

MASTER THESIS

Masters of Land and Sea: Narratives of Control in Dutch Internal and External Settler Projects

A COMPARATIVE MUSEUM ANALYSIS

Human Geography

CONFLICT, TERRITORIES AND IDENTITIES

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John Gast's painting 'American Progress' from <https://www.thoughtco.com/american-settler-colonialism-4082454>

'Maybe the difference was that they were all white

And claim to have a god given right

To take my home and call it their own'

Lyrics of Super white man by Jowan Safadi

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research project is to shed light on the importance of colonialism for Dutch national identity, with a specific focus on the tension between internal (domestic) and external (overseas) settler colonialism and their dominant narratives. To get a better insight into narratives and imaginaries of colonialism, the research project uses a comparative analysis of two museums that propose historical narratives of Dutch colonial histories.

The concept of internal settler colonialism is not widely used; however, I see value in the term as it highlights shared characteristics between external and internal settler projects such as: The belief in human exceptionalism, and the capacity to reshape the world through scientific knowledge. These ideas played a significant role in both internal and external colonialism as they justified interventions into natural and social environments, positioning humans as separate from and superior to other life forms.

KEY WORDS

internal colonialism; external colonialism; human exceptionalism; museums; collective memory; social engineering

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GLOSSARY

Capitalism: An economic and political system in which private actors control modes of production and property with the goal to increase their profits. The market is often called a free market and is based on competition and self-interest (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.).

Collective memory: Collective memory describes memories and shared recollections that individuals have and relate to as a member of a group (Roediger, 2021). Often collective memories support group identities as the memories are known to the group and remembered by the individuals (American Psychological Association, 2018).

Colonial powers: Colonial powers are generally nations that aim to increase their influence and power in the world by settling in territories outside their borders or within their borders if the area is deemed to be 'underdeveloped'. In Europe, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, the UK and France are usually considered to be the big colonial powers expanding their empires around the globe (Starrs, 2021), though other nations also followed colonial logics.

Eurocentrism: A focus on European cultures and societies and their contributions to societies. The focus neglects other (often marginalised) perspectives and cultures. Especially in the context of colonisation, Eurocentrism often represents histories from an imperialist and racist perspective, neglecting and mischaracterising the experiences of colonised peoples (Lewis, 2024).

European: There are many different definitions for European, this thesis uses a definition that usually focuses on imperial powers from Europe. If statistics speak of European in this thesis, the corresponding definition of that data is provided as well.

External colonialism: Also referred to as exploitation or exogenous colonisation, it is a process and structure, that exploits, extracts and expropriates land, labour, and resources from the colonised territories with the goal of using these for the colonisers benefit (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Human exceptionalism: Human exceptionalism reflects the perception that nature exists to be shaped and controlled by humans. Often reflecting an idea of domination over nature and relates to concepts such as anthropocentrism and human supremacy (Henriques, 2025).

Imperialism: A structure and practice through which one nation seeks to increase its power over others. This control may take the form of territorial expansion and colonisation, but it can also manifest through more indirect means, such as economic policies that produce dependency or political influence over less powerful states (Kohn & Reddy, 2024; Betts, 2022; Arneil, 2023).

Indigenous: Indigenous has many definitions, often it is connected to a long heritage and history tied to a specific place (Cunningham & Stanley, 2003). Some would consider communities and peoples only as indigenous if they identify themselves as such. If used for peoples it can be generalising, especially in terms of culture, therefore many people prefer if one uses the specific name of a group that they have given themselves (Animikii, 2017).

Internal colonialism: Development that uses intensive spatial and social planning with efforts to shape the social fabric of new settlements within a nation's borders; therefore, it is also referred to

as domestic colonialism (Arneil, 2017). Methods of expropriation are common especially in rural areas.

Nationalism: A belief has a nation or nationality at its centre. The interests and culture of this nation is promoted and elevated over others. A key aspect of nationalism is that it wants the government of the nation to represent the nation's dominant groups culture and interests (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, n.d.)

Native: A term that similarly to indigenous describes a connection to a specific place. It is often connected to the place of birth and of people, animals and plants (Collins, n.d.).

Nature: There are many conceptions of nature, in this thesis nature is usually used in the context of human exceptionalism, where nature is seen as a separate entity to humans and the human-built environment.

Orientalism: A concept that explores the imaginaries of Arabic cultures within the 'western' world. Often these imaginaries are based on a romanticisation of Arabic cultures (Said, 1978).

Othering: A practice of creating an 'other' by distinguishing between an 'us' and 'them'. It entails a distancing and differentiation between different groups often connected to the creation of hierarchies (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002; König, 2022).

Positionality: It is a reflection of ones background and context, describing ones social position in society and how that shapes ones biases and perspective on the world (Berkovic, n.d.).

Social engineering: A scientifically grounded process to guide social behaviours and structures, that is sometimes also referred to as the 'scientification of the social'. The integration of scientific principles is seen to be beneficial for spatial planning and urban design practices (Sintobin, 2008).

Technocracy: An ideology that is thought to be based on scientific principles and as a form of government dedicates power to scientific experts in their corresponding fields. Political decisions are often based on risk assessments and cost-benefit analysis (Sadowski, 2020).

Western: A vague concept that is used and defined in different ways. In this thesis when 'western' is used it reflects ideologies and perspectives of imperialism. If statistics use the term, it will be explained further how it was defined in the corresponding study.

INTRODUCTION

Dutch identity is strongly connected to colonialism, as colonialism has been an integral part of Dutch history in several forms. One can distinguish between internal (reclaiming and redeveloping of land mostly from the sea) and external colonialism (conquering lands outside the national territory). This paper will compare external and internal colonial projects and the narratives employed to justify exploitation and appropriation of land and people. External colonial projects of the Netherlands have been increasingly criticized since anticolonial movements emerged and gained influence after WW2 (Van der Horst, 2022). The understanding of external colonialism solely as an event in history has been challenged. In colonialism studies, many scholars agree that colonialism should rather be seen as an event that creates structures that still endure in some forms in today's societies due to the systems and ways of thinking they promoted (Kauanui, 2016). The structural inequalities and narratives of superiority are often internalized in imperial societies. The structural inequalities created by the colonial systems that are still visible today are increasingly recognized (Allpress et al. 2010).

Internal colonisation on the other hand is more often perceived not only as a historical but also as a contemporary issue. The narrative of internal colonisation is intrinsically connected to the 'battle against the sea' in the case of the Netherlands, which is often described as a never-ending conflict. The effects and influences of colonial projects are still visible today, some are more visible in the built environment as polders and dikes for example and the other are manifest more invisibly as they are structurally embedded in the society. These structures can range from prejudice and racism on cultural and structural levels to mindsets of human superiority and exceptionalism (Allpress et al. 2010; Balkenhol, 2016; Broekhoven, 2019).

Internal colonisation is often not perceived as colonialism due to the fact that no other peoples' territories are colonised but rather ocean spaces or lands, that are deemed to be 'vacant'. The idea of vacant land is also used in external colonial projects as it is often used as a justification for settler projects, that replace an existing population, which is not perceived as existing, settled or relevant.

Many definitions describe colonialism as '*control by one country over another area and its people*' (Encyclopedia Britannica n.d). This definition reflects a solely external understanding of colonialism, but also a notion of fixedness of countries. If one country takes control of another people's territory or simply a territory 'owned' by no one outside their borders, then it usually will be redefined to be part of the colonisers territory for the moment of colonisation. Then the question remains when does this 'other' land become part of the colonising county and is not seen as a colony anymore? As borders constantly change and nations frequently redefine their borders by annexing other territories or by losing some, then the question remains when do annexed territories count as colonies? The definition of a colony can be subjective and differ if people see themselves as colonised or colonising. When colonised people feel they are a part of the colonisers culture, then they might not feel colonised, but if one feels like their culture is being oppressed, then they are quite likely to feel colonised and oppressed. One could look at Northern Ireland for example, commonly not perceived as a colony but many Gaelic people perceive themselves as being colonised by the British, as their language and culture have been and are suppressed by their colonisers. Scholars have disagreements about the applicability of the status as a colony in this case of Northern Ireland but

nevertheless some people in Northern Ireland advocate for a reunification of Ireland and often perceive themselves as colonised (Aveyard, 2023).

In the context of internal colonisation, the term land reclamation is an often used term implying a taking back of land, framing it as land that was owned before and must be conquered again. This is often done by making it more 'usable'. Here, usability is usually referring to the efficiency and productivity of land use. The narrative of making 'use' of the land, because it is seen as 'unproductive' can be identified in many settler colonial projects. The narratives used to justify exploitation, and the resulting ideologies and narratives will be explored later in this thesis.

Internal settler colonial projects in the Netherlands are often celebrated as part of the national identity and as a part of the 'endless war against the sea', due to the fact that land was reclaimed from the ocean (Van de Grift, 2015; Mostert, 2020). The battle or war against the sea is much older than the Netherlands but has been of concern to people living in the territory of the modern state of the Netherlands. People started protecting themselves from the sea from around 500BC. Approximately 1500 years later the first dyke was built (Hoeksema, 2007). Today the reclamation projects and the protection against the sea are still a part of national pride and feeling of identity in the Netherlands (Haartsen & Thissen 2018). Some scholars like Knippenberg (1997) would argue that the war against the sea became a symbol of the Dutch nation and was consciously used to create a feeling of unity amongst the Dutch population. The war against the sea has a strong connection to Dutch national identity as it is still present in the collective memory of the people in the Netherlands. The ability to overcome the 'struggle against the water' has shaped Dutch collective memory, influencing storytelling and the national consciousness of the Dutch. Instead of referring to the 'struggle/battle against the water' the narrative of 'taming the water wolf' was sometimes employed. This was promoted by cultural and educational institutions such as museums and schools and a narrative of superiority over nature was implied there (Jensen, 2018; Jensen, 2020).

The narrative of a war or battle against the sea implies the nature of a violent relationship. Nature is framed as being brutal, violent and uncontrollable, therefore being able to control the sea can imply something very powerful or even 'godly'. This narrative can feed into a culture of human exceptionalism. The term *war* also implies that there is room for peace if the conflict is resolved. Though peace can take different forms, it can be discussed if the concepts of positive and negative peace (Galtung, 2011) can be applied to the relationship between the Dutch and natural forces shaping the region.

Dutch land reclamation is essential to the formation and narration of a Dutch identity. Today the Netherlands has around 3000 polder regions reclaimed from the sea, like Flevoland or the Noord-Oost-Polder. In order to gain different perspectives on the creation of polders and the 'war against the sea' it is beneficial to also look at cases such as Schokland, which is a former island in the Noord-Oost-Polder. The former island was a fishing island and tells a less dominant narrative of displacement and the loss of a way of living in the region. This could contrast with the dominant narrative, which glorifies the achievements of Dutch water management and the success in their 'war against the sea'.

This research will look at the narratives of colonialism in the Netherlands with the help of museums. For centuries, narratives of colonialism have been selectively remembered or forgotten, and

museums play a crucial role in the process of remembering certain histories and creating a public memory. It is crucial to acknowledge that the histories we see in museums are always dependent on our context of perception and our positionality, as one's background and world view heavily impacts our perceptions of things. Additionally, the positionality of the curator also impacts the story we are told in an exhibit, which parts are focused on and which aspects are left out. Museum exhibits are products of our culture and time, they offer spaces to exhibit, research and store culturally significant objects. Next to that museums are also economic spaces aimed at attracting visitors that are interested in cultural heritage (Perera, 2014).

Historical and cultural museums are usually perceived to be places of education, often narrating local and/or national history, impacting how people understand their own and other peoples histories. The myth of museums being neutral can impact how people perceive the narratives and pieces in a museum. Perceived neutrality in museums and other educational facilities is a widespread phenomenon, with people placing a lot of trust often into the things taught here (Prescha, 2021). Therefore it is crucial to investigate the narrative of internal and external colonialism in museum exhibitions as they give insights into the perception and positionality of the curator, but more importantly also tell a story, which will have an impact on the visitors and their understanding of the Dutch history, identity and collective memory.

Museums also play a crucial role in national discourses around postcolonialism and decolonisation. Often postcolonial theories are used to argue for the engagement with colonised peoples voices and recognizing the persisting power structures colonial projects have created. The engagement with these themes can offer room to question Eurocentric narratives as one is confronted with a multiplicity of stories and perspectives (Loomba, 2015). For instance, the National Maritime Museum has made efforts to decolonize the language and aims to give marginalized and colonised peoples voices more space and agency in their narratives (Plaque: Shadows on the Atlantic – a new light on maritime colonialism, n.d.; Plaque: The choices we made, n.d.).

SOCIETAL RELEVANCE

The research problem centres on the tension between different forms of colonialism and their narratives in museums, the goal is to explore how these narratives intersect and shape national identity. The focus will lie on the contrast between internal colonialism (land reclamation) and external colonialism (overseas empire-building). Both forms are integral to the Dutch historical narrative but are framed in very different ways. Internal colonialism is celebrated as a unique technological advancement and is often celebrated as a national achievement in the Netherlands, which is reflected in the famous quote often attributed to David Winner: *'God made the world, but the Dutch made Holland.'* This statement emphasizes the technological skill of these internal colonisation projects but obscures the projects colonial nature as it reflects a mindset of 'using unused land' and making it Holland. The element of territorial expansion and environmental domination is overshadowed by the notion of creation of something new. Therefore, this form of colonialism is commonly not perceived as a form of colonialism as it conquers ocean spaces or 'unused' land. In contrast, external colonialism is increasingly criticised as its elements of domination, oppression and exploitation are increasingly seen as problematic in today's societies.

Internal and external settler colonial projects often employ ideologies of social or societal engineering. The notion that a society can be designed, controlled, and shaped after ideological beliefs about social norms and structures (Hickel, 2012) supports and reflects a technocratic and human exceptionalist mindset that seeks to dominate and control. This raises questions about the framing and understanding of nature, human exceptionalism, and the ethics of domination. Does the glorification of internal colonialism (land reclamation) reinforce colonial mindsets and attitudes toward external domination? How does the story of the Dutch 'war against the sea' shape the public's understanding of colonialism? What makes us perceive land as 'unused'? How comparable are the mechanisms and consequences of social engineering and settler projects in internal and external colonisation projects?

By researching these points, we can gain a better understanding how or if colonial legacies still shape people's perceptions of environmental interventions and management in the Netherlands, but also more generally how the colonial history has shaped societal values and feelings of a national identity.

SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

The aim of this research is to create connections between internal and external settler colonial projects as there are many ideas and processes that will be found in both forms of colonialism. Highlighting the differences and similarities is necessary in order to reflect on the narratives in society and more importantly the imaginaries connected with both forms. One can compare imaginaries of other lands and imaginaries of the ocean or more generally what is perceived to be 'vacant' land. These imaginaries can give us deeper insights into the underlying ideologies and human-nature relationships, but also how these are used to justify settler projects.

To get a better insight into narratives and imaginaries of colonialism museums will be analyzed, as they often reflect on national history of a nation. This is crucial to get an insight into historical and contemporary national identity formations and national pride in the Netherlands. The narratives in museums and the composition of exhibitions reflect not only the self-image and positionality of the curators and museums but will impact the perceptions of people visiting. Museums are often seen as spaces of neutrality though they are deeply imprinted with politically and ideologically perspectives (Prescha, 2021). The narrative of neutrality can obscure underlying narratives and promote a dominant ontology, which is often invisible to many due to its dominant character. The contribution of museums to a development of a national identity is important as museums are used to aid historical education in a private but also an institutional sphere (McLean, 1998). Especially in schools, educators have highlighted their use of museums as contributing to students' knowledge of their nation (Torgyik, 2022). The development of the focus of museums in the Netherlands and their general development and importance for a national identity could be interesting to research as well.

The discourse on colonialism is predominantly focused on external colonial projects, while internal colonial projects, such as land reclamation, usually remain unexamined in this context. Internal colonial projects are usually seen as part of the Dutch 'war against the sea', which is often described to be still ongoing, as flooding is still a risk in the Netherlands (Delaunay, 2011). The notion that the Netherlands is a nation entangled in a never-ending conflict with the sea is often supported by museums in the Netherlands (Museum Schokland, 2025).

