The Undercurrents of Co-Creation. An Exercise in Embracing Discomfort in the Slavery Exhibition *Herdenken en Helen* in Amsterdam

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Abstract

Through this essay we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of co-creation. We present ‘Herdenken en Helen’ (to Commemorate and Heal), a 2023 project on the annual commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam, co-created with memory activists, heritage professionals and scholars. By bringing together our combined experiences, building on expertise in the field of participatory practices and the topic of this co-creative project, we provide a critical reading of the affordance of co-creation when aiming for multivocality, and offer some considerations on how to re-think ideas of co-creation.

We argue that a focus on ‘community’ in co-creation risks glossing over existing differences and antagonisms. These ‘undercurrents of co-creation’ – the tidal push and pull beneath the surface – need to be brought into view. We propose to acknowledge that the undercurrents are part of the co-creative process, and to find ways to make them productive.

Through this essay we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and multi-faceted understanding of co-creation. We present *Herdenken en Helen* (to Commemorate and Heal), a 2023 project on the annual commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam, co-created with memory activists, heritage professionals and scholars. By bringing together our experiences, building on expertise in the field of participatory practices and the topic of this co-creative project, we would like to provide a critical reading of the affordance of co-creation when aiming for multivocality, and offer some considerations on how to re-think ideas of co-creation.

Within the art and museum field co-creation is increasingly popular as a way to address challenges institutions have been facing in recent decades. Institutions were pressured to rethink their relevance to wider audiences, and to become more diverse and inclusive both in terms of content and as an institution as such. Though part of a broader framework of participation, the idea of co-creation is often connected to theories of 'community art', a term used by British artists in the 1960s who wanted to 'make "art" that would reach beyond the usual art world audiences. These artists wanted to make art not only for but *with* those they saw as excluded from the elite world of 'high art' (Crehan 2011, 13). In recent decades the idea of participatory work methods and theory have been adopted by museums and heritage institutions and are reflected in strategies and definitions of museum associations like ICOM. It is becoming incorporated into standard curatorial practice as a way of "*involving people in the making of anything that those institutions can produce. This could be object interpretation, displays and exhibitions, educational resources, artworks, websites, tours, events or even festivals.*"[1]

Co-creation and participation are concepts now used in such a widespread manner[2] that doubts have been raised as to their "*performativity*" (Chirikure et al. 2010) promoted by the "*box ticking expediencies associated with ideas about social inclusiveness*" (Watson and Waterton 2010, 1). Stephen Welsh, for example, has recently raised concerns that in some cases co-creation might become a way of branding the museum as much as an emancipatory project (Welsh 2024). Pablo Alejandro Leal characterized participation as "*a buzzword in the neoliberal era*" (Leal 2007). In co-creative and participatory practice there seems to be a thin line between opening institutions for participation and multivocality, and conscripting the vernacular into the institution, thus potentially glossing over contrasts between multiple voices (Beeksma and De Cesari 2019).

The use of the term 'community' plays a central role in this tension between participation and conscription. From the early community art to present day applications in the framework of participation, the idea of community has been coupled to an idea of emancipation. The initial analysis of community artists was that the art world and museums have become elite institutions of 'high' art and culture with their own internal logic, language and laws. This was a highly exclusive world that was inaccessible to those without training at recognized institutions, or without the necessary networks in the art world. This situation reproduced racial, gender, and class inequalities, and thus marginalized, for instance, people of colour, women and people from lower-class backgrounds. The community artists wanted to change conventions and practices in the art and museum world by involving people who were marginalized. The emphasis, however, seems to have shifted from addressing exclusion and discrimination to a focus on 'communities'. Increasingly, 'community' now appears as a stable and homogeneous group. Indeed, as Steve Watson and Emma Waterton have argued, "*the very notion of 'community' seem[s] to have ossified into a set of assumptions and practices that were now rarely examined*" (Watson and Waterton 2010, 1). In this view, the community acquires the characteristics of an individual: it is imagined to have a voice, an experience, self-awareness and feelings. It is also associated with attributes such as 'oppressed', 'silenced', or, conversely, 'emancipated'.

