



Between Violence and Silence: a Narrative Analysis of the  
Representations of Colonialism and Race in Dutch History Textbooks

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## Abstract

The Netherlands has long struggled to come to terms with its colonial past. This thesis examines how Dutch history textbooks used in secondary education discuss Dutch colonial history and racism and what aspects of this history are silenced. A narrative analysis was conducted to explore what narratives are used, whether the textbooks attribute agency, and whether connections are made between colonialism and present-day phenomena, such as racism and xenophobia. The textbooks were interpreted through a theoretical framework based on collective memory, the cultural archive, cultural hegemony, and Stuart Hall's approach to national identity and race. The analysis found that the textbooks include representations of Dutch colonial violence but that two of three textbooks separate colonial history from Dutch national history. Moreover, the research identified that Indonesia was given considerably more attention in the textbooks' narratives than Suriname and the Dutch Antilles. While the analysis showed some efforts to include indigenous perspectives and highlight the agency of colonial subjects, a Eurocentric narrative that presents Europe as the architect of knowledge and change in the world persists. The history textbooks framed critical engagement with contemporary colonial legacy through a multi-perspective debate. Additionally, the analysis concluded that the existence of racism in contemporary Dutch society and its historical roots in colonialism was omitted from all three textbooks. Thus, this research finds that silences in the history textbooks about race echo the misunderstandings among the Dutch population regarding the denial of racism in Dutch society.

**Keywords:** *Colonial historiography, colonial narratives, Dutch colonialism, Dutch identity, Dutch racism, narrative analysis, collective memory, cultural archive, cultural hegemony*

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# 1. Introduction

Historically, the Dutch have had difficulty coming to terms with the Dutch colonial past and the enslavement and genocide of its native inhabitants (Weiner, 2014a; Nimako & Willemsen, 2011). However, in recent years, there has been a growing interest in this controversial past, politically as well as in pop culture. For example, 2020 saw the release of the Dutch film *The East*, which illustrates the violence committed by Dutch soldiers against Indonesian civilians during the colonial war (Amelia, 2023). In 2022, the popular historical documentary series *Het Verhaal van Nederland* (The Story of the Netherlands) explored how the Dutch state accumulated wealth through slavery and colonialism (Van Leeuwen, 2022). On a political level, there have also been developments in terms of recognition of the Dutch colonial past. In 2020, King Willem-Alexander expressed his apologies for the violence committed by the Dutch in Indonesia, and in 2022, after years of refusal to do so, an apology for the Dutch role in slavery was made by Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Rutte biedt excuses, 2022).

Despite this growing interest in the colonial past, certain events indicate that the Netherlands is far from ready to accept the extent of its colonial legacy and its effect on Dutch identity. Despite the de jure completion of decolonisation, racial rhetoric that had produced the colonial order remains ingrained in public discourse on Dutchness, and the citizenship of Dutch people of colour is constantly under scrutiny (Wekker, 2016; Jordan, 2014). While white Dutch are constructed as rational and helpful, people of colour are often portrayed as lazy and needy, a burden to the welfare system (Hoving, 2014; Weiner, 2014b; Ghorashi, 2014). As in most countries in Europe, the Netherlands has, in recent years, seen an increase in support for right-wing populist movements that, through racist rhetoric, promote the myth of a homogenous Dutch identity that is threatened by outsiders (Kešić & Duyvendak, 2019). The normalisation of such ideologies makes “the continuing force of patterns of discrimination that build on earlier colonial, racist discourses and practices” invisible to a large section of the Dutch population (Hoving, 2014, p.77).

Additionally, the defunding of the National Institute of Dutch Slavery and Heritage (NiNsee) “mirrors how the Netherlands looks at postcolonial citizens” (Wekker, 2016, p. 14). According to Wekker,

it shows that their past and their presence in the Netherlands are not taken seriously and that postcolonial citizens are regarded as having “nothing meaningful to contribute in terms of knowledge production” and should “quit moaning about the past” (Ibid.). This raises important questions about who gets to write a nation’s history and which voices are silenced. While this thesis focuses on Dutch colonial historiography and contemporary societal configurations, it also aims to contribute to the broader debates on colonial historiography and the power of knowledge post-decolonisation.

Without a critical perspective on colonial history and its effects on the construction of race and Dutchness, white Dutch people will continue to turn a blind eye to the racism prevalent in present-day Dutch society. This denial will persist as long as the historically rooted racial categorical thinking of Dutch identity and ideas of the superiority of Dutch culture are not examined and challenged (Ghorashi, 2014). History textbooks are valuable sources for analysing knowledge and values about national identity and the colonial past (Van Nieuwenhuysse & Valentim, 2018). The aim of this thesis is, therefore, to answer the following research question:

### **Research Question**

How do the silences in Dutch textbooks about the colonial past echo existing cleavages and misunderstandings among various segments of the Dutch population about the colonial past and racism in the Netherlands today?

### **Sub-questions**

To answer this research question, this thesis will be guided by the following sub-questions:

1. What narratives do the textbooks employ to discuss Dutch colonialism and the Dutch role in the slave trade?
2. Do the textbook accounts take a predominantly European perspective, or do they also pay attention to the perspectives of colonised peoples, and do they attribute them agency?

3. Are there critical reflections present that draw connections between colonialism, slavery and present-day phenomena, such as racism and xenophobia?

To answer the research question, the thesis will first provide a contextualisation of the Dutch education system and colonial history. Then, the research question will be situated among the current academic debate on the topic in the literature review. The next chapter will provide the theoretical framework of this thesis, followed by a chapter describing the study's methodology of qualitative narrative analysis. The analytical section of this thesis constitutes three analytical chapters, each dedicated to one of the sub-questions and, finally, a discussion and the study's conclusion.

## 2. Contextualisation

Before we can understand how the history textbooks contribute to public perceptions of the Dutch colonial past, a few words on the Dutch secondary history educational system and Dutch colonialism are required. This chapter will therefore provide a brief overview of the Dutch educational system and colonial enterprise.

### **The Dutch Education System**

Children typically start secondary education at the age of twelve, where they enter one of three different types of schooling tracks based on a pupil's academic capabilities and interests. The first track prepares children for vocational professions, and the second track prepares children for a degree in applied sciences. The final track, called VWO, prepares children for a bachelor's degree at a research university after completing their secondary education. The VWO path takes six years to complete and is split up into the first three years, where all pupils take the same subjects, and the final three years, where pupils choose their subjects. After six years, all pupils must pass the final standardised exams for each chosen subject. History is thus a mandatory subject for the lower grades and optional for the upper grades (Van Boxtel & Grever, 2011).

While the Dutch government is not directly involved in the production of history textbooks, they do set out guidelines for history education that the textbooks must follow. Since 2015, the final standardised exam in history is based on a chronological framework separated into ten eras with forty-nine characteristic developments, events and key concepts designed to enable pupils to orient themselves in space and time, with a particular focus on Western history (Kropman et al., 2020). The characteristics that relate to Dutch colonial history are: (18) the start of the European overseas expansion; (24) the unique political position and economic and cultural bloom of the Dutch Republic; (29) the extension of European domination, in particular through plantation colonies and the Transatlantic slave trade, and the emergence of abolitionism; (33) the modern form of imperialism related to industrialisation; (44) forms of resistance against West-



European imperialism; (46) the decolonisation that ended Western hegemony in the world and (49) the development of a pluriform and multicultural society (Van Boxtel & Grever, 2011). Additionally, the exam programme focuses on four historical themes that overlap with several characteristic developments. The themes are: (1) Cities and citizens in the lower countries (1050-1700); (2) the enlightenment in theory and practice (1650-1900); (3) China from empire to capitalism (1842-2001) and (4) Germany in Europe (1918-1991) (Kropman et al., 2020). However, Dutch colonialism and slavery are not explicitly mentioned in these historical contexts, and thus, the textbooks that cover these four themes will not be analysed.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that Dutch history education rules give teachers a substantial degree of freedom, as they can choose their own source materials (Klein, 2017). While the national curriculum sets guidelines on what needs to be taught and what will be tested during the central exams, it does not specify how a topic should be taught (Ibid.). However, studies have shown that 98% of Dutch history teachers largely depend on the popular history textbooks, which include those used in this research, in their teaching (Kropman et al., 2020).

## **The Dutch Empire**

The Dutch Republic began to acquire trading posts and settler colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. In 1602, several Dutch trading syndicates formed the Dutch East India Company (VOC), and in 1621, the West India Company (WIC), which the States General of the Republic chartered with the trade and management of overseas territories (Emmer & Gommans, 2020).

The WIC concentrated on the Atlantic triangular trade and became active in the slave trade. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the company colonised Suriname and the Caribbean islands of Curacao, Aruba, Saba, St. Eustatius, St. Maarten and Bonaire. These territories were turned into plantation colonies, where enslaved from Africa were brought over to produce sugar and coffee. After the WIC was dissolved in 1791, the Dutch Republic assumed the colonial possessions (Emmer & Gommans, 2020). Once slavery was abolished in the 1860s, Indian and Javanese indentured workers were imported to assume the labour, but many plantations closed due to a lack of certainty and labour. Now that the Western colonies were no longer as

profitable, Dutch interest in them began to wane (Ramsoedh, 2018). After World War II, many citizens within the colonies hesitated towards independence, fearing an economic crash. At the same time, the Dutch government pushed for the independence of Suriname and the Dutch Antilles, fearing the mass migration of colonial citizens to the metropole (Buettner, 2016). Upon Dutch insistence, Suriname became independent in 1975, agreeing to a five-year transition period in which Surinamese could still migrate (Ibid.). As the Suriname economy indeed crashed post-independence, the Dutch Antilles refused complete independence. Today, Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten are autonomous countries within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, while Saba, St. Eustatius and Bonaire share a status similar to Dutch municipalities (Ibid.).

The VOC concentrated on trade with Asia and established its headquarters on Java in 1619 (Emmer & Gommans, 2020). As the VOC dissolved in 1799, the Dutch state assumed colonial control, extending territorial rule over the entire Indonesian archipelago through violence (Kreike, 2012). In 1830, the Dutch government implemented the cultivation system, which enabled the forced labour of the indigenous population and the exploitation of natural resources. In 1901, the Dutch government instituted the 'ethical policy' to 'uplift the natives', but any organisation promoting Indonesian nationalism and independence were outlawed and its members imprisoned (Buettner, 2016). At the outbreak of World War II, Dutch colonial rule fell as Indonesia was invaded by the Japanese, which many Indonesians regarded as an opportunity for independence (Ibid.). After World War II had ended, the Dutch attempted to regain control over Indonesia. However, Dutch troops were met with stark opposition led by the nationalist leader Sukarno, who had declared the independence of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945 (Ibid.). The Dutch, who regarded the Indonesian colony as integral to restoring their economy and international prestige, refused to acknowledge the declaration. They sent over 150,000 soldiers to squash the Republican army, triggering the Indonesian War of Independence (Ibid.). The Dutch forces fought with ruthless violence, but in 1948, under American pressure, they retracted and eventually recognised the Republic of Indonesia in 1949. At the war's end, many Indo-Europeans and Indonesians who had supported the Dutch side migrated to the Netherlands (Ibid.).

### 3. Literature Review

To answer the question of how the Netherlands is narrating its history related to the colonial past, it is necessary to review the existing academic research on the topic. This review will engage with the current debate on the cultural identities of former colonial nations and how they represent their colonial past, specifically in history education. This literary review examines primary current public debates and points out what aspects remain overlooked in the Dutch context.

#### **National Identity and Colonialism**

As stated by historian Frederick Cooper (2005), the last decades have seen a surge in scholarship on colonial studies. However, he argues that there is still a tendency to study colonialism as something juxtaposed to European history and modernisation. Subsequently, the historiography of former colonising countries generally considered colonies as “something ‘out there,’ marginal to a history that remained national, or else as a projection of national culture and power” (Cooper, 2005, p. 171). However, Cooper explains that the process of colonisation and imperialism were central to the formation of colonising nations, as it invited debates around rights, obligations and responsibilities to different categories of peoples. To justify the rule and exploitation of colonies, metropolises instituted a racial and political hierarchical order to enable a distinction between the civilised core and subordinate periphery (Ibid.). Additionally, the consolidation of a fiscally centralised nation-state was also encouraged by the need to invest in a strong military that could maintain the empire (Ibid.). Thus, we cannot understand a nation’s history without looking at its imperial history.

#### **Colonial Narratives**

While there is a general consensus that colonialism was an unjust practice, the legacy of colonialism and imperialism remains deeply contested (Cooper, 2005; Jensen, 2020). Understanding colonial history is, however, complicated by distorted representations of such history by former imperial powers.

As stated by Lars Jensen (2020), when studying the colonial past, it is important to recognise the general traits of colonialism and its legacy, while also considering the particular circumstances of an individual case. He proposes that the narration of the colonial legacy of former European empires should be studied through four central themes: benevolence, exceptionalism, civilising mission and colonial restaging (Ibid.). Jensen argues that these themes represent the colonial discourse in former European colonial powers but that the ways in which these themes manifest differ to a certain extent per country.

Jensen (2020) argues that benevolence has historically been used as a colonial trope by colonising powers to justify their colonial endeavours by presenting the intentions behind the practice as good and wanting to help the population. In today's narration of the colonial past, former colonising countries continue using this trope by emphasising the acts of heroic white figures contesting colonialism or highlighting benign acts towards colonised subjects, rather than focusing on colonial violence. Exceptionalism is closely related to the benevolent trope but has the distinct feature of claiming to be representative of a country's broader national identity. Narratives of this category claim that the specific culture of their nation produces exceptionalism compared to other nations (Ibid.).

The civilising mission is a trope that was often used as a justification for colonialism, under the claim that the aim of colonial rule was the protection of the colonised, not for profit (Jensen, 2020). This narrative encompasses colonisation as a moral duty and a 'white man's burden'. Benevolent and exceptionalist narratives can support the civilising mission trope. However, the emphasis is on the idea that colonial rule can bring about changes to enhance a 'savage' and 'backward' colonial subject (Ibid.). This trope also rests on a careful balance between a projected future change wherein the colonial subject has improved, while also making that future seem impossible, as completing the civilising mission would entail the end of colonial rule (Ibid.). Jensen argues that this narrative is often evoked in contemporary development discourse and used by former empires to teach about the colonial past "without compromising their self-esteem" (p. 112).