By analysing the historical development and use of social engineering in external colonies and comparing these dynamics to the internal settling projects in the Netherlands, underlying ideologies and ontologies of settler projects can be analysed. The underlying assumption that a society can be designed has been crucial to both forms of colonialism and has been used in different forms throughout history but also impacts today's understanding of nature and ocean spaces.

This research aims to draw comparisons between internal and external colonialism and offer a new perspective on the ethical and societal implications, which the education and narrative of either form of colonialism has on the Dutch society, imaginaries and identity.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE AND QUESTIONS

The aim of this research project is to shed light on the importance of colonialism for Dutch collective memories, with a specific focus on the tension between internal (domestic) and external (overseas) colonialism and their dominant narratives. By analysing how internal and external colonialism are framed in museums, this study aims to understand how the narratives can contribute differently to public perceptions of these histories. The research project aims to investigate why internal colonial projects are often not framed as colonial, but rather as national achievements, technocratic advancement and/or examples of a domination of nature. This will be contrasted with contemporary and historical narratives of external colonial projects. The discourse around these different forms of colonialism might reflect different tensions and is used differently in public framing and history education, shaping societal perceptions of nature, history but also ethics.

RESEARCH QUESTION

In what ways do (historical) narratives of land reclamation and internal colonialism foster a sense of Dutch identity and create imaginaries and ideologies of domination and superiority? How does this contrast to the narratives of external colonialism?

- What are the dominant ideologies that colonial projects are based on and what imaginaries have been created and are created today? Do the same assumptions underlie internal and external colonisation?
- Why is internal colonialism celebrated, while external colonialism is criticized and what does this distinction highlight regarding people's perception of nature and their relationship with it?
- How do contemporary political and cultural debates reflect or challenge dominant narratives of internal and external colonialism?

LITERATURE REVIEW

NATIONAL IDENTITY AND MUSEUMS IN THE NETHERLANDS

Museums in the Netherlands often relied on private collections, which were often the basis of museums. The National Maritime Museum also started off as a private collection. These collections

were often based on local histories and traditions but were later, especially in the 19th century, used to create a more nationalist narrative (Bodenstein, 2011). Museums were a tool used by the Dutch government to create new narratives of history that supported nation-building efforts at the time (Bergvelt, 2024). Mijers (2009, p. 43) calls this *'the domestic appropriation of municipal artefacts, by the new central government'*. In 1800 the first public 'national' museum of the Netherlands was founded, but Bodenstein (2011) suggests that the municipal collections, which became municipal museums, still played a bigger role in Dutch society in the 19th century. During the 19th century efforts were made to promote and glorify objects and people that were deemed to resonate with a Dutch national identity. The idea that governments are able to influence and improve their citizens was prominent at that time. The idea that museums are spaces of education was promoted, contributing to a 'more educated' public in the eyes of the government. Consequently, museums were made more accessible to the general public, as beforehand museums had been mostly private collections also called cabinets of curiosities (Riedler, 2023).

Bodenstein (2011) finds in her study that *'Dutch national culture seems to be predominantly represented by the paintings of the Golden Age'*. In the National maritime Museum, the main gallery is also centred around this theme, though the museum states that *'since 2019, the National Maritime Museum has been using the term 'golden age' without capital letters and in quotation marks'* (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025d). This change in language is supposed to change the perception of the 'golden age' and reduce the glorification of this period.

In the case of the Netherlands a museum culture that uses museum cards has developed over the last decades. The museum cards are like a yearly subscription for more than 500 museums one can visit in the Netherlands. There is no limit on visits one can do per year and it costs 75€ for an adult. The pass is only available to people registered as residents of the European Union (Museumvereniging, n.d.). Generally, the prices of museums vary, the National Maritime Museum costs 18,50€ and the Schokland Museum costs 9,50€ per adult.

The visitor numbers in museums are rising in the Netherlands (NEMO, 2024) with the Netherlands having almost 700 museums around the country (CBS, 2017) of which almost 60% are history museums (see fig. 1).

In a panel debate about European colonialism Valika Smeulders, a historian and curator working at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, said that it is a *'difficulty to find objects about the history of resistance and the abolition'*, which makes it harder to tell these histories. *'It is harder to build an inclusive narrative when you have no object. It is hard to talk about something that people deny has ever existed.'* She explained that in comparison to other imperial powers such as France and the United Kingdom, the Netherlands has relatively few objects that depict slavery. She concludes that this leads to the Dutch seeing their country as 'a small, innocent and somehow tolerant nation' (Budasz, 2020).

Museums by type

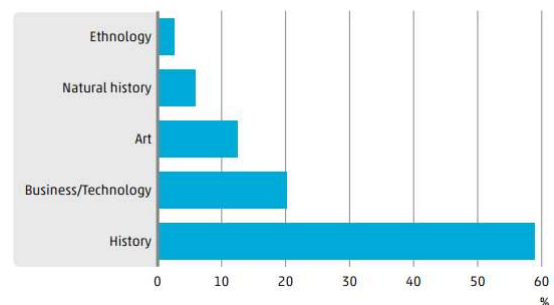


Figure 1: Museums by type in the Netherlands in 2016 (by CBS)

Although ‘museums are absorbing the language of social justice by hosting exhibitions on themes like feminism, blackness, accessibility, etc. the same museums are battling with systemic injustice within their own walls’ (Prescha, 2021). This throws up the question if it is even possible to decolonize exhibits if they take place in institutions that are embedded in these colonial structures.

How national museums impact the national identity has been researched well by many scholars. Anderson (1983) even states that national museums are essential to the legitimization of states within their borders but also on the international scale.

National government can have a strong impact on national museums as they can directly (policy) and indirectly (funding) pressure museums into adopting a certain storytelling lens. Here it is to note that these lenses change over decades and with new political climates focus on different trends and narratives (Winter, 2010). Often the history in national museums is presented in a way that creates the narrative of the contemporary society to be the most advanced state of the nation, sometimes indirectly celebrating the current state of the nation.

National identity reflects a collective self-image and feeling of belonging connecting a whole nation (Marschelke, 2021). National memory culture in the Netherlands reflects the devastating power of floods but also tells a story of technological innovation and a pioneering mindset amongst the population (Jensen, 2021; Kesic & Duyvendak, 2016). The Dutch have a long history with water management, but it only became an important aspect of Dutch national identity around the 1780s (Mostert, 2020). This narrative has been used especially in times of national crisis and unrest to unite the people regardless of their religious or political perspectives. Stories of innovative masters of the sea are told in children’s books, museums and other public facilities in the Netherlands, fostering a sense of national pride and identity.

The promotion of Dutch Nationalism was also influenced by museums and their narratives, as only in the 19th century the notion of national heroes became of relevance. Van Keulen (personal communication, June 4th, 2025) explained that ‘for a long time in the 19th century, people were proud actually [sic]. The history of the 17th and [...] 18th is rewritten in this 19th century. [...] the role of the 19th century is very important in in how we [...] perceive history in the Netherlands’ today’. Museums played a central role in creating and promoting imaginaries of ‘national heroes’ in the 19th century (RKD, 2019) with the goal to increase national cohesion and promotion of national identities rather than local ones as a tactic of nation-building (Bergvelt, 2024; Riedler, 2023). Often these heroes were figures associated with engineering, trade, or military victories, which then contributed to an appreciation and glorification of these things.

A dominant notion in Dutch society is the ‘rejection of ‘bad’ and enactment of ‘good’ nationalism’. ‘Most commonly, the bad type is association with cultural, racial and ethnic definitions of the nation, whereas the ‘good’ type sees the nation as a political, territorial and civic entity’ (Kesic & Duyvendak, 2016). This ‘good’ nationalism often entails perceptions, tastes and identifications that are seen as typically Dutch. Often attributes such as progressiveness and tolerance are used to describe the Dutch nation (Kesic & Duyvendak, 2016).

Historical museums in the Netherlands exhibit the Dutch history and tell a story of Dutchness, which is deeply connected to imperial and colonial projects. The imperial and colonial character of the Netherlands is described in the following.

COLONIALISM AND IMPERIALISM

Colonialism is often described as the *'domination of a people or area by a foreign state or nation: the practice of extending and maintaining a nation's political and economic control over another people or area'* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Another definition by the Cambridge University Press & Assessment (2025) states that colonialism is *'the belief in and support for the system of one country controlling another'*. While many definitions align with these descriptions, scholars frequently expand upon them by highlighting aspects of the suppression of colonised people's cultures, languages, religions, and political practices as a central feature of colonial rule (Longley, 2024; Blakemore, 2024; Ivison, 2025; Sheehan, 2006).

There is an ongoing scholarly debate about whether imperialism and colonialism are synonymous or conceptually distinct. Some scholars use the terms interchangeably, arguing that both refer to systems of domination and exploitation by powerful entities over less powerful ones. The term colonialism derives from the Latin *colonus*, meaning settler, while imperialism comes from *imperium*, meaning to command. Imperialism refers to a structure and practice through which one nation seeks to increase its power over others. This control may take the form of territorial expansion and colonisation, but it can also manifest through more indirect means, such as economic policies that produce dependency or political influence over less powerful states (Kohn & Reddy, 2024; Betts, 2022; Arneil, 2023). From this perspective, imperialism is understood as the broader ideological and strategic framework, while colonialism represents its concrete implementation, such as the settlement of foreign lands and the direct governance of local populations. Imperialism may manifest through military occupation, economic dependency, or cultural hegemony, without formal annexation or settlement. Other scholars recognize military occupation itself as a distinct form of colonialism, often referred to as military colonialism, in which domination is enacted through the presence of military forces rather than settler populations (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

In modern capitalist societies, imperialism frequently manifests as neocolonialism, wherein relationships of exploitation are maintained through global capitalism. In this model, power is exercised not through direct rule but via economic institutions, multinational corporations, and debt structures. Within Marxist thought, imperialism is considered the final stage of capitalism, driven by the necessity of advanced capitalist economies to seek new markets to absorb surplus production and capital (Lenin, 1917).

Scientific development was promoted by external colonisation as seafaring technology was tested and refined, but also cartographic practices were improved as general measurements of time, places and distances became more accurate. The creation of weapons, medicine, communication technology and generally engineering technology were also refined during this period. Scientific curiosity was also used as a justification of colonialism and promoted the imperial expansion of empires (Adas, 2016; Starrs, 2021). Developments such as the spread of European influence and the *'disregard for any non Western scientific methods have led to a widespread Eurocentric bias within science'* (Starrs, 2021) even though 'European' or 'Western' science is built on other cultures and achievements of 'non-western' sciences (Joseph, 1987). With the dominance of 'Western science' and the decline of 'non-Western' sciences, colonists used science education as a 'tool of empire' (Arnold, 2000), spreading and imposing 'Western' beliefs among the colonised populations (Emeagwali, 2008). Starrs (2021) points out an important aspect as the development and narrative of

European ‘Science allowed the European powers to act as if colonialism was in the best interests of colonised peoples, even when perpetuating acts of genocide.’

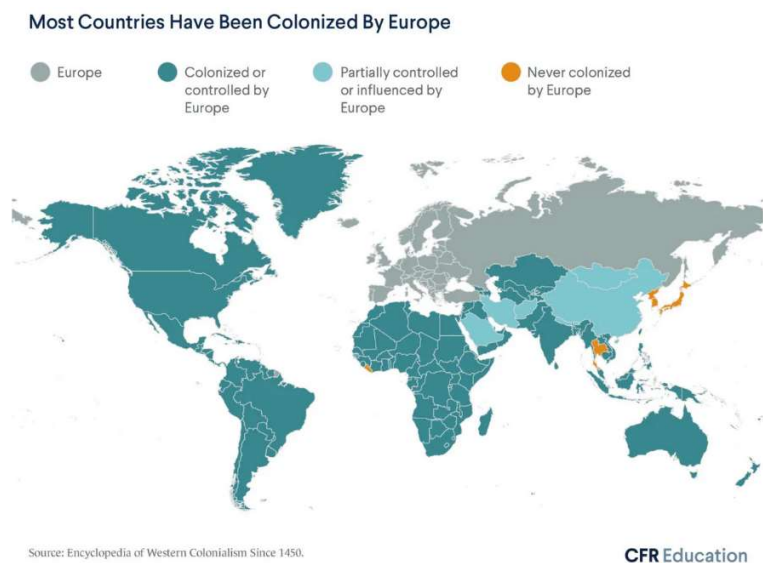
The difference between settler colonialism and other forms of colonialism is that the intention is to settle the region and appropriate it by staying there. Scholars like Wolfe (2006) and Kauanui (2016) point out that these colonial projects are not events in history but structures that often endure for much longer than the period of occupation often leaving colonised peoples still struggling with colonial structures in contemporary societies.

In this thesis, the primary focus will be on settler colonialism, with particular attention to its different forms. Scholars often distinguish between external and internal settler colonialism. External settler colonialism refers to the conquest, occupation, and settlement of foreign territories, typically involving the displacement and erasure of colonised populations. In contrast, internal settler colonialism describes the exploitation, control, and marginalization of specific groups within the borders of an existing nation-state, often through mechanisms such as spatial segregation, economic exclusion, and political disenfranchisement (Tuck & Yang, 2012). These distinct forms will be further examined in the following section.

External (settler) colonialism

External settler colonialism, which is also referred to as exploitation or exogenous colonisation, is a process and structure, that exploits, extracts and expropriates land, labour, and resources from the colonised territories with the goal of using these for the colonisers benefit. These structures often aided the colonial powers to increase their wealth and geopolitical power on a global scale. In order to retain power in the colonies, military forces were often deployed to the region. This practice, referred to as military colonialism, involves the deployment of armed power to suppress resistance, fortify borders, and institutionalize asymmetrical rule over colonised populations (Tuck & Yang, 2012).

Between the late 15th century and the early 20th century, European countries, as defined in the map (see fig. 2), had colonised more than 80% of the global land masses and partially controlled or influenced almost all other regions (Hoffmann, 2015; Stoller-Conrad, 2015; Starrs, 2021). Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, the UK and France were/are the big colonial powers expanding their empires around the globe (Starrs, 2021).



In his 1994 study, Wolfe highlights that European colonial projects

usually integrated previously isolated regions into a global capitalist framework. This integration usually disrupted existing economic arrangements, often resulting in the dismantling of local systems of production and exchange and replacing them with market dependencies centred around European interests. The narratives employed by European colonial powers were often dehumanizing, portraying land as 'unused' or 'unproductive' if it was not being utilized according to European standards of efficient planning and economic development. As Tuck and Yang explain in their 2012 paper, *'In external colonialism, all things Native become recast as 'natural resources' - bodies and earth for war, bodies and earth for chattel.'* This statement offers a description of a psychological and ideological transformation that was crucial for the functioning of colonialism. Their bodies became raw materials – 'bodies for war' (cannon fodder, soldiers in the colonisers army) and 'bodies for chattel' (enslaved labourers considered property to be bought and sold). This narrative made it easier to justify their exploitation, enslavement, dehumanisation, and even extermination, as people often do not feel the same guilt exploiting a 'resource' as they would a fellow human being. It highlights colonial narratives in which colonised people and land were often rendered as resources in order to dehumanise them and then systematically strip them of their rights in order to justify their exploitation. The statement also speaks of 'earth for war' and 'earth for chattel', which refers to not only resource extraction but also to the appropriation of lands and the use of them as military bases or battlegrounds for conflicts.

Wolfe (1994) describes that settler colonialism is based on the elimination of the native, his logic here is that one has to 'destroy to replace'. Kauanui (2016) explains further that the elimination of the native does not have to take the form of genocide (though it often does) but that it can be done through different channels as well, though the goal is often to *'eliminate the native as a native'*. Colonisers often try to replace the native population by either eliminating them or 'adjusting' them to the new imposed system of the coloniser. Usually, the goal is to create a new society in which the coloniser is at the top of the hierarchy.