Here a dilemma emerges. Striving for emancipation and representation is a political process that requires the formation of political subjectivity. That is, in the process of co-creation the 'community' must emerge as a subject, and this necessarily requires the selection of a representative body (a spokesperson, a committee, etc.) that speaks for the community.

The trouble is that political subjects are not homogeneous 'groups' (Beeksma and De Cesari 2019; Brubaker 2004), but the product of socio-political-juridical dynamics (Krause and Schramm 2011). Indeed, initiatives such as the Black Arts Movement or AfriCOBRA ought to be seen as efforts to *create* a sense of community and a *claim to* political subjectivity, rather than simply as *expressions* of an already existing, clearly delineated 'group'. Moreover, experiences of oppression and exclusion work intersectionally (that is, intersecting divisions of gender, race and class), further complicating notions of community as a stable and bounded entity. This raises questions for central concepts of multivocality, equality, knowledge and empowerment in the co-creative process. Political subjectivity tends to absorb rather than foreground opposing positions within a group. For example, co-creative toolkits may include the step of selecting one partner

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organization out of a range of "*potential partners*".[3] The selected partner will be representative of, for instance, the neighbourhood as a whole.

Our experience with *Herdenken en Helen* (both the research phase and the exhibition itself) shows that it is not possible to think of the people who have been involved in the commemoration of slavery as a 'community', let alone one that could be represented by one partner that speaks for all. Instead, as we will show, different, and sometimes opposing, positions exist with regards to commemorating slavery. Absorbing them into one position would not do them justice, and may even violate them. This is what Chantal Mouffe has called "*agonistic pluralism*": an understanding of democracy that, in contrast to 'deliberative democracy', accepts the existence of an oppositional other, but it "*presupposes that the 'other' is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question*" (Mouffe 1999, 755). We call this form of 'agonistic' dynamics the undercurrents of co-creation, to point to the need to bring into view the tidal push and pull beneath the surface. We propose to acknowledge that the undercurrents are part of the co-creative process, and to find ways to make them productive.

The exhibition Herdenken en Helen

The Dutch government designated the year from July 1, 2023 to July 1, 2024 as a 'commemorative year for slavery' (herdenkingsjaar slavernijverleden), and provided more than 12 million Euros for cultural, societal and educational activities. The year was inaugurated by King Willem Alexander's apologies for the Royal House's involvement in slavery. It generated heightened attention at transnational, national, and local levels, prompting joint reflection on the history of slavery and its lasting consequences, which many people continue to experience today. Next to the Royal apologies, activities included the launch of a 'Black Canon' focusing on the history of enslaved Africans and the rehabilitation of the Surinamese icon Anton de Kom and Curaçaoan resistance fighter Tula by the Dutch government.[4]

Amsterdam having been one of the most important players in trans-Atlantic slavery (Brandon et al. 2020), the City Council wished to stimulate initiatives addressing this past in the context of the commemorative year. One of these activities was an exhibition about the history of the commemoration of abolition in Amsterdam, Keti Koti (lit. 'broken chains'). This exhibition was to emphasize the importance of the slavery past, thus giving it a more permanent place in the city's historical canon. The Council also acted upon a promise made by Prime Minister Mark Rutte when he apologized for the Dutch government's role in trans-Atlantic slavery in December 2022.

There he acknowledged that this apology constituted merely the starting point of a prolonged process of healing: "*the most important thing now is that all of the steps we take, we really take together. In conversation, listening with the only intention being: doing justice to the past, healing in the present. A comma, not a full stop.*"[5] In keeping with this emphasis on healing, the Council wished for the exhibition not only to emphasize slavery's afterlives in the present, but also wanted it to explore pathways towards healing.