With colonial restaging, Jensen (2020) refers to “deliberate processes of reinventing colonial relations in ways that bar access for colonial violence to become part of such narrations” (p. 112). It ignores a continuity between the uneven power relations of the colonial past and present. Instead, it reimagines a colonial past which focuses on things like the grandeur of colonial architecture, restoration efforts, tourism and trade, offering a sanitised version of a colonial past while maintaining the idea of a special relationship between former colonies and metropolises (Ibid.). Jensen argues, “While revisiting and/or restaging colonial relations could theoretically involve owning up to colonial suppression and racism as a first step in restaging relations, this is not what happens” (p. 106). Instead, former colonies revisit a nostalgic colonial past without the negative aspects.

### **Dutch Identity**

Wekker (2016) argues, in line with Cooper’s (2005) claims, that “the Dutch culture developed in many respects as a colonial culture and that traces of this are discernible in our contemporary society” (p. 84). Wekker underscores various characteristics of a dominant Dutch self-representation, which, she argues, is heavily influenced by ideas of race that were formed during colonial times and have been transmitted to today’s society. This is supported by Jones (2014), who argues that Dutch politicians constructed non-white overseas subjects “as maladjusted and unreal Dutch citizens [which] enabled the promotion of the idea of the real Dutch as competent people with certain physical features” (p. 332). The Dutch self-image, Wekker (2016) argues, is characterised by several paradoxes, one of them “being a small but ethically just nation that has something special to offer to the world” (p. 5). Related to this conceptualisation of the Netherlands as a small and just nation is the representation of the Dutch as innocent and tolerant towards newcomers (Wekker, 2016; Bijl, 2014; Hoving, 2014; Van Stipriaan, 2020). Paradoxically, the Dutch self-image, on the one hand, construes itself as a liberal, cosmopolitan and open country, while on the other hand, the importance of whiteness and Christianity as signifiers of Dutch identity is enshrined in the dominant discourse around Dutchness (Wekker, 2016; Balkenhol, 2016; Van Stipriaan, 2020). The exclusion of the non-white population from Dutchness is, for instance, visible in the usage of the binary opposition between

*'autochtonen'* and *'allochtonen'*. While the terms literally translate to 'those who came from here' and 'those who came from elsewhere', in practice, the former is used to refer to white people, the latter to people of colour (Bijl, 2012; Wekker, 2016).

However, the significance of whiteness remains under-recognised in public discourse, as the existence of racism in Dutch society is often underplayed or even denied, with many Dutch people implying racism cannot exist in a liberal and just country like the Netherlands (Wekker, 2016; Weiner, 2014b; Hoving, 2014). In the last decades, debates around Dutch national identity and multiculturalism have heightened, centred around the question of who gets to define national identity. This debate is visible in discussions about the national curriculum (Doppen, 2010; Van Stripriaan, 2020).

### **Colonialism and Dutch Identity**

Dutch identity has a strained relationship with its colonial past. On the one hand, colonialism harms the Dutch self-image as just and innocent. On the other hand, the colonial past feeds into exceptionalist narratives of the Netherlands, despite its small size, being an essential player in the world (Wekker, 2016; Balkenhol, 2016). This leads to tensions in the Dutch identity and representations of the colonial past.

Some scholars have argued that there is a tendency within the older Dutch generation who experienced the colonisation and decolonisation period of Indonesia to stay silent about the Dutch colonial past due to a combination of shame and regret of losing the territory (Houben, 2000; Weiner, 2014a; Pattynama, 2012). Moreover, Houben states, "Until recently in Dutch schoolbooks, the 400 years of Dutch presence in Indonesia was either ignored or set within a rather positivist view of national characteristics" (p. 79). However, Bijl (2012) argues that today, the problem is not that the Netherlands has forgotten or covered up its colonial past. Rather, it is the separation of the colonial past from the national past and the fact that the victims of colonial violence are not deemed as memorable within a national context that hampers the discussion of a violent colonial past and its legacy today.

This stance is supported by Balkenhol (2016). He argues that colonial violence is discussed in Dutch discourse and is often done through the politics of compassion. Balkenhol claims that many Dutch

people see compassion as a distinguishing feature of their national identity. Discussions on colonial violence are integral to preserving that self-image, as they allow for the establishment of the actively compassionate Dutch subject, who condemns the past violence and, therefore, distances himself from it and the passive suffering object. Balkenhol states that “the emphasis on suffering has ingrained an often self-congratulatory image of a humanism that is often seen as being ‘typically’ Dutch” (p. 290). Rather than being an act of solidarity, this compassion is thus based on a hierarchical relationship, with the Dutch as morally superior to the poor racial other. Bijl and Balkenhol therefore claim that mere recognition of colonial violence is not enough to change Dutch society’s exclusionary nature, as it does not necessarily equal a critical outlook on the colonial legacy in Dutch society today.

Additionally, Wekker (2016) argues that Dutch historiography “has put the colonies in quarantine,” meaning it refuses to acknowledge the active interaction between the Netherlands and its overseas territories in shaping the Dutch self-representation. This is exemplified by dominant narratives around the Dutch Golden Age, which illustrate this period as a time of development of the arts, science and commerce while ignoring the colonial violence that enabled these developments (Jordan, 2014). Hoving (2014) claims that, whereas in the Anglophone and Francophone postcolonial studies, race is regarded as a central topic in colonial discourse, it remains understudied in the Dutch context. Some scholars have attributed the lack of critical postcolonial and racial studies in the Netherlands to the fact that a majority of immigrants in the Netherlands stem from Mediterranean countries, namely Morocco and Turkey, rather than former colonies (Boehmer & Gouda, 2012; Buettner, 2016).

### **Colonialism and Race in History Textbooks**

Knowledge, ideas and values surrounding Dutch identity and the colonial past are transmitted through various mechanisms, but one important source is history textbooks used in education. History textbooks are valuable ideological and cultural sources, as their information reflects the knowledge and values the authors aim to instil in the pupils about contemporary society and the collective past (Van Nieuwenhuysse & Valentim, 2018; Bellino & Williams, 2017). Textbooks are intertextual products given form through “a

complex interrelation between sources such as social memory, academic history, memory politics, pedagogy and commerce” (Wagner et al., 2018, p. 35). As the state is often involved in curriculum and textbook production, history education is one way through which authorities have aimed to shape the national identity and are therefore “closely linked to identity-formation and social processes of belonging” (Van Nieuwenhuse & Valentim, 2018, p. 2). As history textbooks navigate the space between collective memory, the political agenda and academic history, they “are in dialogue with, and either confirm or modify dominant narratives” (Wagner et al., 2018, p. 35).

Mycock (2017) argues that post-colonising states disseminate knowledge about the colonial past through a nostalgic and uncritical lens, favouring narratives of civilising colonialism over colonial violence. Since the 1980s, there has been a call for a revision of colonial history, moving towards a new imperial history (Mycock, 2017; Stanard, 2018). However, this critical turn has been met with stark opposition, in particular from right-wing political corners, who regard the new imperial turn as a strategy by “‘politically correct’ liberals who seek to ensure the teaching of history is divorced from ‘historical facts’” (Mycock, 2017, p. 3). As a result of the so-called ‘history wars’, revisions of colonial narratives in history textbooks remain a slow process (Mycock, 2017).

Most of the existing research on colonial narratives in history textbooks has focused on the United States and the United Kingdom and find that the textbooks generally present colonialism as neutral and inevitable (Mycock, 2017; Brown, 2010; Nimako et al., 2014; Abadia & Collins, 2018; Weiner, 2014a). In the case of the United Kingdom, the master narrative prioritises the Industrial Revolution, ignoring the link between industrialisation and imperialism and the intercultural exchange behind knowledge production (Abadia & Collins, 2018). Other trends among history textbooks are the naturalisation of the processes of colonialism and slavery, and the segregation of national and colonial history (Mycock, 2017). Scholars argue that Eurocentrism is also common, foregrounding the role of Europe in modernisation processes such as economic growth, scientific knowledge and democracy (Araújo & Maeso, 2012a; Wasserman, 2018). Scholars have moreover identified a general tendency to decontextualise the process of colonialism and



imperialism and to separate it from broader global phenomena (Mycock, 2017; Araújo & Maeso, 2012a; Wasserman, 2018). Wasserman (2018) states that, while European history textbooks generally have started to include more critical information on the colonial past in the last decade, colonial violence is still downplayed and colonised people continue to be presented as silent without agency (Wasserman, 2018). Van Nieuwenhuysse (2018) argues that the colonial perspective of ‘the West versus the rest’ dominates, Western triumphalism and superiority remain, and interactions between colonised and colonisers are limited.

Literature on the Dutch history textbooks and their narratives regarding colonialism and racism is scarce. When discussing master narratives in history education, most studies focus on academic scholarship or a general Dutch master narrative rather than a close analysis of history textbooks. In his paper on the Dutch history canon, Oostindie (2015) argues that there is a growing commitment from the Dutch government to the decolonisation of the canon and recognition of colonial misdeeds. However, he states that this interest is half-hearted, as is marked by paradoxes such as defunding NiNsee and, despite the broadened focus on colonial history, the information remains selective without a link between that history and race relations (Ibid.).

Weiner has published several articles on the discourse on slavery and African stereotypes in Dutch history textbooks used in primary education. She finds that the textbooks concentrate on the commercial and trading aspects of slavery rather than the infliction upon human life (Weiner, 2014a). Additionally, Weiner (2014a) argues that textbooks frame slavery within a short period between 1700-1800 and refrain from connecting the 350 years of slavery and its legacy to other historical processes, such as capitalism and centralisation, nor to persisting inequalities between white and non-white populations in Dutch society today. Primary textbooks’ representation of Africa continues to be plagued “by stereotypes of the continent as violent, primitive, poor, and lacking modern technology, to which a benevolent Dutch nation contributes” (Weiner, 2016, p. 11). In a study of primary history textbooks’ representation of multiculturalism, immigration and tolerance, Weiner (2018) found that the books do not address racial prejudice in Dutch

society and depict non-white immigrant groups as ‘other’ in comparison to the Dutch, presenting them as underdeveloped, poor and violent.

Hira (2012) argues that the dominant discourse on colonialism in Dutch universities is underpinned by the idea that colonialism was “a normal form of social relations between human beings rather than a system of exploitation and oppression”, which he calls ‘scientific colonialism’ (p. 53). Through scientific colonialism, dominant historical narratives continue to diminish the impact of the exploitation and oppression of colonial subjects on today’s society (Hira, 2012; Van Stipriaan, 2006; Nimako & Willemsen, 2011).

Reflecting on Dutch historiography, Nimako et al. (2014) argue that when colonialism and slavery are addressed, it is usually done through a narrative that focuses on trade rather than the people impacted by it. A prevalent idea of discussing slavery through a trade narrative, according to Nimako et al., is that emotions should not bear weight and that we cannot view something that happened so long ago through a twenty-first-century moral lens. They state that “the essence of the Dutch master narrative is that it would rather not address slavery; but that, if the issue of slavery has to be addressed, it is preferable that it is done without reference to real people” (p. 37). The enslaved, they argue, play a limited role in the narrative, except for their function as commerce in the trade. Thus, Dutch discourse on colonialism generally centres the perspective of the metropole, focusing on entrepreneurship, openness and tolerance as characteristics that shaped the Dutch nation, while racism, slavery and colonialism are portrayed as a side story to Dutch history. Bijl (2012) argues that Dutch historiography typically excludes colonial violence, underpinned by racialised ideologies, from historical national narratives. Contrarily, the narrative of the Netherlands as a tolerant country and champion of human rights on an international level is strongly present in the education system (Ibid.).

However, as far as my knowledge reaches, no academic research exists on the specific narratives on Dutch identity in relation to the colonial past used in secondary school history textbooks in recent years. Recent research on Dutch colonial historiography has unfortunately overlooked secondary high school

textbooks. The official curriculum for secondary history education prescribes a critical approach to historical thinking, underlining concepts such as continuity and change, authorial subjectivity, contextualisation, multi-perspectivity, and historical and present significance (Van Boxtel & Grever, 2011). Secondary textbooks are, therefore, meant to cover more complex historical events than primary textbooks and form a bridge between secondary education and academic historiography (Bentrovato & Van Nieuwenhuyse, 2020). As a result, they can be a helpful source in researching Dutch identity and the representation of its colonial past. Moreover, Wekker (2016) argues that the Western and Eastern parts of the Dutch empire are generally studied in separation and that comparative research between Indonesia, Suriname and the Dutch Antilles remains scarce. Thus, this research aims to fill a void in research on Dutch colonialism by including an analysis of whether narratives in history textbooks regarding the Atlantic colonies and Indonesia overlap or differ.

## 4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter elaborates on the main theoretical concepts of this research, providing a framework for the substantial themes that determine the interpretation of this analysis. The theories and theoretical concepts that provide the basis of this research are Maurice Halbwachs' *collective memory*, Gloria Wekker's theory on *the cultural archive*, Antonio Gramsci's *cultural hegemony* and Stuart Hall's conceptualisation of national identity and race.

### **Collective Memory**

This thesis draws on collective memory to understand how social groups distort their historical past. According to Halbwachs (1992), who first developed the concept, collective memory establishes the relationship between a particular community and its past based on current concerns. Collective memory understands memories as encoded, retrieved and maintained through social processes rather than individual possessions (Finkenauer et al., 1997). The concept is often used in academia concerned with how nations transmit the idea of a shared history to their members (Brescó, 2018). Furthermore, collective memory can be used to explain why some events are commemorated while others are forgotten. Drawing on Halbwachs, Baumeister and Hastings (1997) argue that social groups use memories to define themselves and their world and tend to seek and maintain a positive self-image. However, sometimes the "literal, objective record of the facts" does not complement the group's self-image (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997, p. 277). When the reality of events does not match the desired image, memories of such events can be manipulated and severely distorted so that they become a tool for "collective self-deception" (Ibid.).

