumanity in forming the very core of modern Europe in general, and in this particular case, of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Key to that was to make such an exhibition not only highly visible – the Rijksmuseum after all is one of the principal cultural institutions and treasures of the nation – but to make it highly accessible to everyone. Accessibility meant not only insuring that everyone could in one form or another access it, in person or virtually, through an extensive, dedicated site, or even in terms of a modestly priced, profusely illustrated, catalogue, but also relate to it.³

The 'Slavery' Exhibition must be seen as part of a wider movement aiming at a questioning and reframing of our understanding of Europe's past, which has been going on in different countries and with different levels of success. In the Netherlands one would have to refer to other exhibitions in several prominent places such as Utrecht's Centraal Museum, with 'What Is Left Unseen?' in 2019, or 'HIER. Zwart in Rembrandts Tijd' (Here, Black in the time of Rembrandt) at the Rembrandthuis in 2020.⁴ What is perhaps new, in the Rijksmuseum exhibition, besides the fact that as *the* National Museum, such an exhibition already commands a different sort of attention, is how it was also conceived, to put it in the terms [one Guardian review](#) attributes to Taco Dibbits, the general director of the Riksmuseum, 'not to be "woke" but to be a "blockbuster" telling a truer story of the Golden Age'.⁵ Such a claim, if indeed true, must be seen foremost as a strategy to avoid alienating great part of the general public the curatorial team, Eveline Sint Nicolaas, Valika Smeulders, Maria Holtrop, and Stephanie Archangel, wants to reach. It is a difficult balance of course, and one the curators manage in an exemplary fashion, for as Dibbits shows in the catalogue's Introduction, the team was very aware not only of working at 'a time of drastic social change', but also that inasmuch as '[s]lavery is an essential part of the colonial history of the Netherlands', it 'concerns every one of us'.⁶

As Eveline Sint Nicolaas and Valika Smeulders make clear, '[a]t an early stage, the museum decided to make people the focus of its *Slavery* exhibition: ten different lives in the period of slavery. People who were related in all sorts of ways to the greater system of power and money'.⁷ This does not mean that there is not equally a concentrated look at objects and at what they show and what they hide, as for instance, in the double portrait of Marten Soolmans, and his wife, Oopjen Coppit, by Rembrandt, from 1634. Yet, the focus is indeed on people, whether enslaved, such as a certain João Mina, who fled his Portuguese master and was taken by the Dutch around 1646, or indeed profiting from slavery

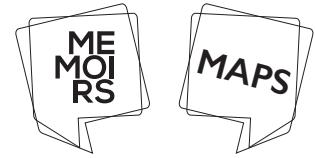


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and its products, namely sugar, such as the couple painted by Rembrandt, or even those who actively fought against the oppression of slavery, such as the legendary resistance figure of a woman, now known as One-Tété- Lohkay, who, upon being recaptured, was ‘punished by having one of her breasts cut off’ and still escaped again.⁸ One of the key lessons from this exhibition is how, in spite of the fact that slavery is the most complete form of reification of human beings, their humanity still comes through over and over again. At the same time, those profiting from such dehumanisation, such as the couple in the double portrait, who, among other connections to slavery, owned of the most important sugar refineries in Amsterdam – the ironically named ‘*t vagevuur*, or the Fire of Purgatory – are never presented as monsters, but rather as frankly human, the portrait highlighting the paradox evidenced in their austere black garments, richly adorned with lace and jewels. In a sense the exhibition, without calling on the concept of ‘implicated subjects’ as advanced by Michael Rothberg, does manage to present a rather more complex view of slavery and how it has touched everything and everyone.⁹