The Council asked Imagine IC, a heritage organization in Amsterdam Zuidoost, to create this exhibition. For 25 years, Imagine IC has served as an open floor for contemporary heritage conversations. Operating out of Amsterdam Zuidoost, Imagine IC is dedicated to the practice of heritage democracy. The organization does this by collaboratively attributing multiple layers of meaning to objects and memories, involving as many different people as possible. Together with their network, Imagine IC reflects on the past in the present in order to imagine the future. Through ongoing conversations Imagine IC seeks to foster a more inclusive and democratic approach to the Amsterdam heritage collection. These conversations can lead to co-created exhibitions or public events as instruments to foster exchange. Over the years, Imagine IC has developed innovative methods, which they actively share with the heritage field at local, national, and international levels (Rana, Willemsen, and Dibbits 2017). It is due to their distinctive approach and accumulated experience that they were commissioned by the City of Amsterdam's Department of Art & Culture to contribute to the celebration of Keti Koti.

Imagine IC proposed to develop the project in accordance with their own established working tradition, which is rooted in a combination of ethnographic and participatory action research. In order to create a multivocal representation, a working group was formed that could connect with various networks. Through a series of conversations and interviews with people from these networks involved in commemorating slavery the aim was to exchange and gather perspectives, to share the rituals and traditions connected to commemorating slavery, and bring them together in the exhibition. The selected interview approach is always to let the interviewee lead the way, to interfere as little as possible and not to steer the conversation too much.

This research was done by the authors of this essay. Jessica Dikmoet is a freelance journalist, guest editor at Imagine IC and herself involved in organizing the commemoration of slavery at Surinameplein (Amsterdam) on June 30 since the 1990s. Markus Balkenhol is an anthropologist working on colonial heritage and memory at the Meertens Institute. He was pre-

viously involved in realising a "baseline" for Imagine IC's neighbourhood archive. Jules Rijssen is researcher at NL Lab and a network collector at Imagine IC. Danielle Kuijten is the director and co-curator of Imagine IC. For the design of the exhibition they collaborated with the local creative agency Vinger.nl and graphic design artist Kevin Rooi.

The research conducted for the exhibition focused on obtaining diverse perspectives on the legacy of slavery, the practices of commemoration over time, and its enduring impact on the present. To this end, the researchers conducted thirty-one semi-structured, in-depth focused life story[6] interviews with a varied group of respondents, including politicians, activists, cultural practitioners, and young people, who had been playing a pioneering role in the commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam.[7] These interviews explored their views on the history of slavery, practices of remembrance, the personal impact of this history, and processes of healing and restoration, both on an individual and collective level. Additionally, we also did archival research in a number of personal archives as well as in the Black Archives, Vereniging Ons Suriname, Vereniging Opo Kondreman, Vereniging Majuri Amsterdam, Kip Republic, Stichting Profor and Loson.

The interviews were intensive; respondents often noted that they had rarely delved so deeply into their personal histories, memories, and emotions. Afterwards, many described feeling exhausted, yet relieved and fulfilled. At the end of the interview, one participant said:

> *"These were heavy questions. Man! I thought it was good, but it was heavy just then. I had to reach deep into myself. I thought it was a heavy interview. I had not thought that the questions would be this profound. I thought it was good, but also heavy."*

In addition, group discussions – part of Imagine IC's methodology – were organized in a Surinamese café, at an Antillean neighborhood center, at a Javanese-Surinamese organization, at a Historic House Museum and a Surinamese-indigenous (inheems) association, to explore the collective experience of the legacy of slavery and its emotional reverberations in daily life.[8] We chose this addition because they create a different dynamic than individual interviews, because participants are able to enter into conversations amongst themselves. These gatherings provided accessible spaces for the exchange of experiences and insights related to recognition, processing, and healing. Strikingly, participants were quick and willing to share deeply personal and emotional experiences. There was a sense of attentive-

ness, mutual respect, and openness in these encounters. For instance, one man shared how he personally struggles with his manhood, torn between wanting to be a good father and colonial stereotypes of black masculinity circulating in black communities and society at large.

Our conversations revealed a wide range of, at times conflicting, perspectives on the commemoration of slavery—a vibrant memory culture that serves as a platform for reflecting on how to live with a difficult past and for exploring ways forward.