The systemic distortion of memories occurs in a variety of ways. One way to distort collective memory is selectively omitting facts disagreeable to the self-image. By ignoring or erasing events that cast a negative light on the social group, a largely positive collective self-image remains (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997). As recent endeavours from postcolonial scholarship have made the complete silencing of

the colonial past in Dutch history impossible, other ways to distance a national identity from the shameful past have been produced (Nimako et al., 2014).

Another tactic is fabrication, or the invention of a false memory. However, Baumeister and Hastings argue that examples of complete fabrication of collective memory are scarce, as collective memories remain somewhat constrained by facts. Rather than resorting to complete fabrications, social groups tend to “exaggerate the importance and positivity of the deeds of their ancestors” (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997, p. 282). This way, bits and pieces of historical truth are taken, but they are glorified and embellished to make the group look better. Exaggerations of positive accomplishments promote a sense of pride in the group’s heritage. Another way memory is made to serve the group’s self-image is through contextual framing. Historical events are almost always encompassed by a complex array of causes and consequences. Due to this complexity, social groups are encouraged to “cast an event in a particular context that can make the memory serve the group’s self-image” (Baumeister & Hastings, 1997, p. 290). Thus, national narratives tend to accentuate historical causes that support the nation’s self-image over others that do not.

### **The Cultural Archive and Dutch identity**

This thesis employs Wekker’s conceptualisation of the cultural archive to further understand how national identities are formed. Edward Said initially coined the term cultural archive, calling it a reservoir of “particular knowledge and structures of attitude and reference...” (Said, as quoted in Wekker, 2016, p. 2). Wekker argues that it is from a cultural archive that “a sense of self has been formed and fabricated” and claims that 400 years of colonial rule have had a significant impact on knowledge production and “meaning-making” of the self in Dutch society (Wekker, 2016, p. 2). The cultural archive is thus not a physical place but rather a fluctuating infrastructure of knowledge, ideas, norms and values that condition how a particular group sees itself and the world. Wekker writes that it determines “the way we think, do things, and look at the world, in what we find (sexually) attractive, in how our affective and rational economies are organised and intertwined” (p. 19). The knowledge and feelings that mould the cultural archive are predominantly determined by the dominant group in society, which constitutes white Christians in the Dutch case.

According to Wekker (2016), the racial system of thinking constructed during imperial rule, embedded in the Dutch cultural archive, conditions the Dutch self as white and superior in opposition to people of colour who are constructed as uncivilised. Imperial and racist ideologies are nestled into the cultural archive, and racism continues manifesting in “a variety of current popular culture and organisational phenomena” (p. 20). However, due to the centrality of innocence in the Dutch self-image, conversations about race are often met with elusiveness and denial.

### **Cultural Hegemony**

As cultural archives are mainly shaped by the dominant group in society, counter-narratives struggle to contest what is considered common sense. The power beneath historical representations can be explained through Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony. Gramsci’s understanding of power refers to “the power to help define the boundaries of common-sense ‘reality’ either by ignoring views outside those boundaries or by labelling deviant opinions ‘tasteless’ or ‘irresponsible’” (Lears, 1985, p. 572). The beliefs and values of the dominant group in society are validated in public discourse, making the dominant group’s culture the accepted norm (Ibid.). Cultural hegemony, like society, is a fluctuating process, meaning that counterhegemonies can arise and challenge the legitimacy of the dominant culture (Ibid.). It is helpful to think about historical representation in such a framework, as it demonstrates the power history textbooks have in shaping what is considered valid history and what is not. Additionally, the concept explores how common sense has changed over time and, thus, how counterhegemonies can change what is considered legitimate (Ibid.).

### **The Construction of the Nation**

For an expression of togetherness like the cultural archive to exist, people need to feel a shared sense of national belonging. This thesis uses a constructivist and decolonial approach to the conceptualisation of national identity, as inspired by the works of Hall. Hall (1989) challenges the idea of cultural identity as a unified and fixed essence, writing that “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like

everything historical, they undergo constant transformation” (p. 70). Hall (2011) maintains that identities are formed within representations through resources like history, culture and language and thus, “arise from the narrativisation of the self” (p. 5). The sense of self, Hall argues, is grounded not in the past but rather in how we are positioned and position ourselves within the narratives of the past, meaning that identity is a constant exercise of becoming rather than being (Ibid.).

Hall (1989) underlines the power embedded in the nation-building process. As social groups such as nations always carry differences, the idea of unity needs to be constructed. Rather than forming in isolation, identities are defined in relation to ‘the Other’. For identity to be defined, it is necessary to determine what it is not; thus, identity formation is always centred around exclusion. Here, Hall quotes Fanon stating that “A national culture is the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence” (Fanon, as quotes in Hall, 1989, p. 81). Thus, people promote narratives that affirm their identity, while displaced narratives do not become part of public discourse (Hall, 1989; Hall, 2011). This also demonstrates how Hall’s conceptualisation relates to Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony.

Hall (2021) argues that race is an important signifier of the cultural identity of former colonial countries, stating that “race is one of those major concepts which organise the great classificatory systems of difference, which operate in human societies” (p. 359). Hall calls race a floating signifier, as it is given meaning through a relationship with other concepts and ideas in a culture. Thus, race does not have a fixed meaning based on genetic facts but is a discursive practice that changes depending on the time and place (Ibid.). Hall clarifies that he does not deny the existence of differences but argues that they only acquire meaning when they are systematically categorised to make societies intelligible (Ibid.). While classification is a fundamental aspect of human culture, since without it there is no meaning to the world, it becomes problematic when, as with race, those classifications become the instrument of power and exclusion. The classification of race has assigned negative and positive attributes to specific categories and dictates how a particular group should be treated over others (Ibid.). Because of the essentialisation of race with built-in

attributes associated with racial categories, they function as common-sense assumptions (Ibid.). Hall (2021) argues that when people of colour challenge their attributed characteristics, this usually generates societal tension. Moreover, Hall asserts that education has played a significant role in the essentialisation of racial categorisation, but that its role has not been adequately assessed.

In the Dutch case, scholars have argued that postcolonial citizens used to be ‘the Other’ to which the white culture could contrast themselves. However, nowadays, Muslims have replaced them as the ultimate other, although the citizenship of postcolonial citizens can still fall under scrutiny when they challenge the status quo and thus threaten the constructed identity (Jones, 2014; Wekker, 2016). When we connect this to cultural hegemony, it is the dominant group that dictates what is Dutch identity, but this does not mean that minority groups cannot challenge that and develop their counterhegemonic idea of Dutchness, which, in time, could alter the hegemonic conceptualisation.



## 5. Methodology

### Source Material

This thesis uses history textbooks as its primary source of analysis because they function as social documents that reflect and produce societal discourses. Therefore, three history textbooks from different popular educational publishers that are among the most used in upper secondary education in recent years were handpicked (Kropman et al., 2020; Van Stilfhout et al., 2014). The choice to analyse three textbooks made for upper-grade VWO pupils was made based on the fact that these textbooks cover all significant periods (colonialism, decolonisation and multiculturalism), and the VWO track's emphasis on critical historical thinking (Van Boxtel & Grever, 2011). All textbooks are in Dutch, and their translations in this thesis are my own.

The first textbook used for this research is *Geschiedeniswerkplaats: Geschiedenis Tweede Fase VWO Handboek historisch overzicht* (History workshop: History Second Phase VWO Textbook historical overview). This textbook is used for secondary pupils to prepare them for their school and central exams. The book is divided into ten chapters equal to the ten historical eras. The *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* textbooks are published by Noordhoff Uitgevers, the largest educational publisher in the Netherlands, which produces educational methods for various subjects in primary, secondary and tertiary education. All three authors have obtained a master's degree in history and are freelance authors for Noordhoff. One author also has experience as a history lecturer for universities of applied sciences.

The second textbook is *Memo: Geschiedenis Bovenbouw VWO Leer/opdrachtenboek* (Memo: History Upper Secondary VWO Tekst/exercise book). This textbook is published by Malmberg, another large Dutch educational publisher that produces textbooks for primary, secondary and vocational education subjects. This textbook has ten authors, all with a master's degree in either history or history education. Some of the authors are also history teachers.

The third textbook used in this research is *Sprekend Verleden: Geschiedenis Bovenbouw VWO Leerwerkboek 4/5/6* (Talking Past: History Upper Secondary VWO Textbook 4/5/6). *Sprekend Verleden* is

published under Walburg Pers Educatief, which produces secondary educational textbooks for history and economy. This textbook is written by five authors, who all have obtained a bachelor's or master's degree in history. Some are history teachers as well.

### **Method**

To research whether the silences in these history textbooks echo existing cleavages and misunderstandings among various segments of the Dutch population about the colonial past and racism, this thesis employed a qualitative narrative analysis research approach. Patterson and Monroe (1998) define a narrative as “the ways in which we construct disparate facts in our own worlds and weave them together cognitively in order to make sense of our reality” (p. 315). Individuals and collective units such as nations “create and use narratives to interpret and understand the political realities around us” (p. 316). The narratives in national textbooks are important tools of analysis, as they convey the dominant conceptualisation of national identity and perception of reality (Bentrovato & Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2020). Narrative analysis differs from other qualitative methods, as it focuses not only on *what* is said but also on *how* it is said (Smith, 2016). Additionally, rather than coding line by line, narrative analysis looks for broader themes in the data, as representations in the textbooks get their significance by being embedded in the narrative as a whole (Smith, 2016; Bentrovato & Van Nieuwenhuysse, 2020).

This thesis adopted Smith's (2016) strategy design to conduct the narrative analysis. The first stage of this approach is called ‘indwelling’, which involved familiarisation with the material by reading the data several times. While the textbooks were read in their entirety, the focus was on the chapters that discussed the characteristic developments related to colonialism and race, as provided in the contextualisation section. The next stage involved a closer read of the data, during which passages were highlighted that were deemed important for discovering themes and trends that might underlie a specific narrative. During the third stage, the narrative themes were identified by asking what the common theme(s) or thread(s) of the stories told by the textbooks are and what occurs repeatedly within those stories (Smith, 2016, p. 216). This stage made use of both inductive and deductive strategies. A deductive approach allowed for the exploration of trends

based on scholarship on colonial narratives, as introduced in the literature review, while an inductive approach enabled themes to emerge that were not identified in the literature (Perry & Jensen, 2001). In the final stage, the narrative structures were identified, focusing on *how* the stories were told. This involved asking how the narratives were constructed, in what section of the textbooks they were placed, and what particular aspects of history were emphasised or silenced to create the story (Smith, 2016).

### **Positionality**

In qualitative analysis, it is important to acknowledge the role of the researcher's ontological and epistemological beliefs that shape how the researcher interprets the source material. My educational background is the first aspect that needs to be acknowledged. Given that I have taken history as a subject during my secondary VWO education, I have substantial knowledge of the Dutch history education system needed to analyse these textbooks. On the other hand, the fact that my school used the method *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*, of which one textbook is analysed, might indicate a bias. This risk is minimised by adopting a critical research framework and comparing textbooks from different methods. An apolitical and atheoretical position is impossible and undesirable when conducting this type of research. Thus, my analysis will be shaped by a critical, decolonial research perspective.

Furthermore, my position as a white half-Dutch researcher needs to be addressed. I have experienced first-hand how skin colour made it so that my immigrant Danish father and I never had to prove our right to be in the Netherlands. As a white researcher, I risk missing specific exclusionary language or using superior rationality that perpetuates a construction of 'the other' as in need of white help. However, I also believe that with that privilege comes a duty to acknowledge how that privileged position was constructed and is maintained, confronting the knowledge I was taught in high school through a critical academic framework.

## 6. Narratives on the Dutch Role in Colonialism and Slavery

The first analytical chapter of this thesis will answer the sub-question of which narratives the textbooks employ. This chapter focuses on how the textbooks discuss the Dutch Golden Age, the Dutch role in the Transatlantic slave trade, Dutch colonialism and imperialism, the decolonisation period and postcolonialism.

### **The Golden Age, the VOC and the WIC**

As stated by Small (2011), the Netherlands tends to think of slavery “as something that happened over there, far away, not for very long, and with little consequence for Dutch society today” (p. xiii). This is reflected in how the textbooks talk about the Dutch Golden Age, the 17<sup>th</sup> century in which the Dutch Republic became an economic power.

*Geschiedeniswerkplaats* discusses the Dutch Golden Age in an eponymous paragraph in the chapter on ‘the Era of Regents and Monarchs’. In this paragraph, the authors attribute the Dutch Republic’s welfare to trade and write that the country flourished culturally and scientifically through tolerance but omit any talk of exploitation from the Golden Age narrative. While the textbook largely avoids the topic of colonial violence in the context of the Golden Age, they pay more attention to colonial violence in other sections.

*Geschiedeniswerkplaats* covers the VOC and WIC in the same chapter, but in a separate paragraph on the rise of a global economy, in turn separating it from the Dutch Golden Age narrative. In the paragraph on the rise of a global economy, the authors do mention colonial violence related to the VOC in their discussion of governor-general Jan Pieterszoon Coen’s actions in the Dutch East Indies. They write that Coen ordered Jakarta to be burned down and “instigated a massacre” of the indigenous population of the Banda islands (p. 91). However, the reason given for this massacre is that the indigenous population evaded their agreements with the VOC. While the textbook says that the indigenous population was forced to sign contracts with the VOC, the authors do not explain that the VOC forced the indigenous population to

cultivate spices and sell them at floor prices. Moreover, the narrative treats these cases as individual mishaps made by Coen, rather than as a part of the exploitative structure of the VOC and Dutch overseas trade.

In *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*' account of the WIC, the authors write that the company initially focused on privateering and thwarting the Spanish fleet, booking "legendary success" (p. 92). Then, the WIC started to acquire trading posts and colonies, "But in the end, the WIC only held on to six Antillean islands and Suriname. The WIC never became very profitable due to the stiff competition in America compared to Asia" (p. 91). Thus, this paragraph on the rise of a world economy focuses on the trade and profits of the VOC and WIC, while omitting the role that the slave trade played in establishing the trading networks. The narrative also emphasises the small size of the Dutch Atlantic colonies and the lack of profit the WIC garnered. In the last decades, however, several scholars have argued that the profits of the WIC for the Netherlands have significantly been undervalued (Bosma, 2014). This suggests that in Dutch collective memory, the WIC continues to be thought of as having little impact on the Netherlands, while the VOC is deemed much more influential. Importantly, Dutch colonialism and slave trade are addressed more extensively in a paragraph called 'Colonialism and slavery', part of the textbook's chapter on 'the Era of Wigs and Revolutions'. In this paragraph, the authors write that due to a shortage of labour on the sugar plantations in Brazil, "the WIC decided in 1637 to start participating in the slave trade" (p. 118). By putting the slave trade in a chapter referring to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and not mentioning it within the context of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the authors have distanced the slave trade from the rise of European economic hegemony and the Dutch Golden Age.

