

# POST SCRIPTUM

## Monuments of the Black Atlantic, 2002–2011

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There is no place you or I can go, to think about, or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves. . . . There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There's no 300-foot tower. There's no small bench by the road. There is not a tree scored, an initial I can visit, or you can visit in Charleston, Savannah, New York, Providence, or better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn't exist . . . the book [*Beloved*] had to.

—Toni Morrison, “A Bench by the Road” (1989)

When I started researching the memorialization of slavery and the slave trade in the Atlantic World in 1999, ten years after Toni Morrison lamented the absence of slavery in American public memory, the call for slavery monuments was only just beginning to be heard and heeded. Much has changed since then and since the publication in 2004 of my article “Monuments of the Black Atlantic.” On Sullivan’s Island in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, there is now finally a commemorative “bench by the road” where visitors can contemplate on the history and significance of what was once the place of disembarkation for almost half the enslaved Africans transported to British North America by British, Dutch, and American slave trading companies.<sup>1</sup> In Lower Manhattan, the African Burial Ground National Monument, dedicated in 2007, serves as a compelling reminder that slavery was not only the South’s peculiar institution, but a foundational part of North America’s colonial history. In 1626, barely a year after the establishment of New Amsterdam, the Dutch West India Company, soon to be a major player in the transatlantic slave trade,

unloaded the first cargo of Africans that were to help build the Dutch colony that was later taken over by the British. New York's history as the second largest slave port, after Charleston, South Carolina, was literally disinterred when construction work in Lower Manhattan in 1991 led to the discovery of an eighteenth-century "Negroes Burial Ground," as it was marked on old city maps, where an estimated ten to twenty thousand New Yorkers of African descent found their final resting place. The major "Slavery in New York" exhibition launched by the New York Historical Society in 2005 and the imposing monument and new visitor center (opened in 2010) that mark the site of the African Burial Ground bear witness to the city's forgotten history of slavery.<sup>2</sup> And, finally, on December 15, 2010, a new memorial exhibit was opened next to the Liberty Bell Pavilion in Philadelphia's Independence National Historical Park, at the site of what had been the residence of the nation's first two presidents, George Washington and John Adams, from 1790 to 1800 when Philadelphia was still the national capital. The discovery by a local historian that President Washington brought a total of nine slaves from his Virginia plantation Mount Vernon to Philadelphia, circumventing Pennsylvania's 1780 abolition law by rotating his slaves, exposed the contradictions at the foundation of a new nation dedicated to liberty. Publications about the find of the President's House and its links with slavery ignited a controversy in 2002 about proper ways to commemorate, and educate the public on, the nation's dual legacies both in the Liberty Bell Pavilion interpretive exhibits and on the adjacent site of the President's House. With the recent opening of "The President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation," Philadelphians' almost decade-long struggle for a slavery memorial at one of the nation's major heritage tourist sites seems to have come to an end, even if perhaps not quite to a close.<sup>3</sup>

Like the Middle Passage Monument and the Netherlands National Slavery Monument I discuss in my article, these three memorial projects in the US do not only reveal the transnational underpinnings of the slave trade and slavery institution they commemorate but are themselves part of much larger transnational movement. In the UK, the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007, rather belatedly in comparison with the US, the Netherlands, and France, sparked a national, and still ongoing, debate about the commemoration of the nation's history of slave trading and slaveholding. In 2007, an International Slavery Museum was opened in Liverpool, while local initiatives in other former slave ports such as Lancaster, Hull, and Bristol had already resulted in memorials and museum exhibits a few years earlier. A monument to the victims of the slave trade and to those who fought for its abolition was unveiled in London in 2008. Also on the occasion of the 2007 bicentennial, President Chirac unveiled a small national memorial commemorating abolition in Paris.<sup>4</sup>