When working collaboratively on projects like this one, the question of power is always present. Importantly, this plays out not only between the institution(s) and interlocutors but also amongst interlocutors themselves. All of them have different stakes in the process. This is a given, and rather than seeing it as a problem to be solved or worse, to be glossed over, one should be aware of its presence, and we try to work this out in our discussion of the undercurrents of co-creation below. For institutions and researchers it is important to avoid extractive practices in which objects and knowledge flow from participants to institutions in a monodirectional way. When engaging in co-creation, institutions and researchers must take on a responsibility and commitment vis-à-vis their co-creators that goes beyond one particular project. The openness and frankness we encountered in these conversations is the result of the team's years of involvement and familiarity with grassroots organizations and individuals. People shared their knowledge also because the project's collaborative method provided an environment in which they felt safe to do so.

These conversations provided four broad themes: commemorating slavery, its afterlives, ownership of slavery's memory and healing. Each theme comes back in the exhibition in the form of a short description, certain images and audio fragments from the conversations. In addition the exhibition featured a showcase with objects that people brought to the collecting meetings. There was also a *begi,* an altar in honor of the ancestors (see below). We cannot do justice here to the richness of what people shared with us. We will discuss some aspects of the four broader themes that bring into view the undercurrents of co-creation discussed above.

Commemorating what, exactly?

Keti Koti, literally the day of 'breaking the chains', has become the single most prominent event commemorating slavery in the Netherlands. It is celebrated with a televised, national ceremony at the slavery memorial in Oosterpark, but also across the country in countless local Keti Koti events. The day has developed into the main reference point for society at large.

It is the achievement of black grass roots organizations who have worked tirelessly for decades to make slavery a part of the Dutch memoryscape. It is supported and recognized by both the national government as well as the Amsterdam City Council.

Our conversations brought to light a tension in this celebration. Although the recognition that goes with a nation-wide event celebration was generally welcomed, the *national* character of the day also led to doubts because it glosses over differences. For example, both the date (1 July) and the year of abolition (1863) have become a matter of discussion over the past few years. Slavery was *formally* abolished by Royal decree in Suriname in 1863, but it was followed by a period of so-called State Supervision (Staatstoezicht) in which the freed people were compelled to carry out wage labor under contract for ten more years (Ramsoedh 2024). This led some to reject 1863 as the year of abolition, preferring 1873 instead. Some told us that they even reject both the date (1 July) and the year (1863/73):

> *"July 1st was enacted by the government of the oppressor. It was not 'abolition' because the slaves[sic] had to continue to work [on the plantations] for ten years. 1 July is not ours. I cannot celebrate this day, it is fake".*

Others disagree:

> *"But there has to be one moment where we say: we all stand up together. And that is 1 July. And I know it, Jessica. It is the date that was given to us by the colonial authorities. But you can go on like this indefinitely, and it will be the same in 20 years' time."*

These positions make clear that 'community' does not exist in and of itself, but it takes a conscious, political effort to build it. We will come back to this below.

But it gets more complicated. The date is also strongly associated with Suriname. The name Keti Koti (breaking the chains) is a Sranan Tongo term (Surinamese Creole). It has long been a day for reflection and celebration for African Surinamese people across the world, who often also know it as the Day of Emancipation, or Manspasi in Sranan Tongo. The celebration already started with the first student and workers associations for Surinamese people in the big cities. The oldest Surinamese association in the

Netherlands is the association Ons Suriname, founded in January 1919, which emerged from the Bond van Surinamers (Bosma 2009; Esajas and Krouwel 2024). While our Antillean participants do not necessarily reject the day, they also do not feel a strong sense of connection to it. They celebrate Dia di Tula, on 17 August, to commemorate Tula, the leader of one of the largest slave uprisings in the Caribbean in 1795.

Moreover, Keti Koti is not only associated with Suriname, but, more precisely, with Surinamese Creoles, that is those who were freed by Royal decree in 1863/1873. It is less important for the Surinamese Maroons who had freed themselves long before that date. Although our Maroon interlocutors did not necessarily reject the day, they also pointed out that since 1973 the different Maroon tribes both in the Netherlands and in Suriname have celebrated October 10, the day marking the signing of the first durable Peace Treaty between the Aukaner Maroons and the colonial regime in 1760.