*Sprekend Verleden* identifies specialisation and commercialisation as the two most important causes of economic growth during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This textbook discusses the Golden Age and the VOC in a chapter called 'From Republic to Constitutional State' and writes that the VOC was very profitable, framing the VOC trade as collaboration through trade agreements with the native population. The authors write, "With the native population, trade agreements were concluded, which often stipulated that the spices were only allowed to be sold to the VOC. This sometimes led to conflicts or violent intervention" (p. 290).

With this passage, the authors acknowledge that the trade agreements led to a monopoly on spices for the VOC. However, they fail to mention that many indigenous peoples were forced to sign such agreements and that the use of violence was not an occasional event but rather a systematic method of achieving the VOC's ambitions (Burbank & Cooper, 2010). Thus, the textbook's account downplays the exploitative nature of the trade with East Asia.

*Sprekend Verleden* mentions the WIC and its share in the slave trade in relation to the Golden Age, but a direct link between the Dutch participation in the slave trade and Dutch economic prosperity is not made, nor is colonial violence perpetrated by the WIC commented on. The WIC is discussed more in-depth in a chapter called 'Changes in the New Age (Europe ±1500 - ±1800)' in the context of the onset of European expansion, the rise of a global economy and the Transatlantic slave trade. Here, the authors provide more information on the WIC and Dutch colonialism in the West. The section discusses that the Dutch established plantation colonies in Suriname and several Caribbean islands. Concerning the Dutch role in slavery, the authors write, "Dutch ships have transported an estimated number of a total of half a million of slaves to America under horrific conditions" (p. 99). In a chapter called 'Colonisation and Decolonisation,' the authors specify that during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Brits, French, Dutch and Danes started to colonise the West African coast. Thus, the textbook does not silence the Dutch participation in the slave trade, nor the status as coloniser, but the authors do not write about these practices in the context of the Dutch Golden Age.

In a chapter called 'A New Republic in Europe,' the authors of *Memo* discuss the rise of international trade and the Dutch Golden Age in the same paragraph. In their paragraph on the Golden Age, *Memo* explicitly mentions that the VOC was one of the main reasons for the Dutch significant economic power in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Within this context, the authors also state that trade with Asian populations was characterised by force and violence. In contrast to *Sprekend Verleden*, *Memo* states that the VOC managed to create a vast trading network in Asia, "but not without regular use of violence" (p. 170). Moreover, the authors explicitly state that "the WIC earned its profits through trade in gold, ivory and slaves. The slaves,

purchased in Africa, were shipped to South and Central America to work on the sugar plantations” (p. 170). Thus, the authors have included colonial violence and slavery as part of their narrative of the Golden Age, in turn presenting a less romanticised account of the Dutch period of economic bloom.

Additionally, *Memo* is the only textbook that acknowledges that “the VOC also used people as slaves” (p. 170). As stated by Van Welie (2008), the involvement of slavery by the VOC is often overlooked within Dutch collective memory. He argues that within the Dutch historical imagination, negative aspects of colonialism are primarily associated with the WIC and West Indies, while the VOC continues to be celebrated. This is also visible in *Sprekend Verleden* and *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*, which emphasise the VOC as a trading company rather than a colonial enterprise. The minimisation of colonial violence perpetrated by the VOC in *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* and *Sprekend Verleden* suggests a desire to preserve the positive narrative around the Golden Age as a source of pride for the Netherlands. However, *Memo*’s more critical narrative demonstrates that the romanticisation of the Golden Age and the VOC is not universal, and there are indeed discrepancies in the views on how to appropriately discuss this part of history.

That is not to say that *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* does not reflect on the debate around the memorisation of the VOC, as the contemporary imagery of the VOC is discussed in a separate rubric called ‘historical thinking: judging the past’. Here, the authors discuss the different opinions on whether the VOC should continue to be celebrated. On the one hand, the textbook presents the view of former Prime Minister Balkenende, “who argued that the Dutch should see the VOC as an example of commercial spirit and vigour” (p. 102). On the other hand, the opinion of Member of Parliament Marijnissen is presented, who argues that nostalgia for the VOC period is problematic because of its relation to looting and colonisation. The authors write that “Balkenende and Marijnissen looked at the VOC from different norms and values” and that “they have based their opinions about the VOC on different facts” (Ibid.). However, the authors fail to address what facts, norms and values could form such opinions and the repercussions of such thinking. As the authors of *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* have painted a picture that connects the Dutch Golden

Age to the VOC without discussing colonial exploitation, they have not given pupils the proper tools to consider the Dutch colonial past and its contemporary legacy thoroughly. This suggests that the claim made by Wekker (2016), that celebrating the VOC feeds into the distortion of collective memory that maintains a certain white innocence, is yet to be embraced as a fact in Dutch public discourse.

As stated by Wekker (2016), the Golden Age narrative is one of the significant narratives that mediate Dutch self-understanding as innovative and tolerant. The textbooks' representations of the Dutch past are physical representations of the Dutch cultural archive. Based on the analysis, two of the three textbooks ignore the role of colonialism and the slave trade in the 17<sup>th</sup> century's cultural and economic boom, suggesting an unwillingness to acknowledge the impact of Dutch colonialism on Dutch self-understanding. Doing so would require a re-evaluation of the Dutch self-perception, which, as these textbooks suggest, the Dutch public is not entirely ready for. Wekker, using the concept of white innocence, argues that white Dutch people cling to the notion of themselves as powerful and, at the same time, harmless, which justifies feelings of superiority. A change in narrative could disrupt the entitlement to a superior position. In this case, the memories of colonial violence and oppression conflict with the self-image many Dutch people ascribe to. In an attempt to avoid such feelings of cognitive dissonance, the Golden Age narrative has continued to be distorted into a narrative that maintains this positive self-image.

However, *Memo*'s narrative demonstrates that there are sections of society ready to accept colonial violence as part of the Dutch past, in turn discrediting the notion of the Dutch as innocent, and teaching pupils about a shared past with postcolonial citizens. Thus, the narrative portrayed by *Memo* could potentially lead pupils to re-examine the dominant notions of what Dutch identity entails.

### **Colonialism and Imperialism**

*Sprekend Verleden* dedicates an entire chapter to discussing colonialism, imperialism and colonisation. This chapter discusses the causes and consequences of Western domination in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and India. The textbook underscores forced labour as a major characteristic of European colonial rule, stating that:



In many colonies, part of the population was forced to work for the colonial government or European companies in various ways ... [such as] the obligation for farmers to cultivate more than they wanted, or to cultivate a specific product for the European market. In the Dutch East Indies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, sugar, coffee and tobacco cultivation was mandatory (p. 242).

By using the Dutch East Indies as an example, the authors emphasise the forceful nature of Dutch colonisation and denounce the idea that Dutch colonialism was exceptional and more benevolent than other European powers. Regarding the West Indies, the authors note that the WIC conquered a part of Brazil from the Portuguese and “succeeded in bringing a plantation colony to fruition” (p. 246). They continue to explain that once the Portuguese had reconquered this territory: “From that moment on, The Dutch began to focus on Guyana, which Suriname was a part of, and the Caribbean. Suriname became an important plantation economy and Curaçao became an important slave market” (p. 246).

Apart from these lines, Dutch colonialism and imperialism are not discussed within the main text of *Sprekend Verleden*, while the processes of Spanish, Portuguese, British, French and Belgian colonisation are covered in greater detail. In the activity section at the end of the chapter, however, the authors have included an exercise called ‘balance of colonial policy,’ which includes questions based on sources from eyewitnesses who have experienced colonial rule in Indonesia. From these sources, pupils can discern what colonial policies the Dutch maintained in Indonesia and how these policies affected the Indonesian population. While this exercise helps explain how colonial subjugation impacted the native population, the problem is that the sources have little connection to the main text, in which Dutch policies in Indonesia are hardly discussed. The main text written by the authors is regarded as the principal source of transferring historical information to pupils (Van Boxtel & Grever, 2011). Using sources in an exercise implies training skills rather than transferring information on a specific topic. As a result, the information provided by these isolated source materials might train critical skills but there is also the risk that pupils will only acquire superficial opinions and knowledge because they could struggle to link these sources to the information provided by the authors in the textbook.

*Geschiedeniswerkplaats* discusses Dutch modern imperialism together with British, French and Belgian imperialism in the context of the chapter on the Industrial Revolution. The authors recognise that expanding territory and thoroughly exploiting the colonies were significant characteristics of modern imperialism. However, the various colonial policies and their consequences on the native populations are hardly discussed. The authors do mention the cultivation system, writing that “[to acquire more coffee and sugar] the ‘cultivation system’ was introduced in 1830: indigenous rulers ensured that farmers cultivated the agreed-upon amounts and the government could buy these at set prices” (p. 142). The authors omit that the new rules set by the colonial government meant that the cultivation of food crops was neglected in favour of export crops, which led to food shortages among the native population (Burger, 2010). Moreover, the authors write that:

After 1870, the Dutch East Indies went through a transformation. The cultivation system was abolished and European entrepreneurs were given free reign. The economic development was impressive, especially on Sumatra and Borneo. The Dutch-Indies were given a prominent position on the global market in tobacco, rubber and petroleum... (p. 142).

With this passage, the authors underscore the positive impact of the new colonial policy for the Dutch while ignoring the consequences for the colonised subjects. Thus, the authors perpetuate the narrative that the Dutch helped the Indonesians to develop through modern imperialism while downplaying the exploitation and cultural subjugation that characterised Dutch colonial rule. The textbook does acknowledge that the Dutch used violence in their expansion of control:

All islands were subjugated. In Aceh on North Sumatra, a war was necessary to do this. There, the colonial army fought from 1873 for more than 30 years in a bloody guerilla war against Islamic fighters. But on other islands, the threat of violence was often enough (p. 142).

On the one hand, the authors provide an example of the violence that accompanied the Dutch imperial expansion. On the other hand, the authors do not mention specific tactics of the Dutch colonial warfare at that time, including environmental warfare, which resulted in many civilian casualties (Kreike, 2012). Furthermore, the narrative suggests that military intervention was uncommon, even though the Royal Dutch

East Indies Army (KNIL) was involved in many military campaigns throughout the Indonesian archipelago (Vickers, 2013).

*Memo* covers Dutch imperial expansion in the Dutch East Indies in a paragraph called ‘Modern imperialism’. The textbook centres on imperial violence and uses the Dutch case as an example: “In several decades, [the European powers] conquered large territories, often with much violence. Thus did the Netherlands wage a long colonial war to gain control over Aceh (in the North of Sumatra)” (p. 242). Additionally, *Memo* pays attention to the consequences of imperialism on native populations in Asia and Africa. The authors write that the consequences varied depending on the colonial policies, which differed per country. They explain that some European powers, including the Netherlands in the East Indies, worked with indirect rule, whereas other powers, like France, used direct rule. Thus, this textbook acknowledges both the similarities and differences of European colonial rule.

Another consequence named by the authors is that “native populations of colonies were forced to participate in the economic activities of the mother country” (p. 244). They use the cultivation system as an example of such a policy. In contrast to *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*, the authors of *Memo* focus on the consequences for the indigenous population rather than the colonisers:

This system was at the expense of rice production, as the farmers henceforth had to use 20% of their land to cultivate colonial products. The farmers could be used for their labour on the plantations for a maximum of 66 days per year and were given a meagre wage in return. Famines happened as a result, whilst the profits were used to build railways in the Netherlands (p. 244).

Thus, *Memo* challenges the narrative that Dutch imperialism helped Indonesia by emphasising that the Netherlands was making large profits at the expense of the native population. *Memo* writes that the abolition of the cultivation system in 1870 “provided the population some relief” but that the new system remained exploitative, seeing as “the native populations of European colonies in Asia and Africa continued to participate in the European controlled world economy at an increasing rate” (p. 244). In contrast to *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*, *Memo* thus frames this increased participation as another form of exploitation rather than an impressive development and underscores that the European powers controlled the market.

*Memo* has also included a historical thinking exercise related to colonial violence in Indonesia. In this section, the authors introduce several sources on the actions of a former Prime Minister of the Netherlands, Hendrik Colijn, who served in the KNIL during a campaign on the Indonesian island of Lombok, which resulted in many civilian casualties. In this exercise, pupils are asked to make judgments about Colijn's actions and whether they can be considered war crimes. While the same pitfalls discussed in the exercise on Indonesia in *Sprekend Verleden* exist, *Memo* has provided a better context of Dutch colonial policy in the main body of text, thus making it more likely for pupils to make well-considered judgments on the topic.

### **Decolonisation**

As argued by Weiner (2014a) and Houben (2000), Dutch history textbooks have historically either ignored the violence around the colonial wars in Indonesia or presented it through a benevolent narrative. However, all three textbooks demonstrate a partial break from this tendency. The Dutch government used the term 'police actions' instead of 'war' to craft the narrative that only a handful of Indonesian terrorist revolutionaries were disturbing the peace (Buettner, 2016). In the researched textbooks, when discussing 'police actions', it is always written within quotation marks to emphasise the controversial nature of the term. However, there are also discrepancies between how the textbooks cover Indonesian independence.

The authors of *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* mention the excessive violence perpetrated by Dutch troops, giving the example of the village of Rawagede, in which the troops looked for guerilla fighters in 1947: "They found nothing, but after an interrogation, they still shot all male inhabitants" (p. 178). Thus, this textbook challenges the colonial narrative of the Netherlands acting as protectors of the "suffering 'poor peasants' against dangerous revolutionaries, that justified the colonial war at that time" (Buettner, 2016, p. 93).