The only national monument dedicated specifically to the remembrance of slavery, however, remains the National Netherlands Slavery Monument in Amsterdam.<sup>5</sup> On July 1, 2003, a year after the dramatic unveiling of the monument,

the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and Its Legacy (NiNsee) was inaugurated. Located in the near vicinity of the monument in Amsterdam, the official aim of the entirely government-funded institute is to help shape a nuanced and realistic view of the Netherlands' slavery past in order to remember, commemorate, and work through this history and its legacies for the benefit of future generations.<sup>6</sup> NiNsee is a research institute that also houses a small exhibit on the Dutch involvement in the slave trade and colonial slavery, arranges walking tours to slavery-related sites in the city, and organizes conferences and public lectures as well as the annual national commemoration of slavery on July 1.

Since 2002, public awareness of the nation's slavery past has dramatically increased in the Netherlands. History textbooks used in schools have been revised to incorporate this long-neglected chapter in the nation's history. Slavery even literally received canonical status when it was included in the so-called Canon of Dutch Cultural History: it is one of the fifty themes that a national committee of scholars and teachers, appointed by the Minister of Education, has deemed central to an understanding of Dutch national history.<sup>7</sup> The fact that of all the fifty themes it received the largest number of reactions on the Canon's internet forum, however, indicates that slavery continues to be a sensitive issue. Moreover, it remains potentially divisive. On various occasions since the monument's unveiling in 2002, the annual national commemoration of slavery has been disrupted by demonstrations, most notably in 2005 when the conservative Minister of Immigration Rita Verdonk was delegated to represent the government at the commemoration. Verdonk was prevented from giving her speech by a multiethnic group of demonstrators who loudly protested against her restrictive immigration policy. Following in the footsteps of the assassinated populist politician Pim Fortuyn, Verdonk started her own political movement, tellingly named "Proud of the Netherlands," in the spring of 2008 with an inaugural speech in which she specifically denounced her opponents as people who want to place slavery monuments all over the Netherlands "to make us look bad."<sup>8</sup>

Verdonk's "us-versus-them" rhetoric reflects the nationalist turn that Dutch politics has taken since the murder of filmmaker Theo van Gogh by an Islamic fundamentalist in November 2004.<sup>9</sup> Serving as a key symbol of multiculturalism to both advocates and opponents of the idea that the Netherlands is a multicultural nation, the national slavery monument was at the center of a Dutch cartoon controversy in 2008. Among a series of anti-immigrant and racist cartoons published on the internet by an extremist Dutch cartoonist was one that depicted a racialized, overgrown baby burdening the back of a native-born working-class man. The text on the cartoon read, "what we need now is a slavery monument for the white native-born taxpayer."<sup>10</sup> Male white taxpayers are the true slaves, the cartoon suggests, bearing the financial burden of unemployed Islamic immigrants. The pseudonymous cartoonist's arrest on suspicion of racism and his subsequent release on the grounds of freedom of speech received wide publicity in the Dutch media. Both his arrest and his release led to public protests, exposing the ideological fault lines in Dutch society.

That six years after its unveiling the slavery monument played a central role in this Dutch cartoon incident indicates that multiculturalism continues to be highly controversial in the Netherlands, but also that it is a force with which the political right still needs to contend.

The political rise of the controversial Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders, whose extremist anti-Islam and anti-immigration rhetoric won the support of fifteen percent of the Dutch electorate during the 2010 parliamentary elections and whose Party for Freedom has made a support agreement with the current government coalition, has put at severe risk the tradition of tolerance that has long been a source of national pride and identity. However, despite conservative backlash, participation in the memorialization of a history of enslavement, exploitation, and racial injustice has fostered a multicultural and even transnational consciousness and produced new forms of historically informed civic and political engagement among citizens throughout the Atlantic world. Moreover, slavery monuments, memorials, museums, and exhibits have enabled at least some local and national governments of and institutions in former slave trading and slaveholding nations to engage in symbolic forms of atonement and reparation. The public debates surrounding the development of and the annual commemorations at the numerous slavery memorials and monuments in the past ten or so years have created a forum in which, as citizens of national and transnational communities, we too are challenged to address—and redress—slavery’s continuing legacies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> On the occasion of Morrison’s 75th birthday, the Toni Morrison Society launched the “Bench by the Road Project” in 2006 with the aim of creating “an outdoor museum that will mark important locations in African American history both in the United States and abroad.” Besides Sullivan’s Island, commemorative benches have so far been placed in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Oberlin, Ohio. See “Bench by the Road Project,” The Toni Morrison Society, <http://www.tonimorrisonssociety.org/bench.html>.