External settler colonialism in the Netherlands

Colonialism holds a central place in Dutch history, not only because the Netherlands was one of the major European colonial powers, but also because the colonial project shaped the country's economic development, global influence, and cultural self-image. From the 17th century onward, the Dutch Republic emerged as a dominant maritime and trading empire, establishing colonial footholds in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The activities of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the Dutch West India Company (WIC) positioned the Netherlands as a key player in global commerce and imperial expansion, contributing to what is often referred to as the Dutch Golden Age. However, this prosperity was deeply rooted in systems of exploitation, including the transatlantic slave trade, forced labour, and the extraction of resources from colonised regions (Rowen et al., 2024).

As the colonial period brought much economic development with it, many Dutch people have been rather proud of this period. As slavery had been perceived to be problematic earlier on, colonialism was differentiated from it as there were also forms of colonialism that did not rely on slavery. Colonial projects have been criticized more since the 1990s by acknowledging the structural inequalities created by colonial systems (Balkenhol, 2016).

Despite this complex and often violent history, public perceptions of Dutch colonialism remain divided. A study by YouGov (2020), which surveyed over 1,000 people in the Netherlands, revealed that 50% of Dutch respondents viewed the former Dutch empire as something to be proud of. This was the highest percentage among the European countries surveyed, with only 32% of British respondents expressing pride in the British Empire. Conversely, only 6% of Dutch respondents reported feeling ashamed of the colonial past, and only 17% believed that the former colonies were worse off for having been colonised. Interestingly, 27% of respondents believed that colonisation benefited the former colonies, while the remaining respondents were either unsure or did not express a clear opinion.

These perspectives may be shaped in part by the dominant historical narratives taught in Dutch schools, which often centre on a Eurocentric interpretation of colonialism and frequently overlook the agency and experiences of the colonised (Simonsen, 2023). Furthermore, an analysis of museum exhibitions by Obit (2024) highlights the persistent gap between how colonial history is presented and the ongoing social and political challenges rooted in colonial legacies deeply rooted in societies. Such findings suggest that critical engagement with colonial history is not only essential for understanding the Dutch past, but also for addressing the contemporary consequences of colonialism.

As the colonial past of the Netherlands has been debated a lot the last years (Goddeeris, 2020), these discussions have been focused on external colonialism. The corresponding wrongdoings have been discussed more widely in the Netherlands but the need for apologies is highly contested (Araujo 2017).

A study by Hendriks et al. (2024) has concluded that the ‘support for political apologies for slavery is rather low among the Dutch population without a migration background’. They also found that ‘about two-thirds of the Dutch electorate opposes apologies by the Dutch government for their role in the slave trade’. But in 2022 the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte has officially apologized for their role in the trade of enslaved people (Henley, 2022). The question, then, is why do so many people oppose the idea of apologies? Can a lack in education be blamed (Vroegindeweyj, 2018) or rather a fear of having to apologize and then potentially having to pay reparations or change your self-image (Boztas, 2023) or is the guilt making them defend their country?

Post colonial studies and movements have been providing critical analysis for decades, but since the 2020s the debate also features more prominently in Dutch newspapers and parliament documents. The newspaper coverage of these debates was under hundred publications a year until 2020 (see fig. 3) (Hendriks et al. 2024). A study by Weiner (2014) highlights how primary school history books have been solely focusing on ‘a Eurocentric master narrative reflective of racial neoliberalism and contributing to The Netherlands’ social forgetting of slavery and scientific

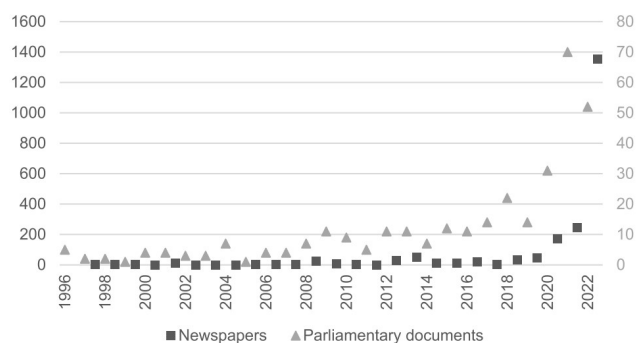


Figure 3: Number of publications for slavery in Dutch newspapers and parliamentary documents (from Hendriks et al. 2024)

colonialism'. The narrative in schoolbooks often offers many justifications of *'their history of colonialism, exploitation, oppression and genocide for profit and labor'*.

It's not uncommon to see defensive reactions when the Netherlands' colonial past is discussed, particularly concerning the atrocities committed, especially the enslavement of people. A frequent response, as observed in for example the comment sections of articles like Cara Råker's (n.d.) article on this topic, is to try and contextualize these actions by stating that everyone did it. The implication, it seems, is to minimize the severity by suggesting that Dutch actions were not exceptionally bad in comparison to other empires. This line of reasoning is, in my opinion, flawed. Excusing the behaviour doesn't facilitate genuine reflection as it shifts the responsibility to the context. A genuine reflection would question where the roots of racism in the Netherlands have come from and how an ideology of 'superiority' over other cultures has developed. Generally, there is little knowledge amongst the general public about roots of these racist ideologies (Ghorashi, 2014).

One of the main characteristics of Dutch racism is the denial about it. Interestingly there is a *'sense of self-satisfaction and smugness about ignoring the issue—racism is seen as an outdated topic that has no relevance to the 21st century'* (Essed & Hoving, 2014). Also, Weiner (2014) stresses that the *'Dutch have long engaged in the social forgetting of slavery even as race served as an organizing principal during centuries of colonial domination'* and that only recently discussions about the colonial history and enslavement of people have been popping up.

During the last decade right wing sentiments have been growing in the Netherlands. This was aided through media representations of 'shocking crime statistics', that tell stories of groups with migration background having unproportionally much contact with the police, but do not reflect why that might be the case (e.g. unproportional policing, systematic injustice and racism, ...). Through this representation in the media, sentiments such as fear and discomfort grow within the uncritical general white Dutch public (Ghorashi, 2014). This representation promotes amongst some Dutch people the feeling that they have to protect their 'native Dutch culture'. A growing number of people with migration background also distance themselves from their cultures, which are often considered as 'backward' and perceived to contrast the Dutch culture. *'It is OK for the 'native Dutch' to feel defensive and to protect their culture, but migrants are criticized for defending theirs'* (Ghorashi, 2014). This growing exclusionary narrative about migrants is *'often explained as fear of change attributed to growing diversity and insecurity in a global world believed to be heading towards a "clash of civilizations."'* (Ghorashi, 2014). The suppression of cultures in order to promote a national culture can also be seen in internal colonial projects.

Internal (settler) colonialism

Internal colonialism refers to *'the situation where a dominant ethnic or racial group maintains control over subordinate groups within the same country, treating them as if they were colonies. This concept suggests that certain groups face systemic economic, political, and social oppression from a dominant group, leading to their marginalization and exploitation'* (Haas, 2023). The concept emerged with the goal *'to understand the unequal terms of trade between the Third World and the First, and between dominant and subordinate groups in these societies'* (Gutiérrez, 2004).

In Europe internal colonisation projects usually targeted rural areas, which became sites of intensive spatial and social planning with efforts to shape the social fabric of new settlements within a nation's borders, therefore it is also referred to as domestic colonialism (Arneil, 2017). The notion of social engineering gained popularity within these settler initiatives, as governments and planners sought not only to manage land but also to cultivate specific demographic and cultural compositions in line with national ideals. Internal colonisation was thus closely tied to nationalist projects, with settlements often designed to serve as idealized representations of national identity and pride. These social engineering dynamics are not only structural but also extend into the interpersonal realm, where they affect individuals' lives and their agency. This influence is often exerted through means such as planning, policy, and the promotion of cultural norms (Van de Grift, 2015; Van Oenen, 2008).

The motivations behind internal colonial projects were often linked to economic goals, particularly the promotion of agricultural and industrial development. However, in some cases, the reasoning was rather emotional than economic, for example when projects sought to alter ethnic distributions within a society (Engerman & Metzger, 2004). During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, interest in internal colonisation grew across Europe, leading to the creation of government institutions to manage these projects, as well as promote further research and initiatives in this area (Nelson, 2009). Between the First and Second World Wars, internal colonisation projects became popular across Europe, particularly as a means of creating new communities within national borders in regions that were considered 'unused', 'empty' or 'inefficiently used' (Van de Grift, 2015).

Internal colonialism became a widespread concept in Europe in the period between the First and Second World War. The idea was popularized by people like the economist Max Sering, who wrote a book in 1883, inspired by his studies of frontier settlements in North America. Sering saw internal colonisation as a project that made use of unused agricultural land by redeveloping it and therefore reclaiming it and increasing its economic value. His book, *The Inner Colonization of Eastern Germany* served as a guideline for politicians, planners, and academics, sparking international interest in the concept (Nelson, 2009). During the 1970s and 1980s, social engineering gained prominence in discussions about societal development and governance (Van Oenen, 2008; Van de Grift, 2013). Social engineering was seen as a scientifically grounded process to guide social behaviours and structures, sometimes also referred to as the 'scientification of the social'. The integration of scientific principles was thought to be beneficial for spatial planning and urban design practices. Social engineering involved for example the managing of settlers and their distribution across the land according to scientific principles, sometimes according to religious and cultural characteristics (Sintobin, 2008).

Outside of Europe, in the US for example the concept of internal colonization is often used when looking at the systematic oppression of black people in the country (Dawson, 2016). In this context internal colonialism is often defined by racial domination and usually took on more extreme forms of discrimination and exclusion than the internal colonial projects in Europe. One could however argue that agricultural container villages in the Netherlands that house guest workers from other countries are a step further into the direction of racial discrimination and segregation. Some people even go as far as calling these villages 'modern day slavery' as the workers' rights are often neglected and they are often spatially completely isolated and faced with much discrimination and racism. This is often

enforced through mechanisms of dependency and a lack of self-determination. It shares some characteristics, even if not called colonialism.

The idea of social engineering and land reclamation are strongly connected to technological advancement and the consequent thrive towards the ability to control nature. It reflects technocratic thinking and an understanding of nature that coincides with human exceptionalist thinking. Human exceptionalism reflects the idea of human superiority over other species, ignoring the intelligence, agency and importance of other non-human species (Tsing, 2012).

Internal settler colonialism in the Netherlands

Since the 12th century AD land reclamation projects have been created in the Netherlands, many polders were created and lakes were pumped dry (De Mulder et al. 1994). Due to the long history with land reclamation and their ingenuity regarding water management and agriculture, people have been highlighting the Netherlands as a progressive nation of intellectuals (Kestic & Duyvendak, 2016). There is little literature though exploring public perceptions of internal colonisation and land reclamation in the Netherlands and how these relate to national identity formations.

Within Dutch society, social engineering projects strived for the creation of a more socially coherent society, due to an increasing pillarization in the religious and political sphere during the 1940s (Van Hulten, 1969; De Prater, 2011). Simultaneously, the notion of modernization and unification were trending in Europe, changing the goals and strategies of economies (Renes & Piastra, 2011). For example, when the Noord-Oost-Polder was designed, planners sought to create a region reflecting the diversity of the Dutch population. This involved intentionally planning a mix of religious backgrounds and selecting settlers accordingly. Other large-scale projects, such as the Bijlmermeer and the polder projects of the Zuiderzee and the Delta Plan, are also examples of the application of social engineering ideals in the Netherlands (Seijdel, 2008).

The Zuiderzee was a saltwater lake, that was adapted to become a freshwater lake and land was partly reclaimed from the sea. The environment changed considerably due to this project, leaving not only the countryside changed, but also changing the whole lake habitat and immensely decreasing the local fishing industry and culture. *'For the local community, an entire culture had been eliminated and it was experienced as a highly regrettable loss.'* (Bodenstein, 2011).

The former United Kingdom of the Netherlands (1815-1839) created a domestic agricultural settler project called the Colonies of Benevolence. A former Dutch East Indies general called Johannes van den Bosch thought to reduce poverty in the country by creating the Society of Benevolence, which created the plan for the Colonies of Benevolence. Firstly, seven colonies were planned but later they were merged into three main colonies (Kolonien van Weldadigheid, n.d.; Bijl et al., 2019). The colonies created in these projects are widely referred to as colonies in contrast to the other internal colonial projects that are usually referred to as reclamation or development projects.

Two colonies of Benevolence were located in the area of the contemporary Netherlands and during the 19th century over 11.000 people lived in these two colonies. The colony in Frederiksoord-Wilhelminaoord was labelled as a 'free' colony in contrast to the 'unfree' colony of Veenhuizen. The 'unfree' colony consisted of 'large dormitory structures and larger centralized farms along planted

avenues [...] built for orphans, beggars and vagrants that worked under the supervision of guards' in contrast to the 'free' colonies that were made up by smaller farms, that were built for families, who were technically able to end their stay whenever they wanted, which was not the case in the 'unfree' colonies. In the 'unfree' colonies people were admitted without their consent (Kolonien van Weldadigheid, n.d.) and every activity had to be carried out under supervision and in a group, so people had to sleep in hammocks in large halls with up to 40 people for example (Bijl et al., 2019). The aim was to that 'colonists would become morally reformed ideal citizens, adding to the nation's wealth'. In the 20th century some (usually 'free') colonies changed into more 'regular' villages (UNESCO, n.d.) and some (usually 'unfree' colonies) became 'penal institutions for beggars' (Kolonien van Weldadigheid, n.d.).

This project highlights the confidence in an Enlightenment '*model of social engineering based upon the notion of 'productive labour', with the aim of transforming poor people into 'industrious' citizens and uncultivated 'wastelands' into productive land*'. The colonies of Benevolence are also a Dutch internal colonial project, which aimed to abolish poverty by settling poor people on 'unused' land and making it more 'usable' by creating jobs and communities. The people did not receive salaries but rather housing, work and education in exchange for the people's labour. Some colonies were '*first built for families and called 'free', later inhabited by beggars and vagrants and catalogued as 'unfree'.*' (UNESCO, n.d.). The colonies of Benevolence are called colonies but are less well-known colonial projects. Whereas some other land reclamation projects are almost solely considered colonial by some scholars.

'The perfect map' is a concept that emerged within early modern Dutch land culture and was instrumental in internal colonisation projects, particularly in the Beemster polder in Northern Holland during the early 17th century. The plans to drain the Beemster Lake were developed by a group of Dutch traders, including two of the founding members of the Dutch East India Company or VOC (Xu, 2022). While land reclamation from the sea was not a new idea, the Beemster polder represented the first large-scale reclamation project in the Netherlands, with 7,208 hectares of land reclaimed from the sea (UNESCO, 2025a). The concept of the 'perfect map' emerged during this project, when detailed and highly accurate cadastral maps were created for planning and design purposes. These maps not only depicted the existing landscape but also outlined the envisioned future developments of the land. This approach to mapping corresponds to classical and Renaissance-era planning, as the maps were designed using grid patterns to organize streets, canals, and agricultural fields (UNESCO, 2025a)

The 'perfect map' concept was later applied in external colonies, where it played a crucial role in introducing cadastral mapping and property management. For example, it was implemented in the former Sunda Kelapa (later known as Jacatra, Dutch Batavia, and today Jakarta) (Xu, 2022; National Maritime Museum, 2025). This highlights how planning and organizational methods, that were used in internal colonies were 'exported' to and imposed on external colonies.

PARALLELS BETWEEN INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL SETTLER COLONIAL STRUCTURES

The character of colonialism underwent a significant transformation in the 16th century, driven largely by technological advancements, especially in navigation, which enabled European powers to travel further and establish control over more remote territories (Webster et al., 2025). This expansion

of territorial reach and the drive towards more efficient technology and economies was mirrored both externally in overseas colonies but also internally within national borders as internal colonies were created.

Dynamics that one can find in both kinds of settler colonial projects include attempts to control the social sphere, regulate the economic participation and marginalize them politically, which then often results in segregation and cultural marginalization and suppression (Haas, 2023).