To a certain extent, this narrative suggests a critical engagement with a historically silenced past. For a long time, the Dutch public distanced itself from the excessive violence in Indonesia, mainly because of the memories of World War II, seeing as many Indonesians, including Sukarno, questioned how the

Netherlands could justify such violence in light of their experiences under Nazi occupation (Buettner, 2016). However, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*' use of "excessive violence" instead of war crime suggests a remaining unease with coming to terms with the colonial violence perpetrated by the Dutch after World War II (p. 178). As stated by Buettner (2016), the use of the term 'excesses' to describe the Dutch military's violent conduct, rather than 'war crimes', was introduced by the Dutch government in 1969, after a Dutch documentary labelled the Dutch violent actions in Indonesia as 'war crimes'. The Dutch government "settled on the euphemistic term 'excesses'" to downplay the extent of the wrongdoings and avoid any association with the Nazi atrocities, which were commonly linked to war crimes (Buettner, 2016, p. 435). Moreover, the Dutch government portrayed the 'excessive violence' as perpetrated by individuals deviating from the ordinary standard rather than intrinsic to the colonial system (Ibid.).

The latter point is also visible in *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*. Whereas, according to the textbook, the Nazis "were guilty of atrocities everywhere" and "the Japanese acted with ruthless brutality" and "committed war crimes on a large scale", the Dutch *troops* "sometimes responded with excessive violence" (p. 166, 167, 178). Thus, not only does the textbook refer to Dutch troops as the individual perpetrators of violence in contrast to the Japanese as an entire nation, but the authors also downplay the violence by describing it as something that only happened on a few occasions rather than a systemic occurrence part of the colonial war.

*Memo* challenges the benevolent narrative concerning Dutch conduct in Indonesia by emphasising that one of the primary reasons for the refusal of European powers, including the Netherlands, to grant independence was the belief that they "desperately needed the profits from the overseas territories to rebuild their countries" (p. 350). The authors also state that while the Dutch government called the military operations 'police actions', "they were in reality a part of a horrific decolonisation war, where around 5000 Dutch militaries died and no less than 160,000 Indonesians" (p. 350). Thus, the textbook recognises the violence as systematic to the colonial endeavour to maintain the territory and acknowledges the number of

lives lost. However, the authors do not give specific examples of violence, nor do they directly define the violence as war crimes either.

The textbook does include a two-page exercise on the ‘police actions’ and colonial war, where the authors invite the pupils to research whether there has been a change in perception around the conduct of the Netherlands during the decolonisation period in Indonesia by using several sources. One of these sources is part of an article by a popular Dutch newspaper that talks about the apology made by the Netherlands in 2013 for war crimes during the colonial war. However, as the article says, the apology concerned specific cases of executions rather than a general apology for the police actions. Thus, *Memo*’s narrative reflects a willingness to engage in the debate around colonial violence and the hesitation to directly define the Dutch violent acts during the colonial war as war crimes.

Interestingly, while *Sprekend Verleden* pays much attention to the decolonisation process of countries in Africa and India, the decolonisation of the East Indies is only given a couple of sentences of information. The authors dedicate a couple of sentences to the colonial war in Indonesia, though not in the chapter on colonisation and decolonisation, but in a chapter called ‘The rise of Asia’:

After the Second World War, the Dutch went to Indonesia with the firm conviction to restore their colonial rule quickly. That proved to be wrong. Too much had changed in Indonesia. In late 1949, the country gained independence after a futile military intervention (p. 373).

Thus, the authors do not provide information on the violence that accompanied the war and separate the military intervention from the context of colonisation and decolonisation. This creates a further distance between the war and Dutch history and suggests that there is little connection between the two countries. The separation frustrates an understanding of the impact of the colonisation and decolonisation of Indonesia on the Netherlands and makes it more difficult for pupils to grasp that the Netherlands was, for several centuries, a colonial power with overseas territories in different parts of the world.

### **The West and the East**

Furthermore, a general disregard for Suriname and the Dutch Antilles is noticeable in the textbooks. Both *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* and *Sprekend Verleden* do not divide any attention to the decolonisation processes

of the former West Indian colonies. Only *Memo* discusses Suriname and Dutch Antilles, albeit briefly, in the context of colonial independence. The authors write that “[Suriname and the Dutch Antilles] lost their status as colony in 1954 and became part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, but with their own government” (p. 351). Moreover, they state that when Suriname became fully independent from the Netherlands in 1974, many Surinamese immigrated to the Netherlands. Thus, the authors have included postcolonial migration as part of the decolonisation narrative, recognising this migration as a consequence of Dutch overseas expansion. Within the same section, *Memo* also discusses the status of the Dutch Antillean islands. However, the colonial policies used to control the Suriname and the Caribbean islands after slavery was abolished are not mentioned in this textbook either. By constraining the discussion on Dutch rule in the West Indies to slavery, the textbooks fail to convey that oppression and exploitation within Suriname and the Dutch Antilles continued after abolitionism (Ramsøedh, 2018).

This near omission of the West Indies in the history textbooks reflects the assertion of scholars like Wekker (2016), Ramsøedh (2018) and Buettner (2016), who argue that the colonies in the East Indies have been given more weight, both in past and present. This is because the West Indies tend to be associated with slavery, which is nowadays difficult to spin into a positive narrative, while the East Indies remain in the Dutch collective memory connected to the Dutch Golden Age.

Nevertheless, the authors of *Sprekend Verleden* do address the lack of Surinamese and Antillean representation themselves, which suggests a level of awareness. In a rubric where they discuss who determines the content of Dutch history textbooks, the authors state that the Dutch colonies are discussed in detail in their textbook for the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. However, as the analysed textbook is the one that is used for the final standardised exam, and thus, the last textbook history pupils use before leaving high school, it is unfortunate that they decided against including the information in this textbook. This suggests that the Western Dutch colonies are not deemed an important topic in the central exam and, in turn, not essential to Dutch history. The authors criticise the Dutch government for this, stating that “the Dutch government mainly controls the content of history education” (p. 313). However, this criticism fails to recognise

textbook authors' significant degree of freedom in the Netherlands. While the Dutch colonies might not explicitly be named as an exam subject, European expansion, modern imperialism and decolonisation are all named as a characteristic development that pupils need to know for the exam. Therefore, the minimal attention given to Surinamese and Antillean decolonisation was a choice made by the authors, especially considering that the topic is addressed by *Memo*.

### **Postcolonialism**

*Memo* addresses the economic deficit of colonised countries post-decolonisation, writing, “Around 1970, almost all countries in the world were decolonised. But that did not mean that the problems in these countries were solved” (p. 352). In the same paragraph, *Memo* also introduced the term ‘neocolonialism’, defining it as “When rich countries [through economic power] indirectly continue to rule and exploit former colonies” (p. 352). This textbook moreover acknowledges that while Western companies attain vast profits from trade with African countries, “[j]ust like in the past, the majority of the population misses out on the profits, except for the political elite” (p. 352). By including a paragraph on neocolonialism, the authors of *Memo* underline that the unequal relationship formed during colonialism continues today and hereby seem to suggest that Western countries are at least partially responsible for economic problems in former colonies. However, the discussion is limited to the economic dimension, excluding conversations around culture and knowledge.

In contrast to *Memo*, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* does not address the existence of neocolonialism.

Instead, the authors write that:

Decolonisation put an end to the Western hegemony in the world. Because of their economic power and sometimes also through their old bonds, Western countries did maintain influence in what started to be called the ‘third world’, but they could no longer force their will. They were often powerless, even in weak and poor African countries (p. 179).

The authors then use the case of US troops that failed to end a civil war in Somalia in 1993 as the single example of Western powerlessness. Thus, the authors downplay the economic, political and cultural influence the Western world still has on former colonies. They suggest that decolonisation ended Western hegemony, even though authors like Wekker (2016) and Araújo and Maeso (2012a) argue that Western



systems of thinking remain dominant in the world, as does the capitalist economic system. The textbook fails to acknowledge colonialism's impact on contemporary power relations in the world.

While *Sprekend Verleden* extensively covers the decolonisation process of the Middle East, South America, India and Africa, it pays little attention to the long-term effects of colonialism. The textbook does have a section called 'The Problems of Independent Africa South of the Sahara', in which the authors discuss political and economic hardships. Still, the role that the West played in creating these problems is minimised. For instance, the authors acknowledge that one of the issues many African states face is that their borders do not align with the habitus of various peoples. However, instead of acknowledging that a Western system of thinking dictated these borders, the authors write that "[the borders were] accepted by the Africans in almost all states when they gained independence" (p. 264). The textbook does address that the West had a significant interest in maintaining influence in the African continent during the Cold War, but the contemporary relations between the West and the Global South go unaddressed.

In summary, this analysis demonstrates that two of the three Dutch history textbooks compartmentalise the violent nature of Dutch slavery and colonial history away from discussions on the formation of the Dutch state, in particular in the context of the Golden Age, which relies more on narratives of the Netherlands as a trading nation. Furthermore, Suriname and the Dutch Antilles are mostly absent from the discussion on colonialism and modern imperialism, apart from sections on the slave trade. Similarly, the decolonisation process is discussed mainly in relation to Indonesia, whereas Suriname and the Dutch Antilles receive far less attention. Based on the analysis, the textbooks have shown various degrees of readiness to recognise the wrongs that have taken place in the Dutch colonial past. However, there is still an unwillingness to treat those wrongs as part of Dutch history, in turn obstructing the idea that this past remains influential in the Dutch present.

## 7. Colonised Perspectives and Agency

As stated by Jensen (2020), describing the Europeans as complex, while colonial subjects are treated as homogenous and incapable of development, is a common theme in colonial narratives. The colonial discourses that feed into European superiority have served to erase the agency and labour of peoples of non-European descent. The idea that colonised subjects lack agency enforces the idea that they are primitive and need Western intervention. The following chapter will thus analyse whether the textbooks take a predominantly European perspective, or if they also pay attention to the perspectives of colonised peoples and attribute them agency.

### **Colonial Resistance**

One important way of analysing whether the textbooks attribute agency to colonised people is in terms of whether they pay attention to colonial resistance (Van Nieuwenhusyse, 2018). *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* discusses resistance to colonialism and slavery in several chapters. In a passage where *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* discusses the cruel treatment that the enslaved received on the plantations, the authors address resistance to slavery in two sentences:

Sometimes, the slaves rebelled, but they were no match for the modern weapons of the white people. A number of slaves did manage to escape and build a new existence in the tropical rain forests, such as the Surinamese Marrons (p. 118).

While this passage attributes agency to the enslaved to a certain extent through the mention of rebelling and escapes, the idea of rebellion, as described by the authors, is limited. The textbook does not include any reference to large slave revolts. By not mentioning slave revolts, the passage makes it seem as if, apart from some running away, the enslaved never managed to actively resist the institution of slavery. This feeds into the narrative of the enslaved Africans as largely passive in opposition to the all-powerful Europeans.

However, academic scholarship on slavery in the Americas tells a different story. Nimako and Willemsen (2011) state that there have been sixty major slave rebellions recorded in the Caribbean, including organised revolts. The textbook also fails to mention the Haitian Revolution, which not only was

the largest and most successful slave revolt known to history, but it also influenced other slave revolts in the Dutch colonies, such as the slave revolt of 1795 on Curaçao (Oostindie, 2011).

The limited attention *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* grants to enslaved peoples continues in the discussion on the end of slavery. The authors accredit the abolition of slavery to the abolitionist movement, which they describe as “inspired by Christianity and the Enlightenment” (p. 118). The textbook is critical of the Dutch role in abolitionism, addressing that the Netherlands was one of the last countries to abolish slavery and that Dutch people did not care about the matter. However, the textbook attributes the English as the instigators of the movement, while the involvement of black people is downplayed. The only person of colour mentioned in relation to abolitionism is the manumitted slave Olaudah Equiano, whose autobiography is stated to be “an important stimulant for abolitionism” (p. 119). However, his name is mentioned in a demarcated box, outside of the main body of the text, which focuses on the efforts of white people in the movement, such as Adam Smith, Abraham Lincoln and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Thus, this textbook fails to include the role of black people in the central narrative around abolitionism, relegating the story of Equiano to the sideline.

The limited agency *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* attributes to enslaved and black people becomes especially evident compared to the other textbooks. *Memo*, for instance, includes a critical debate on the role of abolitionism in the end of slavery in a subparagraph titled “The success of abolitionism only?” (p.221). In this paragraph, the authors note that traditional historiography accredits abolitionists with the end of the slave trade and slavery and paints slaves as merely accepting their position, but state that this view is Eurocentric. The authors then describe several ways in which the enslaved resisted. They mention that 10% of the Surinamese enslaved managed to run away and create their own societies in the rainforest. They furthermore write that slave revolts were scarce and rarely successful but follow this up by stating that the fear of a possible uprising still controlled the lives of slave owners. Additionally, they mention that “ex-slaves played an important role in the abolitionist movement” (p. 221). However, they do not give any examples of individuals and their exact roles, whereas two white abolitionists are accredited.

The paragraph goes on to note that with small acts of resistance, such as stealing, feigning illness and executing their work poorly, the enslaved could force the plantation owner to agree to concessions like shortening the working hours or providing more food. Additionally, the authors introduce the subject of passive resistance, writing that the enslaved resisted by maintaining their own culture and identity:

Through stories and myths, they preserved their memories of their lives in Africa. Among the slaves, who originated from different African peoples, a new shared form of African religion arose, for which singing, dance and ancestral worship were very important (p. 221).

Thus, *Memo* attributes agency to the enslaved in several ways. The textbook showcases the different ways the enslaved resisted but also acknowledges that these forms of resistance affected the course of slavery by instilling a constant presence of fear of revolt and pressuring the plantation owners into making concessions. Additionally, the authors note the creation of a new culture by the enslaved, in turn emphasising their role as active agents in shaping their society despite the constraints of plantation life.