It remains unpredictable, as always, what impact such an exhibition may have on the wider public. The balance struck by the curators is not without its risks, or perhaps even blind spots. For instance, in the story of João Mina, they succeed in making that man’s life come back to us, speak to us, even though hardly anything is known about him. What we have is just the written record of his interrogation by Dutch officials, keen on obtaining intelligence about the Portuguese military forces as they were then still at war in their attempt to wrest control of Brazil away from the Portuguese so as to avoid having to buy that precious commodity, sugar. Yet, it is as if the perspective somehow remains centred on the Dutch dream of making Brazil their colony and the delusion that still holds sway today that, as opposed to the Portuguese, the Dutch were a more benign colonising power. Another missed opportunity – perhaps the most problematic – is the avoidance of making a direct link between capitalism and slavery even though at many points of the various narratives that ought to be an inescapable conclusion. Perhaps that is a result of a conscious or unconscious avoidance of either rigid economicist interpretations, or a fear that the greater public might be scared away from any possible Marxist connotation?¹⁰ Will visitors be made to probe further and investigate how the myth of ‘white innocence’, as exposed in depth by Gloria Wekker,¹¹ that informs national delusions about ‘Dutch Brazil’ is still very much alive today in many other facets of life, or will they become rather more interested in learning more about Oopjen?

There can be no question that *Slavery*, in many, many ways, in its position at the very core of the country’s elite culture, yet directed rather at a non-intellectual public, in its skilful balancing of memory



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and History, actual extant records and traces, as records of past lives and current people, or in its reach beyond the historical collection into very contemporary, even interactive, art, is not only highly significant, but even exemplary. Rather than perceiving a national museum as a mere repository of cultural artefacts emblematic of either the elite's values or its fetishization of those it excludes and rejects, the curators of *Slavery* have fully embraced their educational responsibility and their duty to actively contribute to cultural life in the present. All of which cannot prevent a feeling from remaining, that the fires of purgatory still rage on and much must yet be done to extinguish them.

[1] Toni Morrison. *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*. London: Chatto & Windus, 2019, 283.

[2] [The exhibition is planned until 29 August 2021](#). The complementary focus on 'Rijksmuseum and Slavery', whereby additional labels exploring the links to Dutch colonial slavery will be added to 77 exhibits in the permanent collection, will remain until 28 February 2022.

[3] Tickets cost €20.00 but are free to anyone up to 18 years of age. The extensive website provides access to the ten narratives that form the core of the exhibition as well as to some of the works of art on display. *Slavery*, the catalogue (Amsterdam and Antwerp: Rijksmuseum – Atlas Contact, 2021), is available for €27.00 directly from the Museum's virtual shop or through a variety of internet booksellers.

[4] [The exhibition at Utrecht's Centraal Museum](#) was a collaboration with 'MOED: The Museum of Equality and Difference', a project of the Gender Studies Group at the University of Utrecht led by Prof. Rosemarie Buikema. For the exhibition at the Rembrandthuis, see [more information here](#).

[5] For the Portuguese context see the interview with António Pinto Ribeiro, '[Representar a escravatura nos museus portugueses: que balanço?](#)' de 3 de Julho de 2017. And also his *Peut-on décoloniser les musées?*, Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, 2019.

[6] Taco Dibbits, 'together we write history', *Slavery*, 7.

[7] 'Slavery: An Exhibition of many voices', *Slavery*, 13.

[8] Valika Smeulders, 'Lohkay: beads versus laws', *Slavery*, 266.

[9] Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019.

[10] On this see Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, London: Zed Books, 1983; Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000; and John Bellamy Foster, Hannah Hollerman, and Brett Clark, '[Marx and Slavery](#)', *Monthly Review* 72.3 (2020).

[11] Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, Durham, NC.: Duke University Press, 2016. My question is an echo of her 'Coda,'"But What About the Captain?"; reflecting the question put by a white, progressive, man in the audience after a lecture by Saidya Hartman in Amsterdam, in which 'Hartman reads from her book *Lose Your Mother*, a heartbreaking counterhistory about an enslaved girl aboard a transatlantic slaver, the *Recovery*, who is severely abused, physically and sexually, by the captain' (168).

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