Our interlocutors struggled with these questions. They all agreed that it is important to commemorate slavery, but they also felt that pouring all these different perspectives into the mold of the nation was problematic. Keti Koti's national character does not necessarily jeopardize the existence of other commemorative days, but its high profile also means that other days receive much less attention, and thus also – at least potentially – less political and societal recognition, as well as less government funding.

Our respondents also emphasized that even though they might disagree, they find it important to *respect* different positions. They recognized the need to be united, but at the same time to also respect different positions within this polity. These complexities reveal a dilemma at the core of the demand to recognize slavery as 'national' history. Such a focus on the national also tends towards a homogenization of memory under the banner of one national narrative, thus running the risk of glossing over the multiplicity and multivocality of memories. Might it be precisely the multiplicity of memory that undermines national narratives as a form of colonial legacy?

This also has implications for practicing co-creatively or collaboratively. The different, and to some extent conflicting Creole, Maroon, and Antillean perspectives on commemoration – often also within these categories – make references to a clearly circumscribed 'community' problematic. On the other hand, showcasing oppositional grass roots perspectives rather than unity runs the risk of undermining a political subjectivity that has proven crucial in pushing for change.

Territories of Slavery

Related to these ruminations about July 1st and Keti Koti was the question of ownership. The fact that Keti Koti is now strongly associated with Suriname and people of African-Surinamese descent is in large part due to the fact that the most successful initiatives to commemorate slavery in the public sphere originated from Surinamese grass roots organizations and activists (Esajas and Krouwel 2024; Stipriaan 2001). Virtually all public commemorations of slavery, from the earliest commemorations in the 1950s and 1960s to those on Surinameplein and later in Oosterpark, were Surinamese initiatives. Most of the political struggle to have slavery recognized officially as part of Dutch history came from African Surinamese organizations. In recent years, however, the question has come up whether and how other dimensions of the Dutch slavery past should be part of the narrative. For instance, the Dutch East India Company, too, engaged in enslaving people on a massive scale (Brandon et al. 2020). Some respondents argued that slavery in the 'East' should be included:

> *"To me, Keti Koti is already about slavery in the Indian Ocean. I mean, … slavery in the Indian Ocean is also about Africans. It's about South Africans, it's about East Africans. … It's about Africans who have been displaced by Europeans in Africa, but also about Africans who were brought to other parts, like Indonesia. That people know less about this is possible, but that history simply exists."*

This respondent argued for a multidirectional approach to memory (Rothberg 2009), where different memories support and gain from one another. Other respondents disagreed. They felt that because African Surinamese organizations had pioneered the political struggle for recognition, these groups should now bear the fruit of this labor (see also Jouwe 2020). They are not pleased about other claims to slavery. "*Where have they been when we needed them most*", is the feeling among some. One respondent said:

> *"Now everyone is being called up to talk about 'the comma"[9]: Indonesians, Javanese, Hindustani, Afros. Foul play. Foul play. It is about trans-Atlantic slavery. There were no Javanese there. There were no Chinese, Hindoestani, contract laborers. … So I say, a shared past? It is not a shared past. It is a Dutch past, and black people suffered from it."*

“Might it be precisely the multiplicity of memory that undermines national narratives as a form of colonial legacy?”

The position of strictly distinguishing slavery in the 'West' and in the 'East' might be seen as a re-territorialization of transnational memory (De Cesari and Rigney 2014). The formation of political subjectivity, as discussed above, seems to require a form of strategic essentialism that is tied to territorial claims. The claim, however, that Keti Koti should be about trans-Atlantic slavery alone did not imply that slavery in the 'East' should not be remembered, as this respondent argued:

> *"To me, Keti Koti refers to trans-Atlantic slavery. And I think that if we talk about slavery, the Eastern part should be made explicit, too, but on a different day or in a different framework. Why do we always want to throw everything on one pile? That is something the government always does."*

This assessment brings us to the heart of the matter. Co-creative projects are not somehow exempt from power relations, but right in the middle of them. In the case of the commemoration of slavery, not only the different layers of (local and national) government are involved, but also the multiple positions within a broader memory field often referred to as a 'community'. All of these actors have their own stakes in the commemoration of slavery. Ignoring this would not only misrepresent the complexity of these dynamics, but also amount to a new form of silencing multivocality in favor of a homogeneous narrative.