<sup>2</sup> For the New York Historical Society’s “Slavery in New York” exhibit, see <http://www.slaveryinnewyork.org/>. For the African Burial Ground National Monument, which is now under the auspices of the National Park Service, see <http://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm>. For the history of the African Burial Ground, see Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowan, *Breaking Ground, Breaking Silence: The Story of New York’s African Burial Ground* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998). For a discussion of the public controversy surrounding the discovery and memorialization of the African Burial Ground, see Johanna C. Kardux, “Slavery, Memory, and Citizenship in Transatlantic Perspective,” in *American Multiculturalism after 9/11: Transatlantic Perspectives*, ed. Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), 141–60.

<sup>3</sup> In a critical review of the new exhibit, Edward Rothstein argues that the memorial site ironically is more “a monument to the unresolved tensions” and divisions that marked the lengthy struggle to establish the memorial than a “commemoration of anything else,” “lacking both intellectual coherence and emotional power.” See Edward Rothstein, “Reopening a House That’s Still Divided,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2010, Art & Design section, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/15/arts/design/15museum.html>. Perhaps the most effective memorial is the excellent website of the President’s House, created and managed by the Independence Hall Association, which documents the ongoing memorial project, by archiving electronically all the news as well as some scholarly articles published on the President’s House: <http://www.ushistory.org/presidentshouse/index.htm>. For a discussion of the controversy concerning the inclusion of slavery in the interpretative design of the Liberty Bell Center, see Gary B. Nash, “For Whom Will the Liberty Bell Toll? From Controversy to Cooperation,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton (New York: New Press, 2006), 75–101.

<sup>4</sup> See Alan Rice, *Creating Memorials, Building Identities: The Politics of Memory in the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), 1–54.

<sup>5</sup> The African Burial Ground National Monument in New York officially commemorates black heritage rather than slavery. Though the monument itself is dedicated to the remembrance of “all those who were lost, . . . all those who were stolen,” its official aim is to teach the public about the contributions of people of African descent to the nation. See President George W. Bush’s proclamation that designated the African Burial Ground as a national monument in 2006, “Establishment of the African Burial Ground National Monument,” The White House, February 27, 2006, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2006/02/20060227-6.html>.

<sup>6</sup> See the NiNsee website at Nationaal instituut Nederlands slavernijverleden en erfenis, <http://www.ninsee.nl>.

<sup>7</sup> See the De Canon van Nederland website at <http://entoen.nu/>. For the slavery item, see “Slavernij ca. 1637–1863,” De Canon van Nederland, <http://entoen.nu/slavernij>. The idea for a canon of national history itself seems to have been an initiative aimed at meeting post-9/11, post-Fortuyn demands for encouraging a sense of national unity, while at the same time recognizing the nation’s cultural and ethnic diversity. See also Gert Oostindie, “Slavernij, Canon en Trauma: Debatten en Dilemma’s,” *Tijdschrift voor Geschiedenis* 121, no. 1 (2008): 4–21.

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Wiegman, “Nieuwe Koningin: Rita,” *Het Parool*, April 4, 2008, 2.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the intensification of the multiculturalism debate in the Netherlands after the murder of Van Gogh, see Ian Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> The slavery monument cartoon was printed in several Dutch newspapers after the cartoonist was arrested. See for example *de Volkskrant*, May 21, 2008.