Similarly, *Sprekend Verleden* offers a different perspective to *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*, writing that resistance was difficult due to European firearms and fast ships, but that “Still the slaves and colonised often resisted” (p. 101). Like *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*, *Sprekend Verleden* acknowledges that resistance was not an easy task, but in contrast to the former, which treated resistance as a rare phenomenon, the latter states that it happened often. *Sprekend Verleden* also paints a more nuanced picture of the abolitionist movement by paying attention to the role of black people in it. The textbook emphasises that “Both white and black people were members” (p. 332). The authors moreover include a brief note on black people’s perception of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Whereas the other textbooks hail the book as the reason for the end of Dutch slavery, *Sprekend Verleden* discusses how many black people in the US regarded Uncle Tom as a curse word, as he presented a stereotype of a docile black person who accepts his subordinate position to white people.

Additionally, the *Sprekend Verleden* takes two pages to discuss the different views on agency present in the Netherlands as an exercise for pupils. The introduction to this exercise reads:

In the Netherlands, the ways in which slavery and the slave trade are written and spoken about, and today's effects, diverge. The views in this exercise on slave trade and slavery are composed based on what is available to read and listen to in our country (p.116).

Then, the textbook presents two diverging visions. The first vision offers a view that emphasises African resistance to slavery and the violence that was used to try to control the enslaved. The second vision starts with the ubiquity argument, which entails that slavery and the slave trade were normal phenomena, and then writes that slaves were generally treated well and that some slaves even protected their masters against Marrons. Regarding the discussion of punishments slaves received, this view says that we must consider that at that time, punishments in Europe were also horrific. The end of slavery is attributed to white English and Dutch abolitionists, writing that “Europeans were the first to take action in the abolishment of slavery” (p. 117).

The first view follows the anti-Eurocentric narrative, which focuses on the agency of the enslaved, while the second follows a Eurocentric narrative, which trivialises slavery and emphasises the benevolence of white masters. On the one hand, the exercise of comparing these views invites pupils to engage with these different views critically. However, the authors refrain from properly contextualising these views within the debate on African agency and the colonial benevolence narrative needed to analyse them critically. Instead, it is up to the pupils to debate the views. What is lacking here is a critical discussion of how these competing narratives are produced. As stated by Araújo and Maeso (2012b), the idea of multi-perspectivity is a strategy used in liberal democracies to accommodate and celebrate the varying interpretations of history. However, what the authors of *Sprekend Verleden* do not acknowledge with this multi-perspectivity is that the mere inclusion of a different perspective does not eliminate the hegemony of certain narratives.

In this case, as the second view represents a narrative that scholars like Wekker (2016) and Nimako et al. (2014) have identified as dominant in Dutch public discourse, the two perspectives do not stand on equal footing. The second view has historically been perpetuated by white Dutch scholars, while the first view is mostly asserted by Dutch scholars of colour or Caribbean scholars (Hira, 2012). Thus, the second

view reflects a culturally hegemonic belief that the dominant culture has promulgated, while the first view can be categorised as a counterhegemonic position. Therefore, the authors, on the one hand, acknowledge the existence of the counterhegemonic narrative, which could potentially delegitimise the hegemonic view. However, on the other hand, the authors risk legitimising the second view by presenting it as a valid opinion rather than a narrative rooted in the colonial ideology of superiority.

### **Agency and Revolution**

The differences between the textbooks regarding agency are also visible in the various ways they discuss the Haitian Revolution. While *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* omits the Haitian Revolution from its narrative, *Memo* allocates an entire page to the Haitian slave revolt and places it within the context of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution and ideas of freedom and equality. The authors write that it soon became apparent that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen did not regard black people as part of their definition of man or citizen. The textbook then explains that a massive successful slave rebellion commenced: “In the yearslong war that followed, the slaves defeated the British and French army. The freed slave Toussaint L’Ouverture led the slaves and proved a brilliant general and negotiator” (p.218). This textbook then explains how the revolution struck fear into the colonisers and created hope for the enslaved that a successful revolt was possible. By bringing it into the context of the Enlightenment, the textbook breaks with the Eurocentric view to some extent, as it demonstrates active resistance and challenges European superiority.

*Sprekend Verleden* addresses the Haitian slave rebellion on two occasions: in relation to the abolition of slavery in the French colonies and the colonisation and decolonisation of Latin America. The authors say that the enslaved, led by Toussaint Louverture, commenced a revolt that “the colonial rulers ... could not defeat” (p. 250). However, while the inclusion of the Haitian slave revolts in *Memo* and *Sprekend Verleden* challenges the Eurocentric narrative of black passivity in part, the accounts remain Eurocentric to some extent. Firstly, the textbooks speak only of a rebellion, not a revolution. This diminishes the Haitian Revolution's impact on the world in the ways it revolutionised debates on emancipation and the meaning

of citizenship (Cooper, 2005). The revolution created the first black sovereign country in the colonial world and sparked debates about slavery and civil rights in other colonies and Europe (Ibid.). Additionally, the narratives used to describe the Haitian revolution suggest that the revolution was solely inspired by the French Revolution. This implies that the enslaved needed the Western ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity before they could muster up the will to resist French subjugation (King et al., 2020).

### **Agency and Imperialism**

In terms of resistance against imperialism, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* underlines that, like resistance to slavery, it did not happen often. The authors write that “The African peoples, with their arrows, spears, and simple fire weapons, were powerless against the Europeans with their machine guns” (p. 143). While this statement is not factually wrong, the authors portray Africans as monolithic and weak instead of addressing the diverse ways in which Africans learned to navigate colonial subjugation. This creates a narrative of Africans as fragile vis-à-vis superior Europeans.

*Sprekend Verleden* breaks with the colonial narrative of treating the colonised as a monolithic group without a history by starting the textbook’s chapter on colonisation and decolonisation with several paragraphs on various cultures in America, Africa and Asia. The statecraft, trade, religion and science of these different cultures are discussed, emphasising the existence of flourishing cultures before the arrival of Europeans. *Sprekend Verleden* also brings a more balanced account by highlighting that some African rulers supported the colonial regime and “also profited from the trade,” while other rulers resisted (p. 243). This account again demonstrates the diversity of colonised subjects and discusses how they actively navigated the colonial system. When talking about imperial resistance, this textbook gives various examples, like Sudan and the Zulu. Additionally, the authors state that “In other territories, the Africans initially did not resist, but that changed once they realised what the white people wanted” (p. 261). They write that “the military dominance of the whites was too considerable. The Africans went looking for a different form of resistance that had a larger chance of succeeding. That became the nationalist movements.” (p. 261). Thus, *Sprekend Verleden* acknowledges that the Europeans were militarily superior

but portrays Africans as resistant and innovative by underscoring the various ways in which they confronted colonial subjugation.

The main focus of the paragraph on imperial resistance in *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* is on the rise of nationalism. The authors write that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, unrest in the East Indian colony was uncommon and that “most Indonesians were friendly and subservient” (p. 162). They write that this changed once a nationalist movement emerged that strived for independence. The authors note that:

[Through European education] [colonial subjects] came into contact with Western values of freedom and equality. They also became aware that these did not apply in the colony. That made them rebellious. And they connected that rebelliousness to another Western discovery, nationalism (p. 162).

Thus, the authors imply that the rise of Indonesian nationalism was an indirect consequence of the ethical policy as if Dutch investments in education alone fuelled resistance against colonial rule. This not only ignores long-term oppression and exploitation as causes for rebellion, but also various examples of resistance that were common before World War II. This interpretation of imperial resistance is Eurocentric, as it centres Western ideas as integral to the resistance, rather than the self-awareness of colonised subjects themselves. This again feeds into the narrative that colonised people needed Western ideas to criticise the colonial regime, while in fact, they had resisted this regime long before, and used nationalism as a new way to fight colonialism by using Western ideas against the colonial power.

Similarly, *Memo* also highlights the rise of nationalism as the start of colonial resistance, writing that: “Resistance against imperial subjugation began not only in Vietnam. In other colonies too, the nationalist movement arose” (p. 327). The authors also name Western education as a key cause for the rise in nationalism, writing that it “brought them into contact with Western ideas of democracy and nationalism” (p. 229). However, the authors acknowledge that economic exploitation was another cause for unrest, but do not provide examples of resistance before the rise of nationalism in Asia. Thus, this textbook’s account of imperial resistance is primarily presented through a Western-centred perspective.

In summary, the extent to which the textbooks make an effort to demonstrate the agency of the enslaved and colonised varies. *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* employs a limited view of resistance, considering



only armed resistance. The omission of passive and cultural forms of resistance renders the colonised subject largely passive. Contrarily, *Memo* and *Sprekend Verleden* focus more on the various ways enslaved and colonised people resisted colonisation. However, what the textbooks have in common is a lack of representation of colonised subjects as people able to create ideas and movements that impact the Western world as well, as is visible in the textbooks' (lack of) discussion on the Haitian Revolution and centrality given to Western values in shaping awareness of independence.

## 8. Colonialism, Slavery and Race

Several scholars have argued that racism is generally treated as a non-issue in the Netherlands (Wekker, 2016; Hoving, 2014; Weiner, 2014b). The next chapter will explore whether the history textbooks draw connections between colonialism, slavery and present-day phenomena, such as racism and xenophobia.

### **Colonialism and Racial Categorisation**

All three textbooks state that slavery had occurred for decades before the Europeans arrived in Africa. *Memo* and *Sprekend Verleden* do underscore that the European demand for slaves increased the hunt for slaves by African and Arabic slave traders, as well as wars among Africans. However, the textbooks do not address how, with the Transatlantic slave trade, “race became a major organising principle of slavery” (Nimako & Willemsen, 2011, p. 171). Numerous scholars have argued that racial categorisation is central to colonialism, imperialism and slavery (Araújo & Maeso, 2012; Cooper, 2005; Goldberg, 1993). Race consciousness became central to the scientific revolution and enlightenment, with the concept of race becoming more explicitly and concisely applied. As stated by Goldberg (1993), “While slavery may be explained largely (though not nearly exhaustively) in economic terms, one must insist in asking why it was at this time that racial difference came to define fitness for enslavement, and why some kinds of racial difference rather than others” (p. 206). However, the textbooks omit such a discussion from their narrative on the Transatlantic slave trade.

While the textbooks name domination central to the colonial relationship, they downplay the significance of difference, with race as its principal marker. In the context of slavery, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* and *Memo* discuss how religion was used to justify the Dutch participation in the slave trade through the Biblical story of Noah and Ham. The story goes that Noah cursed all descendants of his son Ham, whom many Christians in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century believed to be Africans. Thus, the justification of slavery of Africans in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century is linked to biblical passages. However, the textbooks do not delve deeper into how colonial powers further racialised Africans and other peoples to fit

their colonial objectives through scientific racism, which began to spread during the Enlightenment. Additionally, this racialised thinking is demarcated as something that happened in the past but is no longer occurring in the present. The authors of *Memo* write:

Africans were not fully deemed human beings; they were heathens and uncivilised. They could not take care of themselves and needed a tough hand. Therefore, Africans would be better off with Christian masters. These arguments we now find 'racist', but then they were very normal (p. 219).

Here, the authors acknowledge the use of stereotypes as the justification of European subjugation but again fail to address this in a broader framework of racialisation by not explaining how these stereotypes became linked to the skin colour of Africans. Additionally, writing that this way of thinking was normal back then implies that racism and the notions of Africans as inferior are in the past and are no longer normal. At the same time, the passage also denies the construction of racism at that time by implying that calling these stereotypes racist would be anachronistic.

Out of the three textbooks, *Sprekend Verleden* pays the most attention to racism during colonialism and directly connects skin colour to colonial domination:

Most Europeans thought they were superior to Africans. According to them, the whites were more 'civilised', and black customs were 'barbaric'. Everywhere where Europeans and Africans were together, racism unfolded in countless ways. It could vary from giving a European name to black servants because they found their African name too complicated, to whip lashes if the European judged a performance poorly. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, racism expressed itself in the form of oppression. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the paternalistic approach gained the upper hand (p. 260).

Here, the authors give various examples of how racism expressed itself and address how racism changed over time. However, nothing is said about how these racist approaches have continued or changed today, in turn indicating that it is a past phenomenon.

*Sprekend Verleden* is the only textbook that comments on "the strict division between various populations" that dominated colonial rule on the plantations (p. 246). The authors write that European whites formed the top layer and the native population the middle layer, while the African slaves constituted the bottom layer and were not recognised as human beings with rights. They also mention that the position of the descendants of European-African parents, called 'mullatos', depended on whether their white father

formally recognised them. However, the authors state that one's position depended on "origin" rather than skin colour, herewith avoiding a discussion on racial hierarchy (p. 246).

Similarly, all three textbooks fail to make a connection between colonialism, racism and the discourse on citizenship and human rights. According to Cooper (2005), colonising powers were in a constant balancing struggle between incorporating more land and people into their empires and differentiating the groups of peoples within their territories. A racial hierarchy was imposed to create a distinction between the civilised national core and colonial subordinates to justify colonial rule and expropriation. When the debates on rights and equality emerged in Europe during the Enlightenment, the ideology of racial hierarchy became more influential. As stated by Mahmud (1998), the modern discourse of racial hierarchy enabled the reconciliation of the colonisation of certain peoples with the ideals of freedom and equality by deeming some races incapable of freedom and progress. However, the textbooks largely disconnect the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment from colonialism and the racial hierarchy. Instead, the Enlightenment is presented as progress, highlighting political Western thinkers like Kant and Locke, who advocated for freedom and tolerance. The abolitionist movement is depicted as being inspired by enlightened ideas, suggesting that slavery was the antithesis of the Enlightenment rather than justified through its discourse.

Similarly, when the textbooks discuss the creation of the rule of law, democracy and the constitution in the Netherlands, they omit any discussion on how the colonised subjects were excluded from these developments and, in turn, were not considered Dutch despite being imperial subjects. *Memo* is the only textbook to indicate that slaves were not included in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen presented during the French Revolution, writing that "Soon it became clear that black people did not fall under the definition of 'man'" (p. 218). However, a discussion on how racial categories were shaped through the Enlightenment and how racial hierarchies impacted the position of colonised subjects regarding the Dutch constitution is not present in this textbook either. In their discussion of the implementation of a new, liberal Dutch constitution in 1848, none of the textbooks mention how "all native populations in the

colonies were exempted from any political rights associated with Dutch citizenship” (Van Stipriaan, 2020, p. 180).