A strong parallel between internal and external settler colonial projects lies in their use of planning and land division strategies. Internal colonisation schemes, such as those in the Netherlands, often mirrored the design principles applied in overseas territories. For example, the planning of the Beemster polder in early 17th-century Holland exemplified a form of spatial organization that would later be transferred to colonial settings, such as Batavia in the Dutch East Indies. Xu (2022) describes the concept of the 'perfect map,' rooted in early modern Dutch land culture, as central to both forms of settler projects. These maps represented a vision of control and order that was imposed on both domestic and colonial landscapes.

In both contexts, settler colonialism brought about the displacement and transformation of existing ways of life. Wolfe (1994) argues that colonial logic often entails the destruction of existing modes of production in favour of more 'efficient' systems designed to serve capitalist extraction. This idea was not limited to external colonies; it was also applied within Europe, where rural or marginal areas were redeveloped to integrate them into the capitalist economy. In the Netherlands, this process of internal colonisation occurred through the reclamation of land from the oceans, while in Germany rural eastern territories were resettled with 'West Germans' in an effort to vitalize the region with what was perceived as a more advanced economic mindset (Van de Grift, 2015).

The expansion of global trade networks under European colonial rule played a key role in this process, facilitating the integration of isolated regions into global capitalist networks. This shift was driven by the demand for cash crops and natural resources, encouraging the adoption of capitalist modes of production in both external colonies and domestic territories. Thus, internal colonisation projects shared with their external counterparts a logic of territorial control, economic extraction, and sociocultural transformation.

The Enlightenment, dominant in Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries, provided both ideological support and critical tools for colonial expansion. On one hand, Enlightenment ideals of progress and rationality were invoked to justify colonial rule, under the guise of bringing 'civilization' to the so-called periphery. On the other hand, Enlightenment principles, such as universal human rights and reason were also later mobilized in critiques of empire and exploitation. These dual legacies reflect the ambivalence of Enlightenment thoughts, which simultaneously supported imperial ambition and planted the seeds for its contestation (Aubin et al., 2025; Ivison, 2025).

The belief in human exceptionalism and the capacity to reshape the world through scientific knowledge played a significant role in both internal and external colonialism. These ideas justified interventions into natural and social environments, positioning humans as separate from and superior to other life forms (Tsing, 2012). Whether it was the drainage of wetlands in Europe or the mapping and division of tropical colonies, the ethos of control, rationalization, and progress unified these seemingly distinct colonial formations.

Despite these overlaps, scholarly definitions of colonialism have often focused predominantly on external projects, thereby excluding internal colonisation from the political discourse, but often also from the academic discourse. This thesis uses a definition of colonialism that considers both internal and external forms of territorial and social domination as colonial structures.

In external colonial projects one of the justifications used was the narrative of ‘civilizing missions’. Often the colonised populations were narrated as ‘backward’ and ‘uncivilized’ by colonisers, creating the wish in the colonisers to ‘civilize’ and ‘modernize’ these cultures (Villafuerte, 2020). In internal colonial projects people usually do not justify the project by calling it a ‘civilizing mission’ but they claim to make the land more ‘productive and efficient’, and often also to create a ‘better’ society. When talking about the ocean, the ocean is often framed as controlling the ocean and nature in order to have as little chance as possible for the forces and power of nature to take over or destroy the ‘civilized lands’ of the colonisers. Pomeranz (2005) notes that this justification of a ‘civilizing mission’ can never ‘succeed’ for the coloniser as the reason for their colonisation would be accomplished and their presence would be obsolete. This highlights how this justification is simply a nonsensical and racist narrative that served the bigger motive of empire expansion.

Importantly, internal colonialism was not limited to European contexts. In colonised territories such as the Dutch East Indies, the concept was employed to organize and direct migration into the ‘new’ lands (Van de Grift, 2015). This demonstrates how domestic colonial strategies were replicated and adapted in overseas colonial settings to serve the broader goals of imperial expansion and control.

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN AND NATURE RELATIONS

It is crucial to examine the ontological foundations of colonial narratives in order to understand their logic and development. This section will analyse perceptions of human-nature relations, focusing on the differentiation between human perceptions of ocean and land spaces. It will also explore the relation to the concept of land ownership.

Human Exceptionalism

Human exceptionalism reflects the perception that nature exists to be shaped and controlled by humans (Henriques, 2025). In this tradition the act of land reclamation is celebrated as a symbol of human power over the natural world. By framing the ocean as something to be conquered, the Dutch narrative around land reclamation elevates human action to a god-like status, reinforcing the idea that humans are separate from and superior to nature. This view also has implications for how the human relationships with the natural world are framed. The transformation of ocean spaces into ‘usable’ land is usually celebrated as an engineering marvel. But reclamation projects come at a cost as they alter ecosystems. However, the cultural perception that the ocean is a ‘blank slate’ for human use can overshadow these environmental consequences, as the focus tends to be on the benefits of reclaiming land rather than the ecological costs of doing so.

A related concept is *terra nullius*, which refers to land that is perceived as ‘unowned’ or empty. This idea was particularly used to justify the colonisation of Australia, where the British subjugated local populations and appropriated the land based on the assumption that it was vacant and unclaimed. The concept of *terra nullius* frames nature as empty or valueless, not because it is devoid of life or

importance, but because it is not recognized as useful or meaningful by the colonising power. Thus, what is considered 'empty' is always framed through the lens of human valuation, making it a tool for exploitation rather than an objective assessment of the land's inherent qualities.

Anthropocentrism, a concept closely tied to human exceptionalism, positions humans as the most significant and superior forms of life in relation to other species. This idea has been dominant in many streams of Western philosophical thought, with thinkers like Aristotle and Kant contributing to its development (Boslaugh, 2013). While both human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism place humans in a central role, they differ in their relation to nature: anthropocentrism sees humans as the most significant form of life within the natural world, whereas human exceptionalism separates humans from nature entirely, asserting their superiority over it.

Aspects of human exceptionalist and anthropocentric thought can be found in Abrahamic religious traditions. For example the creation story in the Christian Bible tells a story of god creating humans in gods own image and many interpretations reflect upon this story concluding that humans are separate from the rest of the natural world and are tasked with the domination over the kingdom earth, which was gifted by god to humankind (Boslaugh, 2013; Anderson & Perrin, 2018). While this interpretation has been contested and reinterpreted over time, the relationship between humans and nature remains a central point of discourse within Judeo-Christian ontologies. These debates are not exclusive to 'Western' or Judeo-Christian contexts. However, other traditions, such as Classical Indian philosophy, have also addressed similar questions, though often in ways that differ from 'Western' naturalist thought (Chatterjee, 2021; Anderson & Perrin, 2018).

The belief in human superiority over nature became more popular during the Enlightenment period, supported by movements such as humanism and rationalism. In this context, nature was often viewed as a resource to be exploited and transformed according to human needs and desires (Von Redecker, 2020). Later, the rise of Darwinism and evolutionary theory challenged the idea of human uniqueness, suggesting that humans are not fundamentally different from other life forms but rather part of a broader process of evolution (Olafson, 2019).

Bhandar (2018) exemplifies this dynamic of framing one culture as superior with an example of a settler colonial state: *'The Zionist return to Palestine incorporated both Christian theological and Enlightenment perspectives on history that posited the Jews on the side of modernity in opposition to the Orientalist world of the Arab, who became for the Jewish, as for Christian Europeans, a backward, inferior people.'* This dynamic is symbolic of a broader dynamic in which human exceptionalism and the exploitation of nature intersect with colonial ideologies.

Perception of ocean vs land spaces

The notion that land reclamation is not perceived as a form of colonialism highlights a significant cultural and conceptual distinction between ocean spaces and land. This perception suggests a deeper ideology, where the ocean, as a natural resource or space, is viewed as something to be controlled and reclaimed, while land, on the other hand, is seen as a valuable, stable, and productive resource.

In many cultures, including Dutch society, ownership of land implies control, wealth, and the power to shape the environment for human use. Historically, land was often the foundation of wealth and power, particularly in agrarian or industrial societies. The transformation of land through practices like land reclamation is framed as an act of mastery over nature, one that elevates human achievement and consequently feeds into an ideology of human exceptionalism. In contrast, ocean spaces have often been regarded as untamed, uncontrolled, and sometimes less valuable than land. The ocean was perceived as an unpredictable, chaotic force, one that can be hostile but is usually not considered a space for human ownership or settlement in the same way that land is. This attitude can be traced back to colonial attitudes where the ocean, as an element of nature, was often viewed as 'empty' or 'unclaimed,' and thus available for human intervention, much like the concept of terra nullius which was employed to frame Australia as an empty land, which therefore needed colonisation (Keenan, 2020; Boisen, 2012).

When the Dutch reclaimed land from the sea, it was often framed as a restoration or reclaiming of land that was not previously inhabited or owned. This reflects the colonial mindset that some spaces, particularly those not previously inhabited or directly controlled by humans, are grounds for colonisation, even if they are part of a natural environment like the sea and have many different species inhabiting them. In the case of land reclamation, the Dutch often frame their actions not as colonising an unclaimed land, but rather as restoring or creating something new, emphasizing the human control over nature narrative rather than colonial conquest.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative methods such as museum ethnography and exhibit analysis will be used to find out how people engage with the narrative of polderism, as the research question aims to uncover the connection between internal colonialism and narratives of control that impact the perceptions of a Dutch identity. Museums are chosen because they are considered to be places of education and often engage with local history, creating a narrative around the national history and consequently also about a national identity. Often museums are thought of as institutions, but that is only a simplification. A museum is not only made up by the institution but also the people working there, such as curators, educators, and designers, but also by the architecture, visitors, objects and their displays and the cultural assumptions underlying these (Macdonald, 2002). Museums are therefore also in constant flux as the people and practices change and new perspectives and stories are told (Mason & Sayner, 2018).

It is important to mention here that history and its narratives are historical constructs and subjective in themselves as they must be examined through the context in which they were produced but also consumed. Generally, we should think about how the understanding of the past as an objective and unchangeable reality is impacted by the ones creating these narratives of the past. The past is only available to us in its fragmented and deeply personal state as it can only manifest as representations from people's individual perspectives and realities. Corresponding to that is the thought of knowledge as unchangeable facts and a totality, where we should also look at the context of this knowledge production and its purpose (Trouillot, 1995; Broekhoven, 2019). Trouillot (1995) even called this phenomenon a fetishization of facts, which helps to reject any positioning by a researcher

or scholar as it is likely to be dismissed as ideologically tainted. As the narratives about history are always impacted by the person narrating and their context, it should be necessary to reflect upon one's positionality. A narrative of the past can give an insight into the narrator's positionality also by looking at the things the narrator disregards or focuses on. When analysing a narrative, we also have to examine the things that are left out of the story, as the silence can also give us deeper insights into the positionality and context of production (Trouillot, 1995). As curators will never be able to retell history in all its facets, we should look at the histories told and the ones left out (Broekhoven, 2019).

It is also important to acknowledge that not only the curator and museum context and positionality impact the stories and histories in museums but also the visitors and how they perceive the narratives, which are told. Generally, the meaning of things is dependent on the person perceiving them and the context in which one perceives them. Therefore, my positionality also impacts my analysis.

My context as a researcher in this project is that I have been familiar with the concept of internal colonisation due to some previous research on the Noordoostpolder. I have been living in an imperial and capitalist society all my life as a white person and have been heavily impacted by these ideologies, though a difference between the Netherlands and my home country Germany might be the history education and the corresponding reflection within these societies. It is to note that in Germany people rarely talk about colonisation and decolonisation as Germany had to give up all its external colonies after the first World War, the former German colonies were then considered to be part of another imperial power and their history (Humanity in Action, 2005; Bechhaus-Gerst, 2012). This might be the reason why many people in Germany do not know much about their country's colonial history.

As museums are seen as places of education and historical truths, the threshold to question the authority and supposed 'neutrality' gets very high. Usually there is no reflection or use of sources in museums that would support the statements made, but the narratives are often presented in a way that might make one think of this history as the only truth. This can result in several problems, for example the naturalization of systematic injustices, if the roots and consequences are not explored (Riedler, 2023). Connecting this to the case of the Netherlands, if museums tell a story of colonialism and domination but portray it as a phase that lies in the past and do not reflect on the consequences and context in which this happened and the ongoing legacies, people might understand the exhibit as a celebration of the power and domination or even as a justification of hierarchies. As the illusion of neutrality can legitimize hierarchies with White 'Western' people on the top, we should unveil the myth of neutrality and stop reproducing this reductionist narrative and acknowledge the multiplicity of histories and perspectives (Warsame, 2018).

While it is of course necessary to simplify histories and not take all perspectives into account because that would not be possible, by presenting history from only one perspective, one risks disregarding the diversity of reality, consequently promoting an imaginary of a single and total truth (Riedler, 2023). National museums have often reflected the perspectives and histories with the ruling class. The perspectives of marginalized people and histories have historically been considered less valuable (Mason & Sayner, 2018). Recently, more attempts to include a more diverse array of voices, especially systematically marginalized voices, tend to be focused. As Susan Crane (2000) argued: *'being collected means being valued and remembered institutionally; being displayed means being*

incorporated into the extra-institutional memory of the museum visitors'. This statement highlights that decisions of display are not neutral; they reflect the values and priorities of the institution, the curators, and the historical narratives they choose to uphold. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise a museum as *'an institution that categorizes and orders knowledge'* (Rassool, 2018).

During the 20th century this perception of a single truth was adapted and some museums started leaving more room for various voices or left room for the interpretation of the visitor. This can be traced back to poststructuralist thinking, in which the context of the examination and creation but also the positionality of the observer is essential for the perceptions and conclusions drawn (Riedler, 2023).

The feeling of belonging to a state or nation was also promoted through the shift from private collections of wealthy people for wealthy people to public museums open to the public. The perception of the museum was to represent the nation, which moved the role of the monarch more into the background. People visiting the museum could now identify as part of the nation rather than being subjects of monarchs. This also had the potential to promote a shared national identity. As national museums are usually regulated by the state, the information and history one gets presented with is usually also controlled by the state (Riedler, 2023). Foucault (1980) argued that this is a mechanism aimed at maintaining the power of the state.

Museums notably always take objects from their context to place them into a constructed context within the museum, imposing the museums or curators understanding of the object, making this process intrinsically artificial (Riedler, 2023). Nevertheless, it has become more common to reexamine objects and exhibitions to look for the 'hidden' stories of people that were not the most privileged and powerful (Rice, 2009).

MUSEUM ETHNOGRAPHY

Museum ethnography will focus on exhibit analysis, participant observations and semi-structured interviews to understand how people engage with exhibits related to internal and external colonisation. The research will be conducted in two museums in the Netherlands, specifically those focused on Dutch colonialism or polderism, the museums chosen are:

Het Scheepvaart National Maritime Museum

This museum focusses on external colonialism and currently has an exhibit regarding the impact of the colonial past on people's lives (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025). Furthermore, it highlights the Dutch history with the sea and describes the Netherlands as a maritime nation. Since 2001 the National Maritime Museum has been more focused on presenting exhibits about (external) colonialism, slavery and the Dutch 'golden age' (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025d).

The building the museum is located in is called 's Lands Zeemagazijn and was formerly used as a warehouse, which was built in the 17th century. The National Maritime Museum moved into the building in 1973 (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025e).

Museum Schokland

This museum focusses on the regional history of polderism and the war against the sea of the Dutch. It tells the story of the former peninsula and island Schokland, which became part of the Noordoostpolder landscape and has become a UNESCO world heritage site in 1995. (Museum Schokland, n.d.). Schokland had been a peninsula until the 15th century, when it had become an island. The last inhabitants had to leave the island in 1859 due to the island slowly being swallowed by the sea. In the 1940s the island was included in the Zuiderzee reclamation project and became part of the Noordoostpolder (UNESCO, 2025b).

The museum was opened in 1947 in the Enserkerk and renovated in the 60s (unknown, n.d.). The main exhibition about the history of the area is a permanent exhibition.

Exhibit analysis

Firstly I will look at the exhibition myself and analyse the methods used and the message conveyed in the exhibit, also called the poetics of museum display, entailing the interactional, organizational and representational elements in the exhibits.

The exhibit analysis will examine how the museum presents the narrative of colonialism, focusing on the strategies used to convey the significance of internal and external colonialism in Dutch history. To understand their intentions behind the exhibit's design interviews with museum curators and employees can be conducted. A visual and a narrative analysis will be used to analyse the exhibits narrative. Comparing how different museums approach the narrative of colonialism and its connections to Dutch identity will be valuable in order to compare the museums narratives. The information will be collected by the help of photographs and field notes.

A focus of the exhibit analysis will be the way how the places and people that were colonised are or are not mentioned in the exhibit. Since there has been a shift in the narratives and communication about colonialism in museums in recent years, it will be interesting to see if internal colonial projects are reflected upon in a different way than external settler colonial projects.

Looking at the use of the 'other' and the distinction between an 'us' and 'them' can highlight more invisible understandings of belonging but it can also give us an impression what person/people has/have created this exhibition and who they expected or aimed to address in their exhibit (Broekhoven, 2019; Modest et al. 2018). Narratives of 'us' and 'them' and many prejudices can arise from structural racism in societies and often become invisible for privileged people as their own positionality can be hard to uncover as it seems too natural and people might see their perspective as universal (Broekhoven, 2019).

The narrative in museums about external colonialism has shifted from a narrative of the 'other', which was seen as 'exotic' and/or primitive, to a narrative that acknowledges a more multidimensional view that does not neglect the agency of the 'other' (Bennett, 2009; Broekhoven, 2019).

The effort to 'decolonize' museums has been topic of discussion since the 1970s (Broekhoven, 2019), though some scholars, often identifying as indigenous have offered resistance to historical misrepresentation for decades before (Deloria, 1998; Doxtator, 1988; Valaskakis, 1993). Due to the increase in independence movements, ethnographic museums started assessing their work with

colonial topics more critically and since the 1990s more ethnographic museums have started considering the colonial history and legacy more critically.

Kreps (2011) describes 'decolonisation' work as the act of '*acknowledging the historical, colonial contingencies under which collections were acquired; revealing Eurocentric ideology and biases in the Western museum concept, discourse and practice; [and] acknowledging and including diverse voices and multiple perspectives*'.

It is to mention that this 'decolonisation' work can be counterintuitive to the curators and museum staff, as they have been socialized to prioritize or even only recognize certain ways of knowledge production. Therefore, structural injustices might seem natural to some people (Broekhoven, 2019). Some scholars like Kassim (2017) question if this 'decolonisation' of museums is even possible in a system that is so deeply embedded in power structures and systems that the 'decolonisation' process aims to dismantle. '*Decolonizing is deeper than just being represented*' is Kassim's (2017) concern when museums claim to have 'decolonised' their work.

Other scholars such as Marion Cadora (2020) question if an institution so intrinsically colonial like a museum can even be decolonised. She focusses in her work on the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, which is an ethnographic museum. She points out the numerous efforts of the Tropenmuseum to engage more critically with their collections and '*more precisely reconciles Dutch viewers to their own colonial histories by revealing how museum collections are complicit in the unequal structures of colonial power*'. In 'decolonised exhibitions' a space is often created that encourages '*Dutch viewers to contemplate their own complicity and positionality in ongoing forms of racism and colonialism*'. Cadora (2020) generally notices that Dutch exhibitions about colonialism often focus not on the colonised peoples and lands but rather on the role of the Dutch in their colonial history with a 'decolonial' narrative at hand. The changes in narratives and 'decolonisation' work in museums often do not address the colonial legacies of the institution itself by restructuring or dismantling the institutional organization.

Scholars like Modest and Lelijveld (2018) have written about the strength of words and the impact they can have, especially in the context of museum narratives. The communication of museums on labels is crucial, but also methods of acquisition and engagement are fields in which 'decolonisation' work is crucial. Scholars like Boast (2011), Onciul (2015) and Robbins (2017) are raising concerns about the neo-liberal character of these 'museum decolonisation' projects as it is also crucial to examine the stakeholders and decision-making processes that are usually invisible for the visitor.

Ravelli (2007) uses a framework that distinguishes between organizational, representational and interactional communication in museums. The organizational communication regards the thematic and spatial arrangements of an exhibit and how organization influences the narrative. The second aspect is representational communication, within which the narratives constructed by the museum are analysed. The stories told are analysed but also the stories not told, which can be considered silences. The last aspect is the interactional communication, looking at which and how visitors engage with different elements such as descriptions, labels or other interactive elements. Here the focus lies on how the visitor interprets the elements, whereas in the representational and organizational communication the focus lies on the museum and the narrative they want to use.

Silences are unavoidable as it is not possible to tell a story from all perspectives. Silences are often perceived as ‘cultural amnesia’ but the trend to acknowledge silences as mediums of not only forgetting but also remembering has become more prominent (Munroe, 2016; Thorpe, 2016) especially in memorial museums or sites (Mason & Sayner, 2018). Sometimes communities might want to stay silent, for example if they consider their knowledge sacred (Cowell, 2015) or if it would bring shame to the community (Carnegie, 2006). Museums should ask themselves if it is reasonable to ask individual people to share their stories as the public sharing of deeply personal stories can also come at a cost for the individual telling the story. This ethical question highlights the need for museums to look not only at their goal but also the effect of uncovering these stories (Mason & Sayner, 2018).

Silences are culturally and socially constructed as they depend on the context and perception of the communicating entity and the audience (Jaworski, 1993; Jensen, 1973). There are several forms of silences. Silencing people because they are perceived as not having anything ‘valuable’ to say or solely because they are not seen as having the agency or authority to speak can be called ‘essentialist silence’ (Wolfe, 2010). Silences as a form of communication can be very ambiguous as they leave much room for interpretation (Jaworski, 1993), which highly depends on the consumer, but also the context of the silence. A key element of a museum context is for example the museum-visitor interaction and communication. In the context of a museum, silences are usually ‘collective endeavours’ as the exhibitions and museums are based on groups of people, who make decisions (Zerubavel, 2010). Though other aspects such as funding can have a big impact on the narratives displayed as well.

Semi-structured interviews

Conducting interviews with curators and museum staff provided me with insights into the narratives aimed to produce in the exhibits, that were analysed. The interviews gave an insight into the positionality of the staff and the museum. The interviews did not only look at specific exhibits but also investigated current debates and the museum’s reaction to them. The interviews were semi-structured and based on interview guides, but there was room for themes that came up in the conversations. When an interviewee didn’t know about one topic other questions about the same topic were skipped.

During the project it proved a problem to get an interview with a curator or staff of the Schokland Museum. The topic of internal colonisation and the perception of it was then thematised in the other interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

Analysing interviews and ethnographic field notes helped to identify key themes related to the ways visitors understand and engage with the exhibits. The interviews are firstly transcribed and then coded after recurring themes. Variables can be used for recurring themes such as collective national memory, environmental control, and colonialism, domination or technological advancement. Also, the field notes are coded and when possible the same codes are used to compare the data. A mix of

deductive and inductive coding was used as there are some themes are predetermined and some will come up in the analysis.

One has to mention here that the visual data collection is always impacted by the researcher's perceptions and underlying assumptions (Crang, 2009). Therefore, the data I will collect in this research will be impacted by my positionality and context.

ANALYSIS AND COMPARISON OF CASES

CASE STUDY: SCHOKLAND MUSEUM

The main exhibition in Schokland has a linear narrative, organizing the rooms along different periods of time, starting with an overview of Schokland's history in form of a linear timeline ending with the creation of the Noordoostpolder. The museum presents the islanders' history and the changes in the island's landscape, but it ends their story around the polder's construction, not addressing the settlement of the colony. Instead, the exhibit focuses on the 'battle against the sea' and land reclamation, which was of bigger urgency in the time when Schokland was an island.

The museum establishes a narrative of early human intervention in Schokland's landscape, immediately framing land reclamation as an act of asserting control. The museum anchors this theme *'in the Middle Ages, people moved into the peat marsh in order to prepare the land for farming. From 1100 AD, a start was made on large scale reclamation.'* (Plaque: Peat Reclamation, n.d.). *'For the first time, people tried to exert control over nature. A large area was drained and made suitable for agriculture.'* (Plaque: An island in the Zuider Zee, n.d.). This connects land reclamation to the idea of human control over the ocean, repurposing and remodelling the environment for agricultural use.

The narrative shifts from a narrative of control over the ocean to a narrative of unpredictability or even defeat. Despite the islanders' efforts the island was *'by no means a safe place to live. The sea was an unpredictable foe; land erosion caused the island to become smaller and smaller, and storm floods regularly caused major damage and settlement areas. Due to the lack of earnings, the population lived in extreme poverty. By the 19th century the situation had become hopeless. The government saw no future for the Schokkers (inhabitants of Schokland) and the decision was taken to evacuate the island completely. In 1859, the residents of Schokland had to leave their homes and move to the mainland. The island was left almost deserted'* (Plaque: The island's inhabitants, n.d.). Intriguingly, there is no further information on people who did not leave the island, beyond the implication that some stayed.

The battle against the water is described as *'virtually hopeless. Time and again, it proved impossible to maintain the coastline. Bits of the island were constantly being chipped away.'* (Plaque: The battle against the water, n.d.). A narrative of frustration and fruitless efforts is created as the sea is portrayed as a relentless foe.

Yet, whilst fighting a seemingly impossible battle, an alternative narrative of resilience and adaptivity is introduced, drawing on depictions and descriptions of people traveling to Schokland, like Henry

Monnier and Henk Rotgans. Monnier seemingly impressed by the adaptivity and determination of the inhabitants of Schokland and described them as ‘*amphibian people*’ (plaque *Souvenir de la Hollande*, n.d.). This description of the inhabitants of Schokland highlights how well they learned to adapt to the water dominated landscape. It seems that, to Monnier, water is the natural habitat of the Schokkers.

Then the museum frames the local history as ‘*a symbol of the Netherlands and the Dutch people.*’ (plaque: *World heritage Schokland*, n.d.). The exhibit transforms ‘Schokland’s fight against the sea’ into a broader national symbol, despite a lack of other mentions of national identity or symbols in this exhibit.

While the exhibit remains relatively quiet on a national identity, its symbolic weight is amplified by the UNESCO website, which also frames Schokland as a national symbol. Schokland is described by UNESCO (2025b) as ‘*symbolizes the heroic, age-old struggle of the people of the Netherlands against the encroachment of the water.*’ This highlights again how a local struggle is used to create a general narrative of a Dutch people.

The UNESCO entry adapts a celebratory tone, not only describing Schokland but also the broader Zuiderzee project as ‘*one of the greatest and most visionary human achievements of the twentieth century*’. The entry further describes the project as ‘*mute testimony to the skill and fortitude of the Dutch people in the face of this never-ceasing natural threat.*’ (UNESCO, 2025b). This description highlights an appreciation of technological advancements that help gaining control over natural forces and environments. UNESCO frames the Zuiderzee project as one of the ‘greatest’ achievements of humanity in the twentieth century on a global scale. This implies an understanding of greatness that is based on the idea of development and making land more profitable. Compared to other great human achievements such as the development of vaccines, antibiotics and anticolonial and feminist liberation movements of the twentieth century, which aimed at improving and/or saving people’s lives, the Zuiderzee was rather focused on economic prosperity and controlling of environments.

The museum tries to make the local history more relevant for the contemporary society by giving the visitors an assignment regarding protection from water. The museum asks people to draw ideas to protect houses from water as the ‘*sea level is still rising and the Netherlands is subsiding. There will certainly come a time when the Dutch want to improve their sea defences again.*’ (Plaque: *Assignment*, n.d.). This interactive element displays many different drawings (predominantly by children), from houses surrounded by walls or built in whales, to houses constructed on stilts. While

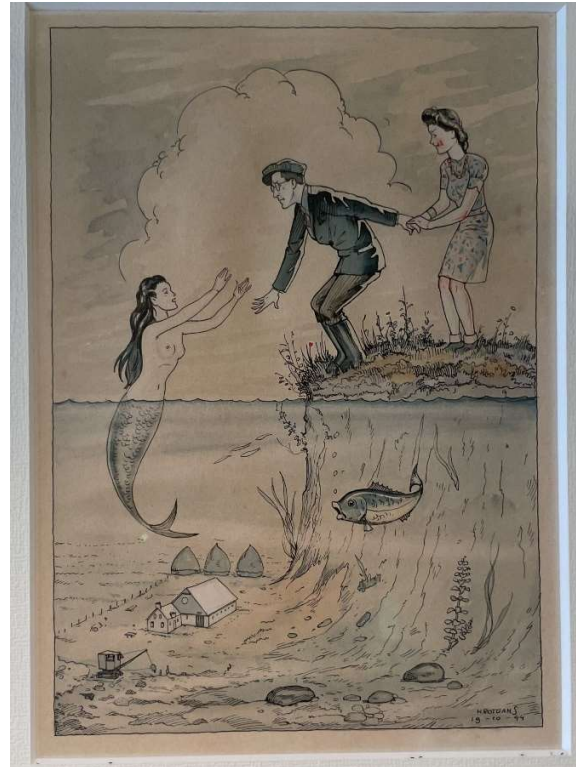


Figure 4: Figure 3: *Zeemeermin* by Henk Rotgans (photo by author)

various forms of dikes and seawalls appear in the drawings, the concept of creating a surrounding polder landscape is absent in the drawings.

Historically, protecting yourself from the sea often demanded collaboration with others, especially for larger scale projects like polders. During the Middle Ages, Dutch people started building polders and dikes to prevent flooding and developed a consensus model that was called the 'polder model'. To 'polder' means to cooperate. The term is also often used in Dutch politics today (De Vries, 2014; Van Keulen, personal communication, June 4th, 2025).

The museum does not contain any mentions of colonialism. Yet indirectly mentions external colonialism by talking about shipworms that were brought back to the Netherlands on VOC ships (Plaque: The plaque of the Zuiderzee, n.d.). These shipworms were seen as a plague in Schokland as they reduced the effectivity of wooden seawalls and dikes. Internal colonialism on the other hand is also solely implied but not explicitly mentioned. It is described as land reclamation and is not referred to as colonial. The exhibit also does not thematize the settlement of people in the polder as it ends with the creation of the polder. The management and planning of the polder regarding the social and cultural sphere are not mentioned in the exhibit.

CASE STUDY: NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

For this analysis, I will focus on two permanent exhibits at the National Maritime Museum: *Republic at Sea* and *Shadows on the Atlantic*, as they are the most relevant to the topic of colonialism and maritime identities.

The exhibit the *Republic at Sea* offers no interactive elements and primarily targets an adult audience. In contrast to that, *Shadows on the Atlantic* works more with interactive elements and provides the audience with family questions designed to make the complex and often difficult topics, such as colonial violence and its impact on human lives, more accessible to a broader audience. Beyond these two exhibits, the museum offers some exhibitions targeted at small children and a replica of a former VOC ship, which is used as a more interactive exhibition space. The exhibits are organized along themes such as whaling, the historical evolution of the city of Amsterdam or maritime expansion of the Netherlands. The *Republic at Sea* exhibit is focused on the maritime expansion and conflicts.

Republic at Sea

According to the museum the exhibition *Republic at Sea* has two parts, the first part showcasing the economic wealth that was generated due to the maritime expansion of the Netherlands. The exhibit emits a feeling of opulence, depicting scenes of trade, portraits of the wealthy or naval conquests and conflicts. The use of oil paintings in ornate golden and wooden frames, alongside intricate ship models and various trinkets, creates a narrative of opulence and domination. The narrative shifts in the second part according to the museum website. The second part of the exhibition is more focused

on external colonialism and the corresponding violence and slavery (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025b).

Upon entering the first room of the exhibit *Republic at Sea*, the Netherlands is described to visitors as *'defined by water'*. Life with the water brings *'frequent floods, but also many opportunities for fishing and trade'* (Plaque: Republic at sea, n.d.). As *'water played an important role in the lives of many inhabitants of the Dutch Republic. Consequently, a marine culture emerged.'* And the *'Dutch language was enriched by nautical expressions'* (Plaque: no title (from section maritime culture), n.d.). These plaques frame the water as a threat but also as an opportunity, shaping the Dutch people's lives in many ways.