Generally, the textbooks bring up racism outside of the Dutch colonial context. *Memo* discusses racism more thoroughly in the context of the United States. In a paragraph about the United States, the authors write about racial segregation: “The norm was white and protestant, and whoever deviated from that had a hard time: they had fewer opportunities in society, was disadvantaged or even discriminated against. Especially the African American population had to deal with that” (p. 300). That people of colour also faced discrimination in the Netherlands is not discussed in the textbook, nor that white was also, and still is, the norm in the Netherlands. It reflects the common misperception in the Netherlands that ‘whiteness’ or ‘institutional racism’ are concepts irrelevant to the Dutch context. This supports claims by scholars like Wekker (2020) and Nimako et al. (2014) that the Netherlands treats racism as an American phenomenon. Through this narrative, the Netherlands is exempted from critical reflections on today’s effects of slavery and colonialism, as racism is not treated as something happening in our own country.

*Geschiedeniswerkplaats* does not bring up racism in the context of slavery and colonialism, but rather, in relation to the Nazis and the Holocaust. The textbook’s chapter on the Holocaust starts with the following warning:

Out of all historical events, the Holocaust is maybe the most horrific. It is also the most infamous example of genocide. More than anything else, the Shoah, as the Jews call the Holocaust, reminds us of what racism and genocide can lead to (p. 168).

Here, the authors use the Holocaust as a cautionary tale of what racism can lead to. While it functions as an important example, its use becomes problematic in light of the textbook’s complete omission of the effects of racism on colonised peoples. Thus, it suggests that the principal case of racism in Dutch collective memory is the Holocaust. As racism is equated with Nazism, it allows Dutch people to distance themselves from the phenomenon and induces a reluctance to acknowledge their own racist practices. As a victim of the Nazis, Dutch people could not possibly be similarly capable of racism themselves. While the textbook mentions that “a small minority” of the Dutch population collaborated with the Germans, racism is treated

as something introduced through Nazi rule that was solved as the Netherlands was liberated (p. 170). As stated by Wekker (2016), “The memory of the Holocaust as the epitome and model of racist transgression in Europe erases the crimes that were perpetrated against the colonised for four centuries” (p. 4). Thus, racism remains segregated from the Dutch self-representation *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* constructs.

### **Race and Multiculturalism**

*Geschiedeniswerkplaats* does not critically reflect on racism in the Netherlands in their paragraph on the pluriform and multicultural society either. The authors write that racist incidents increased due to growing migration to Europe in the 1990s but only use a German example. Additionally, this chapter employs the narrative of presenting Muslim immigrants as a problem. The authors write that most immigrants: “came from a traditional culture, where there, for example, is little understanding for the freedom of women and homosexuals in Europe. Most of them were moreover Muslim.” (p.193). Here, the authors present Muslims as ‘other’ and essentialise them as non-Dutch, incapable of integration because of their religion. In turn, the textbook constructs the Dutch identity as tolerant and free in opposition to the Muslim other who is traditional and unfree.

The way the textbook eludes addressing racism in Dutch society continues in this paragraph with a discussion on the tradition of *Zwarte Piet*, who is played by white people painting their faces black. The authors present *Zwarte Piet* and whether the tradition is racist as a debate in a demarcated box outside the text’s main body. On one side of the discussion, the authors place Surinamese and Antillean Dutch people, who “feel uncomfortable” by the tradition, while “others point out” that *Zwarte Piet* is no longer portrayed as a silly or scary character (p. 193). Additionally, the authors say that Americans are shocked by the tradition because it reminds them of blackface. The authors give two possible explanations for *Zwarte Piet*’s origin, which have nothing to do with racism and do not explain why *Zwarte Piet* wears an afro or has big red lips. By emphasising that it is Americans who believe *Zwarte Piet* constitutes blackface rather than Dutch people, it devalues the claim that *Zwarte Piet* poses a problem in the Netherlands. The discussion is also not linked to a continuity of racism that Surinamese and Antilleans face in the Netherlands. Thus, the

narrative undermines their feelings of discomfort, especially when their emotions are contrasted to ‘evidence’ provided by proponents of *Zwarte Piet* about his origin that omits his racist background. Notably, the authors do not mention academic research demonstrating the racist basis of the Dutch tradition (E.g. Wekker, 2016; Brienen, 2014). Thus, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* creates the narrative that critics of *Zwarte Piet* base their opinion on emotions, while the proponents' claim is grounded in research.

The narrative used in *Memo* differs from *Geschiedeniswerkplaats*, as the authors do not construct immigrants as problems but note that the majority has integrated successfully. Additionally, they write that “To find a place in society is made difficult because migrants are often confronted with exclusion and discrimination, for instance, when looking for work” (p. 369). While *Memo* recognises that immigrants are often excluded from Dutch society, the role of racism in this exclusion remains unaddressed, as the authors have opted to use the word discrimination instead. This again reflects a reluctance to talk of racism in a Dutch context, perpetuating the idea that it does not exist.

Multiculturalism in the Netherlands is not discussed in the main body of the text of *Sprekend Verleden*, but rather in an exercise on migration in the Netherlands. The textbook brings attention to the debate around the term *allochtoon*:

How can you lose this label? Never if you belong to the first generation, no matter how ‘integrated’ you have become? Or how Dutch you already were? How Dutch do you have to be? What is actually Dutch? Are children of mixed marriages half *allochtonen*? And are, in reality, many ‘*autochtonen*’ not more or less ‘*allochtoon*’? (p. 318).

With this passage, the authors raise some important questions about the use of the categories of *autochtoon* and *allochtoon*, and how and to whom these labels are ascribed. The authors highlight that “Many Indos and Surinamese, for example, have mastered the Dutch language and other aspects of our culture better than ‘*autochtonen*’ and consider the Netherlands just as much their home as their country of origin” (p. 318). While the authors thus demonstrate the ambiguity of the binary categorisation and challenge the practice of othering Indonesians and Surinamese, they fail to acknowledge the role of race in determining the label of *allochtoon* or *autochtoon* (Wekker, 2016; Buettner, 2016; Bijl, 2012). Instead, the authors focus on culture and religion as the markers of the binary difference, representing a pattern noted by scholars

such as Wekker (2016) and Ghorashi (2014) to talk about ethnicity instead of race. This demonstrates that, while racial categorisation has had a lasting impact on the Dutch cultural archive, the centrality of whiteness to Dutch identity remains unrecognised (Wekker, 2016). This disregard also shows how colonial violence in the form of racial hierarchies stemming from the Dutch colonial past is not part of the Dutch collective memory.

*Sprekend Verleden* does focus on postcolonial migrants in the same exercise. The exercise includes four rubrics that provide information on important migration flows to the Netherlands: Indo-Dutch and Moluccans, Surinamese and Antilleans, Turks and Moroccans and political and economic asylum seekers. In the discussion of Indo-Dutch migration, the authors state,

From 1945 to 1962, 180,000 Indo-Europeans (also known as Indisch Dutch or Indos, the offspring of Dutch fathers and Indonesian mothers) left Indonesia and came to the Netherlands ... The exodus of these ‘repatriates’ resulted from the decolonisation and the subsequent conflict (p. 318).

The authors write that their assimilation went “virtually soundless” due to their knowledge of Dutch and good educational background (Ibid.). This is contrasted to the Moluccans, who came to the Netherlands after having fought in the KNIL and “lived separated from the rest of Dutch society” (Ibid.). In their discussion on the differences in integration between these groups, the authors leave out any mention of race.

The notion that the integration of the first generation of Indisch Dutch went ‘virtually soundless’ is, as stated by Captain (2014), a fabrication used to portray Indos as “the prime example of successful integration” in contrast to the current problem with Muslims (p. 60). However, while within the colonial system, Indos were, as long as they were recognised by a white parent, not differentiated from white people, they were racialised as ‘other’ once they migrated to the Netherlands. The Dutch authorities tried to prevent them from coming, construing them as “rooted in the East Indies ... incapable of assimilation” (Captain, 2014, p. 57). Once repatriation proved inevitable due to the further deterioration of Indonesian-Dutch relations, the Dutch government altered their policy. Indos were given a special course to prepare them for Dutch society, which white repatriates were exempted from. This textbook’s narrative of Indisch integration



silences the traumatic experience of first-generation Indisch Dutch who felt forced to give up their culture (Captain, 2014).

A similar narrative is used to portray Surinamese immigration. The authors write:

In Suriname, there was (and is) good education in the own and the Dutch culture. Therefore, the Surinamese migrants arrived in an environment that was in many ways familiar... And most found jobs at all levels, for example, in politics, from ambassador to member of parliament, and in the hospital, from nurse to surgeon (p. 319).

The authors emphasise the ease with which Surinamese migrants integrated into Dutch society, but once again, this narrative ignores the realities of many Surinamese Dutch who dealt with racial discrimination upon their arrival and long after (Wekker, 2016). As stated by Buettner (2016), even middle-class arrivals were regarded as second-class citizens and were kept at arm's length from mainstream Dutch society. The Surinamese were positioned as prone to criminality and laziness, and their social, economic and educational disadvantages were justified based on Surinamese lacking the Dutch attributes of rationality and civility (Ibid.). The public scrutiny towards the Surinamese has lessened in recent years as Muslims have become the centre of public concern, but their disadvantaged position in comparison to white Dutch continues (Ibid.). One could read the text in *Sprekend Verleden* as a positive attempt to emphasise the Dutchness of Surinamese. However, by ignoring racial discrimination in favour of a romanticised narrative, the authors disregard the reality of racism in Dutch society.

In contrast to the Indisch Dutch and Surinamese, the authors construe Turkish and Moroccan immigration as a problem. They write that:

In contrast to Indonesian and Surinamese migrants, most Turkish and Moroccan immigrants had had little education ... Both Turkish and Moroccans are Muslims. Both groups came from the countryside, where traditional and orthodox views dominated (p. 319).

Thus, the authors paint the narrative that Surinamese and Indisch Dutch integration succeeded due to their closer resemblance to Dutch identity, while Turkish and Moroccan integration is difficult due to their traditional views. The authors ignore the role that Dutch government policies, public perception of Muslims and discrimination play in the success of integration of Turkish and Moroccans.

The textbook's narrative of Surinamese and Indisch Dutch migration encapsulates how who is considered Dutch changes over time, and how race as a floating signifier dictates the cultural identity of Dutchness. Indos and Surinamese have been constructed as non-Dutch in the past, while their Dutchness is now emphasised and celebrated in this textbook and broader public discourse, in contrast to Muslims who are excluded from the Dutch identity through a portrayal that essentialises them as different. Acknowledging the racialisation and ostracisation of Indos and Surinamese when they first arrived would challenge the narrative of Dutch identity as tolerant and open, and also refute the notion of Indos as exemplary immigrants that is used to further other Muslims from Dutch identity today.

### **The Social Relevance of Race**

The authors of *Sprekend Verleden* do address the effects of the slave trade and slavery on today's society, but again do so in a debate as an exercise for pupils rather than in the main body of the text. This time, however, the authors take a clear stance on which view is correct, writing that:

In the last decennia, the debate in the Netherlands on how our society should handle the past slave trade and slavery has been derailed. In their vision, radical activists, also known as black-and-white thinkers, declare their opinion holy and vilify opponents in the media instead of facing them in an open debate. In this exercise, the authors of *Sprekend Verleden* are going to debate these black-and-white thinkers (p. 308).

The authors call anti-racism activists 'radicals' and 'black-and-white thinkers', thereby delegitimising their criticism of the continuity of racism in Dutch society. The authors write that one of their issues with these activists is that if you disagree with them, you are immediately labelled a racist. Thus, the authors simplify the activists' grievances and lump all anti-racism activists together.

In this debate, *Sprekend Verleden* introduces the following definition of racism: "members of a specific ethnic group who feel superior to other members of an ethnic group. According to this description, racism can occur among all ethnic groups" (p. 308). Thus, the authors do not include systematic oppression in their definition and omit a discussion of institutional racism in the Netherlands. Instead, they emphasise that the 'black-and-white thinkers' are themselves racist against white people. In turn, the authors employ

the concept of reverse racism to shift blame. The effects of slavery on racial hierarchies are denied and even ridiculed:

The black-and-white thinkers have given their own meaning to [racism]. Slavery and the slave trade, according to them, are the original sin of white people based on racism. Only white people are, in their eyes, racists; all black and coloured people are victims. That was then the case and has not changed in the 150 years after the abolition (p. 309).

The authors construct their own version of the opinion of radical activists, as they do not actually give a platform to black activists or scholars who have a critical view of race relations in the Netherlands today. The narrative the authors have created around anti-racist activists perpetuates the idea that racism is not an issue in the Netherlands and that the people who argue otherwise are crying wolf. Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony strongly applies here. Through this 'debate', the non-black authors of *Sprekend Verleden* use their power as textbook writers to legitimise their opinion as common sense. At the same time, they construct a deviant opinion that they label as nonsensical.

The radical activists are painted as intolerant and unwilling to enter into debate. In this way, the authors frame them as un-Dutch, writing that "To debate and to respect the views of people who think differently is part of society for people who want to belong to it" (p.309). At the same time, the authors do not recognise the unwillingness of many Dutch people to discuss racism in the Netherlands, nor is there an awareness of the issues marginalised people face in voicing their opinions that counter the status quo. Instead, only the anti-racism activists are blamed for "derailing the debate" (p. 308). In this way, the textbook feeds into the Dutch master narrative of tolerance, freedom and democracy, while the anti-racism activists are construed as threatening Dutch tolerance.

The way in which the authors frame the idea that slavery has an effect on racism in the Netherlands today as a ridiculous and radical claim also reflects a broader pattern of Dutch views on racism. Hoving (2014) identifies this pattern as a "strong resistance to acknowledging the continuing force of patterns of discrimination that build on earlier colonial, racist discourses and practices" (p. 77). Additionally, by framing the oppositional voices as radical and intolerant, in contrast to the common-sense statements made by the authors, the textbook perpetuates the idea that the Netherlands and white Dutch people are innocent.

In this way, the authors also claim moral righteousness over the activists, who are painted as playing the victim by accusing the actual victim, the tolerant white Dutchman, of racism. The authors paint the narrative that these anti-racism activists' sole objective is to condemn all white people instead of wishing to dismantle harmful stereotypes that hamper their position as equals in Dutch society. In turn, the narrative constructs the tolerant white Dutch as the victims of the intolerant person of colour stuck in the past. Thus, the authors of *Sprekend Verleden* silence the historical roots of contemporary racial inequality in favour of perpetuating the dominant discourse on racism.