The exhibit presents a specific understanding of prosperity as rooted in global economic dominance. A plaque notes that *'for two centuries it had been one of the most prosperous nations on earth, but the Napoleonic wars had impoverished and worn out the country'* (Plaque: no title (wall with royal barge model), n.d.). This two-century span referred to is the period often referred to as the 'golden age' of the Netherlands, the time of intense imperial expansion and global trade dominance.

This economic wealth is attributed to *'developments in shipbuilding and navigation [which] intensified contact between different cultures [...] The first contact between societies was seldom peaceful [...] Everyday violence, extortion and racism were all of the result of the European urge for expansion. The Dutch Republic was deeply complicit in this. The acknowledgment of the complicity of the Dutch in the violence and racism fuelled by imperial motives of expansion is necessary in a museum context like this. Shipping whetted an insatiable appetite for products from afar, influenced the arts, and increased knowledge of cultures and customs that were considered both alien and exotic.'* (Plaque: no title (from section water connects worlds), n.d.). This statement creates a direct link between desires for foreign goods and knowledge to the violent dynamics of expansion but also highlights some dynamics of Orientalism, as the products are described as 'exotic' and foreign to the Dutch, creating also a narrative of an 'Other' (Othering). The museum acknowledges, that maritime expansion was usually connected to violence and racism and that this acknowledgement is necessary in a context of a museum that thematises maritime histories.

The establishment of a vast trading network was made possible by *'Shareholders [who] invested their money which the trading companies used to carry out their wars. Once the enemy was defeated the VOC or WIC took its place and started trading with the local population - in this way Dutch investors even made a profit from war.'* (Plaque: no title (from section war for profit, profit from war), n.d.). The word 'even' in the previous sentence expresses a feeling of accomplishment but also surprise about how profitable war can be (usually for the winning side). The headline of this section reveals the motivation to fight not solely for defence but rather to make profits to enrich oneself. It also



Figure 5: *War for profit, profit from war* (photo by author)

suggests a perpetuating cycle as war is initiated *because* it promises profit, and the profits gained *from* that war then fund further military expansion, creating a continuous loop of aggression and accumulation. This cyclical statement implies a systemic and perhaps insatiable drive for wealth and expansionist conflicts.

As trading networks had existed before the Dutch and other imperial powers set to sea, the trading routes were often conquered and networks taken over by the imperial powers. The museum's claim that the '*monopoly of the Dutch East India Company was founded mainly at Portugal's expense.*' (Plaque: Siege of the Portuguese town of Galle in Sri Lanka, 1640, n.d.) reveals a problematic and singular focus on the imperial perspectives. Statements like this completely neglect the experiences of the local populations and the profound social, cultural and economic impacts the imperial powers had. To frame the shift in power in Sri Lanka almost exclusively as a loss for Portugal diminishes, or even erases, the devastating impacts on colonised societies. This curatorial choice strikes me as particularly insensitive, minimizing the widespread suffering and dispossession endured by non-European peoples under colonial expansion.

The National Maritime Museum's depiction of Dutch colonial history highlights significant crimes against humanity yet often mitigates their severity through linguistic choices and narrative omissions. For instance, the exhibit names '*Jan Pieterszoon Coen [who] destroyed Jayakarta in 1690*' (Plaque: The Roadstead of Batavia, n.d.) and acknowledges that the VOC '*murdered and exiled the people of Banda Island to establish a monopoly on the protection of nutmeg*' (Plaque: What was the VOC?, n.d.). However, the museum fails to identify the Bandanese atrocity as a genocide, despite historical evidence confirming that fewer than seven percent of the local population survived, amounting to a near-total annihilation of the local population (nationaal archief, n.d.; Dhont, 2023). Not mentioning the term genocide arguably downplays the scale of the violence.

Furthermore, while the museum names Coen in relation to Jayakarta, it does not link him to the Bandanese genocide, despite his direct command of the massacre and subsequent reward with a second term as governor-general for 'securing' the island (nationaal archief, n.d.). This narrative choice is particularly striking given the historical awareness of his role, including his nickname, '*the Butcher of Banda*', among Indonesian people (Van der Rol, 2012).

The museum does, however, admit its past reluctance to fully confront the Dutch history critically, stating that it '*avoided telling the story of the VOC's involvement in oppression and slavery aboard the ships. Research has now revealed the structural violence of that period. Today, the National Maritime Museum shows that aspect of the VOC too, and the inequality that colonial trade fostered*' (Plaque: The city of Amsterdam helps build Amsterdam, n.d.). The claim that '*research has only now revealed*' this structural violence is debatable, as awareness of atrocities like the Bandanese genocide must have existed at the time, as Coen was even celebrated and rewarded for his doings in Banda (nationaal archief, n.d.). This plaque reflects a colonial perspective which now seems to apologise for and more critically reflect on their history, but it is not a new narrative, especially not for the people who have suffered from the colonial regime and have had those atrocities reflected in their histories for a long time.

In 1893 a statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen was erected in his hometown Hoorn which has been the topic of debates since its erection (The Contested Histories Initiative, 2022). The statue still stands

today and is defended by the local counsellor who argues *'he may be a crook, but he's our crook'*. The public opinion remains divided, with some arguing that one should not *'condemn the man outright, we need to consider him within his environment, that is, the early seventeenth century. Europeans saw themselves as better than everybody else, slavery was everywhere and treatment of defeated populations generally cruel.'* (Van der Rol, 2012). *'Critics continue to call for the statue's removal, but local authorities and museums are reluctant to take a moral position in the debate'* (The Contested Histories Initiative, 2022; Gordin, 2024).

The National Maritime Museum uses the quote *'no trade without war'* as a headline for a plaque, though it does not attribute the quote directly to Coen, who this quote is often attributed to (Crawford, 2022). The plaque primarily offers general information on Dutch wars. The statement is problematic as it reflects no room for collaboration and solely the idea of an economic monopoly. It reflects a narrative of an imperial and capitalist mindset that assumes resources, lands, animals and peoples can be conquered and used to the elites liking.

The glorified representation of the statue and other colonial objects does tell a crucial part of the history of the Netherlands, but it also neglects a lot of details. An uncritical retelling of history risks a problematic narrative that is solely proud and does not reflect on the structural and social violence created by violently extracting wealth from other lands and people.

The *Republic at Sea* exhibitions second part is thematizing colonialism and the corresponding violence according to the museum. A painting called *'Portrait of Lieutenant Admiral Cornelius Tromp and an unknown man'* is shown (see fig. 6). The plaque next to the painting describes the scene in more detail: *'Self-assured Cornelius Tromp (1629 to 1691) poses next to a globe and sea charts. An African man presents him with a plumed helmet. We do not know his identity. Tromp is also portrayed alongside a black man in another painting. It is possible that the admiral had an African servant. At the time this was considered the height of luxury.'* (Portrait of Lieutenant Cornelius Tromp and an unknown man, n.d.). The museum's website further clarifies its curatorial intent, stating the painting *'features a man thought to have been his slave—his name unknown but important that he's now acknowledged within the scene. In this way, grand naval paintings to sit alongside more thought-provoking stories around slavery to give a wider perspective on colonialism'* (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025b). However, the mere acknowledgement of the presence of the Black man, particularly when presented as possession and a symbol of 'luxury', raises questions about its actual impact on the museum's overall narrative. The supposed 'thought-provoking' nature of this



Figure 6: Portrait of Lieutenant Cornelius Tromp and an unknown man by Ferdinand Bol, 1676 (photo by author)

specific display is, at best, debatable, and leans more towards wishful thinking than genuine critical engagement with the realities of slavery within such a celebratory context.

A similar dynamic appears in the 'Portrait of Vice Admiral Pieter Gilles Schey and an unknown man' (n.d.) where a white Dutch admiral poses with a black man, who is kneeling next to the admiral but 'the meaning of the kneeling man and the angry dog in this painting is not known.' (Plaque: Portrait of Vice Admiral Pieter Gilles Schey and an unknown man, n.d.). In both this piece and the 'Portrait of Lieutenant Admiral Cornelius Tromp and an unknown man' the Black men are acknowledged as present, their visibility undeniable, yet the museum creates new silences around their characters.

The museum misses an opportunity to reflect on the body language within these paintings. The Black men are depicted with submissive gestures, notably kneeling and gazing upward at the admirals. Furthermore, the presence of the dog in the Schey portrait, with its angry stance, injects a strong element of aggression directed towards the Black man, rendering the image quite hostile. Adding to this portrayal of dominance, the admiral in the Schey painting extends his hand in a silencing gesture towards the kneeling figure, as if commanding him to wait or remain silent. These visual cues, left unaddressed by the museum, convey dynamics of hierarchy and control inherent to external colonial oppression and exploitation. Analysing these visual cues, rather than simply noting their ambiguity, could offer a more critical interpretation of power dynamics embedded in these historical representations.

In the 'Brazilian Landscape' painting, the accompanying plaque critically acknowledges the silence within the painting. It 'presents an Arcadian landscape with palm trees and the sailing boat on the river, but does not show the 25,000 enslaved Africans working for the company on the sugar cane plantations.' (Plaque: Brazilian Landscape, n.d.). This direct reflection on missing histories does a better job of provoking critical thought than the museum's treatment of the two admiral



Figure 7: Portrait of Vice Admiral Pieter Gilles Schey and an unknown man by Jan Weenix, 1693 (photo by author)



Figure 8: Brazilian landscape by Frans Post, ca. 1650 (photo by author)

portraits featuring Black men. While the enslaved people are indeed absent from the *'Brazilian Landscape'* painting, the plaque's explicit acknowledgment of this silence offers a different critical context than the admiral paintings, which, despite depicting Black men, apologetically commodify them and/or create new silences around their identities and experiences.

Generally, the *Republic at Sea* exhibit offers limited engagement with the lived histories of colonised populations, predominantly featuring paintings of naval wars between imperial powers and numerous portraits of wealthy individuals. Too often, the figures depicted in these artworks are not critically problematized; instead, their roles are presented with an apologetic tone, their actions often apologetically framed as products of their era. This curatorial tendency hinders an unpolished and honest engagement with the complexities of colonial violence and exploitation.

In a speech Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explained that the common narrative in 'European' countries regarding colonialism acknowledges that: *'Yes, colonialism happened, but ... And whatever comes after the 'but' is the focus of the story. What the 'but' does is that it absolves. It frees Europe of responsibility of a significant and traceable connection to the African present and it allows Europe to glow in charity.'* (Africa Web TV, 2022).

Shadows on the Atlantic

The exhibition *Shadows on the Atlantic* highlights *'how maritime history is inseparably linked with colonial violence and slavery, and its impact on human lives, both then and now'* according to the museum guide.

This intent is already evident before entering the exhibit as a plaque explains that the Dutch *'colonial history has had a major impact on the way we think about each other today. Both consciously and unconsciously.'* A past bias in the collection practices is further acknowledged: *'Our collection has been for a long time unconsciously collected from a one-sided perspective. People with money and power kept maritime objects that had significance to the Netherlands. At least they thought so. Those objects then ended up in the museum. This influenced the narrative we tell with those objects.'* (Plaque: *Shadows on the Atlantic – a new light on maritime colonialism*). The curators try to tell *'a narrative that gives the objects in our collection a different meaning. More meaning.'* (Plaque: *Shadows on the Atlantic – a new light on maritime colonialism, n.d.*). This introduction frames the exhibit as a deliberate effort to deconstruct traditional narratives and shed new light on the colonial past.

The curators reflect on this bias, stating that *'Many objects in the National Maritime Museum collection were acquired with one objective. Generally, they were made by Dutch people and commissioned by Dutch people, and their purpose was to illustrate the country's triumphant maritime past. But this view of history – through the eyes of a white, male elite – is just one perspective. [...] One object can tell many stories.'* (Plaque: *One object, many stories, n.d.*). This critical reflection of museum practices sets a new tone, indicating the intention of the museum to broaden its historical narratives beyond a singular, dominant perspective.

Some plaques (e.g. *Colonialism in the Netherlands* and *Colonialism lives on, n.d.*) try to raise awareness about the exploitative external colonial system that still carries its legacies in today's

Dutch society. This is achieved by prompting visitors to consider the origins of certain luxury products like cotton or sugar, and by reflecting on *'institutional racism, the groundwork for which was laid in colonial times. People of colour face the negative effects of colonialism every day. Not least in the Netherlands [sic]. In theory, every Dutch person is equal. Yet in practice Dutch people of colour find their opportunities limited by racism, however unintended.'* (Plaque: Colonialism lives on, n.d.).

While this statement acknowledges that colonialism produced ongoing discriminatory structures, its assertion that this racism is 'unintended' can be seen as problematic. This framing can be perceived as an assumptive interpretation. Even if individual racist beliefs might be unintended, labelling structural inequalities as 'unintended mechanisms' is also an (unstated) assumption, that frames structural racism as not intentional mechanisms in societies. This interpretive choice could be seen as softening the critique of systemic racism, even suggesting a nonexistence of deliberate designs in perpetuating structural inequalities.

Throughout the exhibit, the brutal history of colonialism and the enslavement of people is frequently intertwined with references to the luxury goods that the Dutch acquired through their exploitative practices. This approach can be seen in the plaque *'Migration: A booming business'* (n.d.), which notes: *'A new society takes shape in which European newcomers enjoy opportunities and privileges which the original inhabitants and descendants of the enslaved are denied. For Europe's shipping companies, these migrants are a booming business. They ferry the hopeful fortune-seekers to their new future.'* This statement highlights the economic benefits gained by European companies from migrants, though it also implicitly acknowledges the profound inequalities and injustices inflicted upon colonised populations and enslaved peoples within the colonial societies.

The headline *'Without ships, no colonialism'* is a bold and reductionist claim by the museum. While linking the Dutch maritime technology to their colonial history, this statement is fundamentally reductionist and in a broader historical context, inaccurate.

The museum's framing narrows the definition of colonialism to a solely external, overseas phenomenon, with a particular focus on the European scramble for colonies. In that specific historical period, ships undeniably served as the primary, and often only, means for European powers to expand their influence and transport settlers, goods, and military across vast oceans to establish and maintain external colonies. Ships and seafaring certainly opened various options for external colonialism, making colonialism possible on a grand global scale.

However, colonialism is not inherently tied to maritime transport. External colonialism has occurred without ships, often through land-based expansion, for example the Israeli colonisation of Palestinian territories, the Russian colonisation of Siberia, or the Chinese settlements in Tibet. Reducing colonialism to being reliant on a mode of transport not only oversimplifies but distracts from the underlying ideology: the imposition of a new society, designed by settlers, with the explicit aim of displacing or subjugating an existing population. The focus shouldn't lie in the logistical means of transport of settlers, but in the ideology and practice of replacing and dominating existing societies. This headline, therefore, risks oversimplifying a complex global phenomenon and inadvertently excusing and/or neglecting other forms of colonial expansion that did not rely on naval power.

The exhibit explicitly defines colonialism using the Oxford English Dictionary definition, that describes colonialism as *'the practise of acquiring control over another country, occupying it with settlers, and exploiting it economically'*. This definition aligns with those found in other encyclopaedias, reflecting an understanding of colonialism as an inherently external process. Notably, the plaque displaying this definition is one of the rare instances within the museum where a source is cited.

The National Maritime Museum's *Shadows on the Atlantic* exhibit illustrates the clash of worldviews inherent to colonial encounters, especially concerning the concept of land ownership. A plaque titled *'Can land be owned?'*(n.d.) contrasts the Lenape's relationship with their environment with that of the Dutch colonists. It explains that the Lenape *'live with the land, yet they don't see it as their property. For them, the land they live on is a gift from the gods. Like the air you can't own it.'* This highlights a perspective of coexistence with nature in contrast to the Dutch aim to own and dominate nature. The plaque notes that *'Dutch colonists believe it is possible to possess land. They believe they have bought Manahahtáanung (today's Manhattan) from the Lenape.'* This encapsulates the 'Western' concept of private property, which was often used as a basis for colonial claims.

Further plaques within the exhibit connect this difference in worldview to the violent dynamics of colonisation. The plaque *'Reshaping the world'*(n.d.) states that *'colonisers believe that they are entitled to them [territories and materials]. With might and violence, they reshape the world the way they want it.'* This highlights the constant imposition of the will and ideology of the colonial powers. Another plaque then reflects on the racial ideology underpinning this perceived entitlement, stating that colonisers *'believe that being white makes them superior to the indigenous populations, the animals and the environment.'* (Plaque: A system of exploitation, n.d.). This statement exposes the racist hierarchical framework that justified the exploitation of both land and people, providing a lens through which to understand the colonial racism and the perceived entitlement of the colonisers.

The exhibit *Shadows on the Atlantic* explores conceptions of the Atlantic Ocean and how they changed over time. *'In the late Middle Ages, Europeans see the Atlantic Ocean in a different light. Instead of terrifying endless water, they now see opportunities and riches.'* (Plaque: A system of exploitation, n.d.). This statement highlights how with more sophisticated naval technology, an ocean space which was perceived to be threatening changed into an economically rich and exploitable space. The perceived nature of a physical space like the ocean can change over time if people's relationship towards the space change.

On the one hand the exhibit tells the story of the WIC and their aim to monopolize the trade in the Atlantic region. But the WIC *'struggled to maintain its monopoly. In 1734, it ceded all control over the Atlantic trade to private companies'* (Plaque: no title (from section continuity and change), n.d.). This narrative reflects the difficulty to maintain economic and political dominance over trade in the Atlantic region especially if one aims to monopolise such a big region.

But beyond economic control, one is confronted with other narratives of the Atlantic Ocean in this exhibit, for example how *'the Atlantic Ocean symbolises trauma and transformation'* for *'descendants of the enslaved Africans'* (Plaque: Trance Atlantic, n.d.). Here a more personal relationship to the Atlantic Ocean is explained as for many people the Atlantic Ocean reflects more than a trade route. The Atlantic Ocean can be seen to hold the stories and memories of the people

who suffered on journeys over the Ocean and/or died there. On the one hand the term ‘trauma’ reflects the pain and suffering of people that were enslaved and their descendants, reflecting the idea of generational trauma. On the other hand, the Atlantic Ocean symbolises ‘transformation’ reflecting the new lives people started and how their cultures and social structures changed. This narrative is expanded upon when mentioning a *‘powerful spirit so furious that her eyes glow red. The following day, her demonic rage is unleashed across the Atlantic Ocean. It launches a shockwave of emancipation.’* (Plaque: Erzulie Ge Rouge, n.d.). This portrayal of the Atlantic Ocean focuses rather on an emotional and spiritual narrative of the Atlantic Ocean, which offers incentives for liberation and emancipation. The Atlantic Ocean is seen as an active and spiritual entity, rather than a passive thing that can be controlled. This narrative also defines emancipation as not solely a social and political process but also a spiritual event, framing the Atlantic Ocean to be actively fighting for emancipation. One could even read from the ‘demonic rage’ that the Atlantic Ocean has an emotional side and maybe even a moral compass.

A central figure in this exhibit is Yemanya, *‘mother of the Atlantic Ocean, [...] her ability to manage continual change [...] is what enables her to transform pain, grief and sorrow into hope, strength and healing.’* (Plaque: Yemanya, n.d.). She is presented as the *‘primordial goddess of the sea’* whose realm is the Atlantic Ocean, which holds many secrets and echoes *‘the footsteps of ancestors’* (Plaque: Heart of the sea, n.d.). This narrative highlights an endlessness of the Atlantic, as it has been there since before human existence and will continue to exist for much longer. The Atlantic Ocean is perceived as an active and spiritual being and as a source of ancestral memory. This spiritual interpretation of the Atlantic Ocean can be seen as a contrast to the narratives of control and exploitation, as the Atlantic Ocean is perceived as a subject and not object, whose nature cannot be controlled or contained by humans.

The exhibit offers some room for alternative histories by introducing questions researchers have not found answers to. The example of cotton is used: *‘The Taíno, who live on Guanahani (Bahamas) in the 15th century, develop [a] hybrid strain combining cotton from America and Africa: an Atlantic blend that predates colonialism.’* (Plaque: The secret of cotton, n.d.). This hybrid strain highlights that intercontinental connections have existed before the European colonial powers ‘controlled’ the Atlantic Ocean. It also highlights that histories are always incomplete and that new narratives are created and old ones rediscovered. The plaque undermines ‘European’ narratives of the Americas waiting to be ‘discovered’ by the ‘Europeans’ and to be integrated into the ‘European’s’ global system as there have been people crossing the Atlantic Ocean and sharing and trading knowledge and resources earlier. In the ‘Eurocentric’ narrative, the Atlantic Ocean is often portrayed to be an impassable and vast ocean, that was only traversable with ‘European’ maritime technology.

One could argue that colonialism did not only aim to control people and land but also exceed control over history and knowledge. As colonisers wrote and celebrated their histories, they often erased or marginalized histories of colonised peoples. This one-sided focus on some histories constitutes *‘an ugly exercise of brute power’* (Africa Web TV, 2022, n.d.).

It is often a matter of perspective, dependent on the colonisers (and sometimes colonised peoples) perspective what is even considered to be colonialism.

PERCEPTIONS OF COLONIALISM

The different perceptions of what colonialism entails and when something is considered to be colonial are explored in this chapter. This topic was not only explored based on the exhibits framing of colonialism but also discussed in interviews.

In an interview with Ernst van Keulen, an educator at the National Maritime Museum about the perception of colonialism in the Netherlands, he said that *'if you talk about colonialism in [...] the Netherlands, most people will think of colonialism as Dutch being overseas. [...] And by giving it the same name you almost mitigate [...] all the things we did'* (Van Keulen, personal communication, June 4th, 2025). The argument that land reclamation considered colonialism could lead to a trivialization of the external colonial projects and enduring structures is understandable when seeing how proudly people talk about the internal colonies. Even though the internal colonies of Benevolence were horrible prison environments the narrative around them is not very critical. But for both internal and external colonialism the justification of colonies is often based on a narrative of contextualization as colonialism is often relativised by saying 'everyone did it'.

Ernst Van Keulen said: *'You can't compare the impact of colonialism [...] in the Netherlands to the impact of colonialism in in the East or the West'* (Van Keulen, personal communication, June 4th, 2025). I think we can exactly do that and we can notice how the impact differs also if the techniques and structures imposed can be similar. How the impact differed between external and internal colonies should be examined in further detail, but it is notable that the internal colonies were often built on environments that were not as rich in human cultural diversity as the external colonies. In both cases cultures and ideologies were imposed on the population in the colonies but the context of these cultures and how close they were to the native culture differ immensely. The scale and level of brutality also differed between internal and external colonies as external colonies were larger, and numerous atrocities were committed there as this was more rarely the case in internal colonies. Also, if in some cases people were technically enslaved in internal colonies, for example in the 'unfree' colonies of Benevolence, the scale of this enslavement is not comparable to the Transatlantic trade of people.

Immense wealth that was created in the Netherlands through internal and external colonisation is big, but one key difference between them is that external colonies rarely or rather never benefitted from the occupation and colonisation. The internal colonies have sometimes gained much prestige within the country and people from there were seen as pioneers. One can argue that an 'exploitative elite' in the more metropolitan areas colonised the rural areas of the country forcing people to resettle but also to adjust to the newly planned societies, that were supposed to be created. These dynamics highlight the systematic rather than individual oppression of people, which is a key element of colonialism but also reflects many dynamics in capitalist societies. But people in internal colonies had more privileges living in the Netherlands as they also benefited from the economic wealth they created, whereas the external colonies were supposed to benefit the coloniser by offering an environment for extraction of wealth, but also a market for the coloniser's products that would increase the colonisers wealth. This often left colonised countries reliant on the coloniser for economic development, creating a continued dependence.

Looking at the scale of the colonial projects, the internal colonial projects are of a smaller scale in comparison to the external settler projects. The Netherlands is a comparably small country and has colonised a manyfold of their own territory (see fig 9).

In comparison the amount of land reclaimed from the sea in the Netherlands makes up around 17% of the country's landmass (see fig. 10).

Van Keulen distinguishes the forms of colonialism through the narrative of land being empty, he claimed that *'the internal colonies we know [...] those areas [...] they were empty. We are sure about that. They were empty and the [...] empty places [...] in the Americas were not really empty'* (Van Keulen, personal communication, June 4th, 2025). This statement highlights how the same justification of land being empty was used, but that nowadays the narrative of external lands as being empty is revised and critically reflected upon. But the statement also highlights that 'economically unused' spaces especially ocean spaces, are often perceived as being empty or not used. This also highlights the human exceptionalist mindset within the Dutch society, but more importantly neglects the immense change and destruction of ocean habitats and the destruction of a way of living for many people when considering spaces 'empty'.

I do not want to downplay the horrors and violence that people had to and still have to endure due to external colonial projects, but I think calling land reclamation projects colonial in nature does not impact the perception of external colonialism as exploitative and horrific, though not everyone would agree with this statement. I think while acknowledging the unspeakable horrors of external colonialism is crucial, the concept of internal colonialism offers a valuable perspective for understanding how colonial power structures can manifest within national borders. The shared dynamics can highlight how societies are being designed for reasons of efficiency and/or social control.

As our perceptions of colonialism are shaped by our context and positionality, there are changes and adjustments being made on the dominant narratives with different goals and interests. The



Figure 9: Dutch Colonial Empire by Gabriel Ziegler (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>)

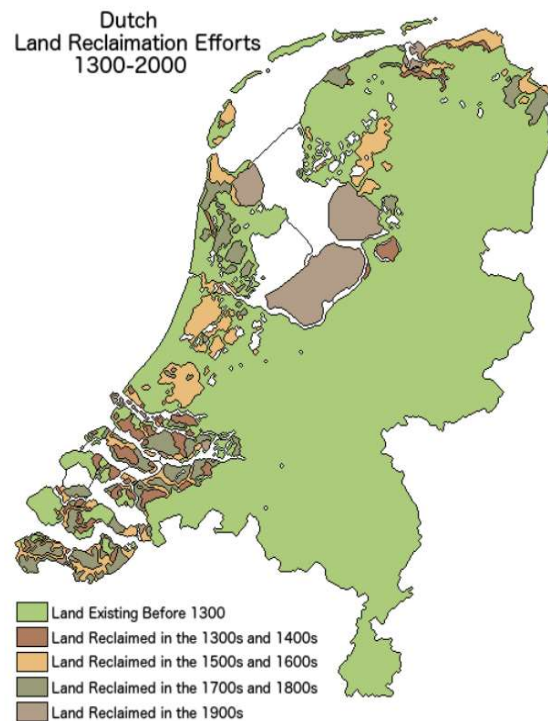


Figure 10: Land reclamation in the Netherlands (by reddit user *TheMan77777*, <https://brilliantmaps.com/netherlands-land-reclamation/>)

perception of colonialism can be highly dependent on the social and political climate within a country and people.

EVOLUTION OF MUSEUM NARRATIVES IN THE NETHERLANDS

Museums have always been telling stories sometimes intentionally and sometimes more indirectly following narratives that suited the context within exhibits were created. The narrative was and still is heavily impacted by the institutions and curators' positionality.

Ariese (2020) highlights that decolonial debates are often firstly initiated by activists. As a response cultural institutions often increase their engagement with the topic, so that finally the general public will be confronted with these debates. In more recent debates, the topic of enslavement was very central, which often leads to fewer conversations and even silences about other crucial and contemporary issues such as institutional racism and lack of representation of marginalized voices.

An interview with Alex Poldervaart reveals that the collection practice of the National Maritime Museum, which is similar to many other museums in the Netherlands is often indirect as the *'collecting is mostly done by accepting offers from individuals, other museums, archives or companies.'* (Poldervaart, personal communication, May 22, 2025). A lack of proactive collecting makes it harder to create new narratives and fill silences as the existing and available objects are used. Using a proactive collection strategy, certain narratives can be created to address for example underrepresented histories. This is, for example, the case in the *Shadows on the Atlantic* exhibit, where contemporary artists as indigenous identifying were exhibited. This was not done in the *Republic at Sea* exhibition. Generally, it has become more common to include a wider array of (critical) voices and perspectives in the curatorial processes (Ariese, 2020).

Initiatives like *Words Matter* have addressed language and alternative terminology to reduce negative historical implications of words such as 'slave' and 'Golden Age' (Ariese, 2020). The National Maritime Museum also had a plaque explaining this initiative of 'Words Matter' on the entrance door to the *Shadows of the Atlantic* exhibit. A statement in the museum and on the website exemplifies the change: *'we have also decided not to use the word 'slave' but instead 'enslaved'.* (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025d). *'We want to emphasize that no one is born a slave. A slave is a person who is enslaved by someone else.'* (Plaque: The choices we made). Kachur (2021) explains further that, *'language has an impact on the human perception of the world, but at the same time, the reality has an influence on what we say.'*

The National Maritime Museum also acknowledges, that they were *'confronted with the lack of an indigenous community perspective in Dutch colonial history. [...] To correct that bias in this presentation we have made a concerted effort to listen to what indigenous communities tell us, working jointly with indigenous storytellers, artists and historians'* (Plaque: An honest discussion). The inclusion of diverse voices and perspectives is often stated as a focus point as it helps to address other sides of history, that might have been less visible before. Many museums therefore aim at showing new histories, but how far does this commitment to inclusivity and diversity really go? They aim to include marginalized voices in the curatorial processes and often do that by collaborating with people outside the museum, who will probably also not show up in the statistics of museum staff,

but the numbers of people with any migration background working in higher positions such as curatorial staff are shockingly low as reported by the Dutch newspaper NRC. The report by NRC focused on the art museum sector and not historical or cultural museums but can give an impression of the current situation. The study found 2,6% of people working in higher positions and 6% of people in supervisory boards have a 'non-western' heritage or background (Ter Borg, 2020; Deloughry, 2020; Mc Givern, 2020).

The National Maritime Museum claims that it *'strives with its workforce to reflect Dutch society and takes this into account when recruiting staff'* (Het Scheepvaartmuseum, 2025d). It is to note that almost 15% of the total Dutch population are labelled as having a 'non-western' migration background. In this context 'western' is defined as *'someone from Europe (excluding Turkey), North America, Oceania, Indonesia or Japan. Because of their socioeconomic and cultural background people from Indonesia and Japan are also considered Western. This involves mainly people from the former Dutch East Indies and employees of Japanese companies. All others are considered non-Western (first or second generation)'* (Statista, 2025). It is to note that the term 'western' is a culturally and historically constructed identity, that has been used to distinguish between people, in other words to create an 'other'. The 'West' is often described as 'developed', 'rational', 'superior', 'progressive' and/or 'civilized' and the opposite of these characteristics are usually applied to the rest of the world (Said, 1978; Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). The data of the staff of the National Maritime Museum including data on migration backgrounds was not available but it is questionable if their staff reflects the diversity of Dutch society.

In an interview with Alex Poldervaart, a historian at the National Maritime Museum, she explained that there were and are debates around the *Amsterdam* replica, that is part of the museum. People ask: 'were slaves transported on that kind of ships from Africa?' She states *'people are now looking at [it] with [...] a different view [...]. Years back, it was just oh great, it's a carrier and we built it and [...] it made us rich. But now people are sort of embarrassed when they see the ship because they [...] think of it as transporting slaves or as a symbol of slavery and some people are just extracting the question and they see it as [...] a black spot, we should not have that kind of ships. There is a necessity to use the ship in a new narrative of the VOC and the expansion overseas.'* (Poldervaart, personal communication, May 22, 2025). There are many discussions around the question whether symbols that remind of external colonialism should be abolished or if they should be kept but critically reflected upon. I personally think that it depends on the symbol and its context. It can be useful to have a symbol like the ship replica to show how life was onboard of such a ship for different people but one should be careful not to neglect the perspectives of colonised people. The ship offers an environment that can send people into the historical context and make them feel the told history in a closer way. On the other hand, it can be triggering for some people, therefore some safe space should be created there, that people can retreat to. Another case is the statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, which I find more problematic as he was a figure of horror for many people and the environment the statue is located in does not offer a good room for critical reflection of the person as it is solely placed in the middle of a plaza with little explanation. If the statue highlighted the brutal side of Coen more, it might offer a new narrative. However, such a statue is probably not appropriate for a town square but rather an art exhibition.