Another example that shows the social relevance of race is not recognised in the history textbooks is the refrainment from using the term '*tot slaaf gemaakt*' (enslaved) instead of the word *slaaf* (slave). The use of the concept is heavily debated in Dutch society, but also specifically in decolonial academia: while it is used by some scholars, others contest it. As stated by Nimako et al. (2014), this concept was introduced by the Afro-Dutch community as an act of epistemic disobedience to challenge the idea that these people were non-human and inherently conditioned to work as slaves. The Surinamese-Dutch anthropologist Aminata Cairo, however, argues that the word 'slave' serves as a reminder that people were deprived of all rights from the moment they were born, and that changing the word would soften the meaning (van Kempen, 2022).

The controversy surrounding the concept is also visible in the three textbooks. All three textbooks still use the term 'slave', but while *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* remains silent on the topic, *Memo* and *Sprekend Verleden* address the debate. The authors of *Memo* state that "the word 'slave' is disputed as the correct indication because it ignores the humanity of those who were victims of slavery" but give no further opinion (p. 222). The authors of *Sprekend Verleden* address the term in the same paragraph in which they debate the 'black-and-white thinkers'. They argue that the concept has "the implicit suggestion that white people were guilty" and that "it falsifies history" (p. 309). Thus, rather than describing the contested nature of the term, with arguments for and against it, the authors of *Sprekend Verleden* take a defensive tone in stating their opinion. They present the desire to blame white people for everything as the sole plight of anti-racism

activists instead of focusing on their wish to challenge a long history of historiography written from the perspective of white men, which focused on trade rather than human beings. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the concept, it has sparked an important debate on how the Dutch slavery past is told. However, the way in which the authors of *Sprekend Verleden* frame the debate silences the reason why scholars like Nimako and Willemsen (2011) have advocated for the change in word use in the first place.

In summary, the analysis of these textbooks demonstrates that racism is not considered an essential subject of Dutch history. The effects of colonialism and slavery on contemporary inequalities and systems of thinking are disregarded or even denied. Racism is treated as an American phenomenon, or associated with the Nazis, suggesting that it is not seen as a Dutch phenomenon. Instead, the narrative of Dutch society as tolerant perseveres, while two textbooks construe Muslims as the other.

## 9. Discussion

This thesis has demonstrated a paradox in the ways in which colonialism and its legacy are covered in the researched history textbooks. On the one hand, the textbooks recognise Dutch colonial misdeeds, but on the other hand, these misdeeds are segregated from national history by two out of three textbooks and a link between colonial history and racism remains neglected by all.

History textbooks are inherently political, and thus, an important question to ask is in which direction they lean. Due to the nature of history textbooks as intertextual products, it should be considered which power structures are reproduced. The separation of colonial violence and the effects of Dutch colonialism and slavery from the story of the construction of the Dutch Republic ignores the role of postcolonial subjects in developing the Netherlands. The limited focus the final history exam lays on colonial history is another sign that it is not yet regarded as a pivotal historical process pupils must understand to grasp global and national history fully. The lack of discussion on contemporary racism and its colonial roots in the textbooks and the exam's framework suggests that there is currently less public demand for societal critique than there is for the affirmation of white innocence by a segment of Dutch society, anxious about its national identity. The lack of reciprocal influence between the Netherlands and its colonies in the textbooks could imply to their audience that the Netherlands was formed as a homogeneous nation. Thus, this narrative could potentially exacerbate feelings of anxiety regarding a national identity that is now threatened by outside groups.

While the textbooks do not actively employ the classic colonial narratives of exceptionalism, benevolence and the civilisation mission, the compartmentalisation is an example of colonial restaging (Jensen, 2020). In the context of the Dutch Golden Age, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* and *Sprekend Verleden* neglect Dutch colonial violence in favour of a trading narrative celebratory of Dutch vigour. This reflects the claim of scholars like Bijl (2012) and Wekker (2016), who argue that the colonial past remains segregated from the national past in Dutch public discourse. However, this analysis has also demonstrated that *Memo* deviated from this proclivity by including colonial violence as part of its narrative on the Golden

Age. The inclusion of colonial violence within a national context in a popular history textbook suggests the emergence of a counterhegemonic culture that challenges the legitimacy of a Golden Age narrative void of the perspective of colonised and enslaved people.

Moreover, the analysis demonstrated a bias towards the colonial history of the East. The Western colonies are only discussed within the context of slavery but are largely sidelined after abolitionism, even though these territories remained colonies of the Netherlands for many years thereafter. This reflects a continuity of feelings of nostalgia towards the East Indies that are not present in relation to the West Indies in Dutch collective memory. It furthermore conveys that Dutch colonial historiography continues to be self-serving instead of initiating a critical discussion on Dutch colonialism. Thus, despite the growing academic interest in the West Indies, this has yet to be translated into the history textbooks.

The analysis demonstrated that agency was attributed to non-Europeans to a certain extent. *Sprekend Verleden* challenges the monolithicity of non-Western peoples and both *Memo* and *Sprekend Verleden* were shown to focus on various ways enslaved and colonised peoples resisted, challenging the notion of them as passive. The lesser amount of attention to the agency of colonised subjects in *Geschiedenisplaats* suggests that this has not fully become engrained in Dutch public discourse as of yet, but the other textbooks indicate a growing awareness of the need to include colonial agency in the history repertoire. However, the analysis has also shown that, in line with observations made by Araújo and Maeso (2012a) and Wasserman (2018), the textbooks establish the role of Europe as an agent of change and bearer of knowledge. The danger of such a narrative is that it could suggest to pupils that the Global South needs Europe without recognising that this relationship is reciprocal. Such a narrative negates a discussion on how colonial subjects impacted the Netherlands. This is especially visible in the textbooks' discussion on the creation of the Dutch constitution, which silences the importance of thinking about the status of overseas subjects to determining what rights Dutch citizens should have, and who was to be considered a Dutch citizen.

The neglect of the effects of colonialism on Dutch societal configurations is furthermore visible in how the textbooks silence discussions about the connection between racial hierarchy, colonialism and slavery, and how this hierarchy endured once colonies gained independence. Even *Memo*, the textbook that recognises colonial violence as part of Dutch national history, avoids a conversation about racism in contemporary Dutch society. The textbooks thus confirm the dominant narrative in Dutch society that frames racism in the Netherlands as non-existent (Wekker, 2016; Hoving, 2014). The omission of a discussion on race in the Netherlands demonstrates that black and migrant perspectives continue to be marginalised. The implication of the textbooks' silencing of racial categorial thinking as a consequence of colonialism is that it could further legitimise the notion of the Netherlands as a colour-blind society, which undermines the experiences of many people of colour. The textbooks fail to provide their pupils with the information needed to critically examine racism in contemporary Dutch society. Thus, while past colonial violence has been given a platform, the contemporary experiences of the black and migrant population continue to be silenced.

This calls into question what the recognition of colonial violence is worth if its contemporary effects remain unrecognised. This thesis supports the claims made by Bijl (2012) and Balkenhol (2016) that the recognition of colonial violence does not necessarily result in a critical reflection on the legacy of colonialism in contemporary Dutch society and its exclusionary practices. Instead, the recognition of violence could be weaponised to consolidate white innocence. The condemnation of past violence without acknowledging the present-day consequences enables white Dutch people to distance themselves from it and to constrain colonialism to the past now that it has been 'fixed'. In turn, it allows for a self-identification as compassionate towards past subjects without the need to extend that compassion to contemporary victims of racism (Balkenhol, 2016). Such a narrative only enforces a self-congratulatory image of the Netherlands as a country that might have committed certain misdeeds in the past but is now truly a liberal and tolerant nation (Ibid.). Thus, while recognition of colonial violence is an important step towards critically engaging with the Dutch colonial legacy, this recognition can also be used to silence such a discussion.



Furthermore, it is important to recognise that the variance between the textbooks is reflective of conflicting opinions within Dutch society. The differences between the textbooks' narratives suggest that there is no single univocal outlook on how to deal with the Dutch colonial past. As stated by Oostindie (2015), post-colonial activists have advocated for the inclusion of the colonised perspective in history textbooks, whereas other sections of society call for the conservation of a traditional nationalist narrative that strengthens their idea of a homogenous national identity. This research has demonstrated that the textbooks are navigating these public debates and that, while a critical post-colonial narrative might not be dominant, it is not entirely absent either. The textbooks proved to be social documents in which conflicting memories accumulate, as the textbooks shift between depictions of the Netherlands as perpetrator of colonial violence and subject of tolerance and justness. These contradictions suggest that the Netherlands is currently engaged in a conflict with its own identity and history. While these textbooks indicate an impending interest in the inclusion of colonial violence and marginalised perspectives, the process of decolonising Dutch national history remains far from complete.

This research is distinct from previous studies on Dutch colonial historiography, as it provides new insights into how the narratives on colonial history in history textbooks balance between acknowledging colonial violence and maintaining a positive self-image of the Netherlands as a just and tolerant nation. Moreover, by comparing the textbooks' narratives on the Eastern and Western parts of the empire, the research has illuminated that textbooks discuss Indonesia significantly more than Suriname and the Dutch Antilles, which are only discussed in the context of slavery. This further distorts the understanding of the effects that colonialism, slavery and racism continue to have on Dutch systems of thinking, as it implies that the oppression of Surinamese and Antilleans ended once slavery was abolished.

While this research focused on the Netherlands, the findings might prove relevant to other countries with a colonial legacy, as many nations are confronted with the question of how their colonial histories should be told in light of new academic scholarship and societal pressures. This research has identified a break with the civilising mission, benevolent and exceptionalist colonial narratives that, as Jensen (2020)

argues, are often used by colonial powers to justify colonial rule and preserve a positive self-image. At the same time, other narratives, such as Eurocentrism, the compartmentalisation of colonial history and denial of racism, were shown to prevail. Whether this partial shift in narrative themes in history textbooks is part of a broader pattern among former colonial powers in response to current debates about the recognition of colonial history, racism and multiculturalism would be worth researching.

Finally, this study has certain limitations that need to be addressed. Firstly, the analysis was limited to three Dutch history textbooks, all written for the same age category (sixteen to eighteen years old) and one educational track (VWO). Thus, whether the same narratives identified in these textbooks are also employed by the textbooks in other tracks and age categories merits further research. Furthermore, while history textbooks continue to be an important source for analysing public discourse, it is important to note that this research cannot make any definite claims on to what extent teachers actually teach the content of the textbooks. Moreover, this research cannot draw a direct causal relation between the textbooks' content and societal views, as education does not solely happen within the classroom, and pupils may respond differently to the textbooks' content. Therefore, to reach more thorough conclusions on the impact of the textbooks' narratives on the pupils' views on colonialism and race, further research should examine how history teachers use the textbooks and study pupils' perceptions of Dutch colonial history and race relations before and after reading the textbooks.

## 10. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to analyse how the silences in Dutch history textbooks about the colonial past echo existing cleavages and misunderstandings among various segments of the Dutch population about the colonial past and racism in the Netherlands today. To answer this research question, the analysis was guided by several sub-questions.

The first sub-question asked what narratives the textbooks employ in their discussion of Dutch colonialism and the slave trade. The analysis found that all textbooks address the Dutch role in slavery and recognise that the Dutch perpetrated colonial violence. However, *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* and *Sprekend Verleden* separate this part of history from the construction of the Dutch state. *Memo* diverged from the other textbooks in this regard, as this textbook include the slave trade and colonial violence as part of its narrative on the Golden Age. Moreover, the analysis concluded that Indonesia is given significantly more attention than Suriname and the Dutch Antilles in the context of colonialism and decolonisation. This indicates a continuity of nostalgic feelings towards the East Indies and the persistence of the notion that the West Indies have not had a substantial influence on the construction of the Netherlands.

The second sub-question asked whether the textbooks take a predominantly European perspective or pay attention to colonised peoples' perspectives and attribute them agency. The research identified a pattern in the narratives that present Europe as the architect of knowledge and change in the world, while reciprocal influence between the coloniser and colonised is overlooked. Therefore, despite the inclusion of the colonised perspective and the emphasis on colonised peoples' agency in some sections of the textbooks, the overall narratives remained Eurocentric by sustaining the notion of European superiority.

The final sub-question asked whether critical reflections that draw connections between colonialism, slavery and present-day phenomena, such as racism and xenophobia, are present in the textbooks. The analysis has demonstrated that the textbooks do not connect the consolidation of a racial hierarchy to colonialism and slavery, and ignore the existence of racism in the Netherlands today. Moreover, in the context of multiculturalism, the textbooks avoid discussions on institutional and systemic

racism by referring the exclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities based on religion and culture instead. Thus, the textbooks protect the notion of the Dutch as tolerant, just and open, and neglect the relationship between xenophobia and the colonial ideology of white superiority.

Thus, the analysis identified several silences about the colonial past and slavery in the textbooks. The ways in which *Geschiedeniswerkplaats* and *Sprekend Verleden* isolate the history of the Dutch nation-state from colonial and slavery history echo the misunderstanding that colonialism was something that happened far away, with little consequence to the Netherlands. This misunderstanding is further reflected in the textbooks' lack of attention to reciprocal influence between the Dutch and its colonies. The omission of racism in the Netherlands and its roots in a colonial system of thinking resonates with the misconception that racism is a non-issue in the Netherlands.

Finally, while several patterns were identified in all textbooks, the analysis also underscored the differences between the textbooks' narratives. Differences, such as whether colonial violence is included in a national context or not, echo the existence of diverging views within the Dutch population. The textbooks' inclusion of multi-perspective debates further highlights these diverging views. However, despite the inclusion of a critical perspective in multi-perspective debates, critical reflections on the legacy of colonialism remained absent from the core narratives. This suggests that there is a counterhegemonic culture present in Dutch society that has the possibility to delegitimise the colonial systems of thinking that constitute the Dutch cultural archive, but that it is not yet dominant. For now, the textbooks remain engaged in a battle between critical historical thinking and national master narratives that underpin a positive self-image.

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