Regarding the evolution of museum narratives Poldervaart notes that *'when you look back in the history of museums, you always have periods in which certain types of objects were obtained because it was in fashion or [...], for example in the 80s and 90s in the Netherlands, many museums were focused on female artists and objects in relation to female history. Women were underrated in history and it was time historian gave them a voice and put them on the agenda [...] That field has been explored and is now recognized. That does not mean there is nothing more to explore. Now we're very much into the colonial era, so to speak, which is a good thing, of course. Colonial history is more humanized than in the past. The focus lay on the history of institutions and shipping movements. We are now in an era in which the humans are the focal point. Not only they who once lived but also what colonialism meant and means for their descendants.'* (Poldervaart, personal communication, May 22, 2025). Big amounts of funding are dedicated to decolonisation work in museums in the Netherlands, encouraging museums to reflect more and integrate more marginalized voices in the contents but also the organization and institutions more generally (McGivern, 2020). As many museums started forms of 'decolonisation' work in their museums, the question remains if these attempts can actually lead to a decolonisation of cultural institutions. Saavreda (2025) questioned in a debate in the research group *colonialism as a structure* if it is even possible to decolonise the debates around colonialism if 'European' history is not decolonised first, which requires a more self-critical reflection of the history and an inclusion of other histories that were impacted by the 'Europeans'.

Regarding the evolution of museum narratives Ernst van Keulen (personal communication, June 4th, 2025) states, that a museum is *'like a government. It takes some time to change'* them. I think that is one of the big misconceptions of political and cultural institutions. It can be seen as a sign of institutional laziness and ignorance and a systematic problem, that generally persists within the 'western' societies. If one looks at the government of the US under Trump or any coup d'état one would probably not agree with the statement Ernst Van Keulen made.

The National Maritime Museum talks about the contemporary struggles and impacts of Dutch colonialism on the contemporary (Dutch) society, but one feels like all the stories told are in the past and are not connected to today's world. I think that is a missed opportunity and can also distract from the contemporary impacts of colonialism that could have been problematized more effectively than solely mentioning that institutional and structural racism is existing.

Hodan Warsame (2018), an activist and sociologist, who co-organized the intervention *Decolonize the Museum* and visited museums in 2015, noticed that *'Overwhelmingly, the group—mostly Black and other people of color, many of whom queer—described experiencing feelings of discomfort from the moment they walked in. They did not feel like their presence was welcomed. Although many participants were open to the idea of having their history and heritage displayed in the museum, most were disappointed in the representations of their culture, those of non-Western peoples in general, and Dutch (colonial) history. Many of the White participants also felt uncomfortable with the uncritical, exoticizing gaze these exhibits seemed to expect from them'*. Especially the lack of description of the contemporary impact of the different histories told was not critically reflected upon, though the accessibility was also a point of dissatisfaction. The language used in the exhibits was too celebratory or euphemistic for many people or even found to be erasing of mainly colonised peoples' histories. Colonised populations are often represented as being struck in time, which is

often constructed against the 'European self' to create an exotic and backward 'other'. People also found the supposed neutrality in museums problematic as it goes hand in hand with a kind of patronizing authority that tells only one history, the dominant imperialistic narrative (Warsame, 2018).

DISCUSSION: THE NARRATIVE OF CONQUERING NATURE AND MAKING USE OF UNUSED LAND

The museum narratives surrounding internal and external colonialism in the Netherlands have supported ideologies of human exceptionalism and superiority in sometimes similar, but also different ways. This consequently impacted the self-perception of the Dutch people and how they reflect on different colonial projects and their impacts and relevance in today's society.

Internal colonisation and the 'war against the sea' have been essential to narratives of Dutch histories. Many people connect the Netherlands to water, as the Netherlands has not only had a long and devastating history of floods but also a history of extensive water management. National memory culture in the Netherlands reflects the devastating power of floods but also tells a story of technological innovation regarding water management.

Land reclamation projects often frame the ocean as an enemy. This narrative is used to promote ideas of a shared national purpose, creating a shared sense of facing a common enemy. This narrative allows for the continuous celebration of Dutch engineering and supports a technocratic ideology as technology has helped the Dutch to 'fight' their enemy – the sea. Internal colonisation and land reclamation have frequently been presented as revolutionary Enlightenment projects, showcasing Dutch technocracy and scientific ingenuity. The descriptions of reclamation projects such as UNESCO articles support this celebratory view by not critically engaging with the idea neither on a practical nor an ideological level.

The idea of creating societies based on 'scientific principles' to create a typical Dutch family was implemented in some internal colonisation projects. The aim is to design not just the land, but also the ideal Dutch citizen. It also suggests a desire for homogeneity within the Dutch population. While in practice a 'typical Dutch family' is hard to quantify, policies in polders often promoted specific family structures and social behaviours, that were deemed to be desirable for the new polder communities and the image of a pioneer family (Seijdel, 2008).

The 'domination of oceans' was also crucial to the European race for external colonies. Before naval technology became suitable for overseas travels, the oceans acted as barriers between different land masses. Then, when more distant lands were reached, the establishment of more permanent sea routes was of importance as trade routes were desired. The more trade routes and colonies an empire controlled, the more wealth it could extract from the colonised areas. Often the imperial powers fought over these trade routes, trying to gain control over them or protect them (Bowen et al. 2012).

Framing the ocean as something to be dominated or conquered elevates human action to a god-like status, reinforcing the idea that humans are separate from and superior to nature. One can also observe that in most settler colonial projects, new ecosystems with the settler at the top of the hierarchy were created by transforming existing ways of life. Wolfe (1994) argues that the colonial logic often entails the destruction and/or transformation of existing modes of production in favour of more 'efficient' systems designed to serve capitalist extraction. In external colonialism, this meant the marginalization and dispossession of peoples, often through violent means, and the destruction of their modes of production in favour of capitalist extraction. In internal colonialism, particularly

with the transformation of rural areas, it could involve the displacement of existing rural communities and the imposition of new, scientifically designed social structures and agricultural practices. While not always as overtly violent as external colonisation, it nonetheless represents a significant disruption of established social and ecological systems.

The narrative of ‘conquering nature’ and ‘making use of unused land’ is central to both internal and external colonial projects, fostering ideologies of domination and superiority. The narrative of using ‘empty land’ has often been used as a reason for colonisation by European settlers, the ‘empty land’ was seen as a place of opportunity, offering room for agricultural development, but also exploitation and settlements (Jacobs, 2005; Bhandar, 2018). The thought here is clear, ‘unused land’ requires development and settlements to be transformed into a place that can be ‘useful’ to society. For land reclamation projects the ‘unused’ land consists mostly of ocean ecosystems in the case of the Netherlands. Other internal colonial projects use ‘unused’ rural areas, where rural landscapes are transformed and people displaced within one’s territorial borders. This is very similar to the way colonial powers saw external territories they colonised. The colonised peoples and lands were also seen as ‘unproductive’ and ‘unclaimed’, disregarding any other ways of identifying and living with the environment than the human exceptionalist approach of exploitation and domination. These dynamics promoted the marginalization and dispossession of many peoples, but also some rural communities in Europe. The perception of land being ‘vacant’ or ‘unused’ is based on a hierarchy or superiority of some forms of land use and property over others. The notions of what is ‘useful’ land were usually based on European ideas of technocratic progress, capitalist economies and empire building. These ideas of progress supported the argument that land has to be developed after scientific and economic principles, that deem other (often indigenous) practices as ‘non-existing’ or inferior (Bhandar, 2018). The narratives of ‘conquering nature’ and making use of ‘unused’ land, whether in polders or distant colonies, are deeply embedded in a capitalist logic. This logic prioritizes development, efficiency, and resource exploitation for economic gain, often at the expense of existing systems, that are solely deemed to be less efficient. The human exceptionalist mindset and the ideologies of domination and superiority are also powerful justifications for the ongoing process of unhinged capital accumulation that defined both internal and external colonial enterprises.

Another strong parallel between internal and external settler colonial projects lies in their use of planning and land division strategies. Internal colonisation schemes, such as those in the Netherlands, often mirrored the design principles applied in overseas territories. For example, the planning of the Beemster polder in early 17th-century Holland exemplified a form of spatial organization that would later be transferred to colonial settings, such as Batavia in the Dutch East Indies (Xu, 2022). The ideology of social or societal engineering, that a society can be designed, controlled and shaped after ideological beliefs about social norms and structures, can therefore be found in both internal and external colonisation projects, supporting and reflecting a technocratic and human exceptionalist mindset that seeks to dominate and control.

This human exceptionalist and capitalist perspective on nature, more specifically ocean spaces is contrasted in the *Shadows on the Atlantic* exhibition with an approach that defines the Atlantic as a spiritual and mystical entity. It is to note that this narrative highlights perspectives of colonised peoples and their descendants but does not refer to the perceptions of the general Dutch public.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

The case studies and interviews highlighted an understanding of colonialism that is heavily focused on external colonialism. One interviewee was also reluctant to use the term colonial for land reclamation projects as it could risk downplaying the brutality of external colonialism. It is to note that yes, the external colonisation was extremely brutal and internal colonisation was usually not as brutal, but both share many characteristics that are worth to look at as they give a deeper insight into the underlying ideologies of domination.

The museum narrative of external colonialism offered some critical reflection around exploitative practices and the resulting systemic inequalities that people still have to face today. The critiques usually did not involve an encompassing review of the underlying ideologies of empires, but dehumanizing practices were usually acknowledged in an apologetic tone, justifying the atrocities by claiming that they were just a product of that time. For example, discussions around the transatlantic slave trade might acknowledge the hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans transported by Dutch ships and their suffering. However, the discussions usually frame it as a regrettable product of its era rather than a deliberate, ideologically driven system of exploitation that was well thought through in order to extract as much wealth as possible from lands and peoples that were deemed to be 'worthless' or 'in need of Dutch development'. On top of the acknowledgements, I personally would prefer for there to be an explanation of how these ideologies and narratives became so dominant in the Dutch society rather than just mentioning it as a product of the time. It feels like the responsibility of external colonial exploitation is avoided and the systematic nature of the colonial systems is not explored critically enough. A critical analysis should encompass a review of the structural hierarchies created in the former system and most importantly a review of who profited and profits from these hierarchies – in this case the Dutch.

It should also be examined how (formerly) colonised people feel towards the (former) colonisers and how they see the influence of the colonisation on their today's society. What narratives are dominant in colonised communities and societies? How is decolonisation perceived in colonised societies? This can be interesting to see within the Dutch society alone but also including countries that were colonised by the Netherlands. It can also be interesting to see how the views could differ between descendants of colonised people living in the Netherlands and outside the Netherlands.

In contrast to the reflection on narratives of external colonialism, the narratives of internal colonialism have offered little to no critical engagement with the ideas of social engineering and have praised a technocratic and human exceptionalist mindset. The narratives of internal colonialism often show these projects as purely beneficial achievements, a 'war against the sea', that was fought for the good of the whole Dutch society. The potential social disruptions, the imposition of specific lifestyles, or the transformation of existing ecosystems is rarely criticized if even thematised.

I think it would be valuable to explore the perceptions of people visiting exhibits on colonial projects. It might be interesting to look into the backgrounds of the people and see how factors such as age, ethnicity, and educational context might impact people's perceptions of and responses to such exhibits. Such research could shed some light on the perception of current exhibition strategies and might give new insights on why which people visit the museum. This can help museums to expand their reach and accessibility if wanted.

Beyond museums, one could look at educational facilities such as schools and look at how colonial history is taught in schools and comparing this to museum narratives. This could highlight some influences on the public understanding of colonialism and its contemporary impact in the Netherlands or more generally in imperial societies.

As decolonisation work has been a topic in museums but also broader society, it could be interesting to delve into the arguments and emotions of those who advocate against decolonisation initiatives and apologies for historical injustices. Understanding the motivations behind this reluctance, particularly the role of emotions such as fear—fear of losing a perceived national glory, fear of economic implications, or fear of confronting uncomfortable truths—could be useful when trying to introduce and/or continue decolonisation efforts. It can also be examined if decolonisation is even possible in a ‘colonised’ system, a system that still carries structural injustices in itself and makes no or few efforts to change that.

Lastly, further research about the sense of national Dutch identity would be interesting as according to some sources, the perception of a shared national identity is a relatively recent development (Mostert, 2020; Bergvelt, 2024; Riedler, 2023). Therefore, exploring the evolution and the narratives (including colonial ones) that have shaped Dutch national identity would offer a wider context in which perceptions of colonialism can be analysed.

‘Racism manifests in many cancerous ways

We must rally for change in these most tragic of days’

Lyrics of Children of Diaspora by Lowkey

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APPENDIX

QUESTIONS NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

Introduction

- Thanks for participation
- Introduce myself master study and research: How do narratives around the maritime history of the Netherlands foster a maritime culture and national identity?
- Recording? Would you mind if I use your name in my research or would you like to stay anonymous?

- Could you tell me a bit about yourself and your background?
- What is your work in the museum?

General museum

- What is the role of museums in your opinion?
- Do you consider the museum to be a neutral space?
- What were the guiding ideas or themes behind this exhibition? (republic at sea, shadows on the Atlantic)
- How did the concept for this exhibit develop?
- What is the process for selecting the artists or works included?
- Were there any surprises or challenges that shaped the final outcome?
- I noticed you make a lot of decolonization efforts in the museum, do you think it has an impact on the understanding of the topic?
- Can you describe decolonization methods the museum uses?
- How do different people feel when learning about the Dutch colonial history?

Questions About Interpretation

- What do you hope visitors take away from the exhibit?
- Have any exhibitions sparked public debate or controversy? How did the museum respond?

Process & Practice

- Did your perspective change during the curatorial process?
 - Were there particular pieces that shifted the direction or tone once they were included?
 - Were there any unexpected or under-represented voices or stories that you made a point to include?
- If you were to design this exhibit again, what would you change?
- Have changing political climates influenced how the museum curates and presents history?

Engagement & Audience

- How do you think this exhibit is relevant to Dutch history education and why?
- What kind of feedback did you receive for the exhibit and from what people?

Topic related

- Do you see the museum playing a role in shaping public understanding of national identity?
 - maritime culture
- How would you define a maritime culture, and did it change?
- “No colonialism no ships”: elaborate what is meant with the statement and/or define colonialism
- Ways how Dutch justified colonialism? different justifications for different types?

Closing

Thanks

Any questions?

QUESTIONS SCHOKLAND

General

- What is the role of museums in your opinion?
- Explain quickly what the exhibition is about?
- What were the guiding ideas or themes behind this exhibition?
- How did the concept for this exhibit develop?
- What was the process like for selecting the artists or works included?
- Were there any surprises or challenges that shaped the final outcome?

Questions About Interpretation

- What do you hope visitors take away from the exhibit?
- How do you approach the balance between providing context and leaving room for viewer interpretation?

Process & Practice

- Did your perspective change during the curatorial process?
- Were there particular pieces that shifted the direction or tone of the show once they were included?
- Were there any unexpected or under-represented voices or stories that you made a point to include?
- If you were to design this exhibit again, what would you change?
- Did you receive any critique, that something was missing from the exhibit?
-

Engagement & Audience

- How do you think this exhibit is relevant to Dutch history education?

- What kind of audience engagement or reactions were you hoping to encourage?
- How do you think different visitors might experience the exhibition differently and if so why and how?
- Is this exhibit used by schools and teachers as resource and how?
- What kind of feedback did you receive for the exhibit and from what people?

Topic related

- How do you think this exhibit is relevant to Dutch history education?
- Do you think you contribute to a Dutch identity formation with this exhibit?
- What is the relevance of the war against the sea for a Dutch identity?