Although a decision was made to include slavery in the 'East' in the forthcoming slavery museum (Brandon 2024), – scheduled to open in 2030 – this does not mean that the underlying questions will cease to exist. The challenge for co-creative projects is to acknowledge oppositional positions without jeopardizing their political claims.

Afterlives

All of our respondents agreed that slavery continues to inform the present in a harmful way. One respondent pointedly said:

> *"I see these traces everywhere: in the way we think; in the convictions that we pass on to our children; they are in all kinds of systems that we use every day, from the educational system to the way we organize work and the health system. And the elections we had in 2023[10] show that a sense of superiority is still present, where one has more rights than the other."*

Respondents saw a link between slavery and racialized inequalities in the present. As they saw it, enslavement is a process in which human beings are dehumanized and turned into commodities. The massive scale of this practice and centuries of its duration imply that it was not the consequence of individual acts, but that it required a system encompassing not just a trans-Atlantic, proto-capitalist economy, but also a cultural system of beliefs and values justifying and supporting that practice. This has become ingrained in what Gloria Wekker, following Edward Said, has called a 'cultural archive' that continues to inform Dutch society today (Wekker 2016).

While all respondents felt that slavery continues to affect the present in a negative, or even devastating way, not all of them agreed that an exclusive focus on oppression should be the most important strategy to address this. One respondent said:

> *"Everything that goes even slightly wrong in the Afro-Surinamese community is being hooked up to that past. ... That does not mean that we should not take it seriously. But I think a few things do not add up."*

For instance, this respondent disagreed with the idea that enslavement on the plantations has led to an aversion against agricultural labor among descendants, arguing that many freed people afterwards had bought the plantations they had been forced to work on during slavery. This respondent felt that the focus should be less on anti-racism, and more on the strength of the ancestors who, in spite of all odds, not only survived slavery, but were able to build highly resilient social, cultural and religious institutions. Importantly, he said, the word 'slave' never played a role in his upbringing:

> *"When my grandma talked about this period, and I also knew her sister, she was born in 1881, she died at an old age when I was twelve - they talked about our 'bigisma' (lit. big people, a respectful reference to older people and the deceased). Our ancestors. Never about 'slaves'. Our 'bigisma'."*

This respondent felt that although combating racism is important, an exclusive focus on racism disregards the strength these institutions can provide today. He points to the ancestors not only in terms of cultural pride, but also as a source of spiritual strength. After all, in the African-Surinames Winti religion, the ancestors are an important presence in many people's lives that can be appealed to in times of crisis.

References to the ancestors, however, can be risky. After centuries of demonization by the colonial regime, and in particular by the Protestant Church in Suriname (Pieterse and Stegeman 2025), Winti has a bad name especially among the older generations. Some see it as superstition at best, and as black magic and dangerous at worst, and many do not want to get involved. In spite of this rejection, there are frequent rituals, performed to seek strength and stability during significant and life-altering events, such as birth, illness, or death, as well as in times of major personal challenges. These rituals often include prayers, singing, dancing, the offering of sacrifices, and the solicitation of spiritual guidance from ancestors or respected members of the community. In such moments, spirituality assumes a central role. It supports both individuals and the community in finding inner peace, protection, and resilience, thereby fostering harmony on both a personal and collective level. Beyond these pivotal life events, spiritual devotion or connection to spiritual power also constitutes a daily practice for many. Most of our respondents agreed that the ancestors must play a crucial role in processes of healing.

In the exhibition we therefore involved a Winti priest, who helped us create a *begi* - an altar at which people could have a moment of contemplation or prayer. Considering the contested position of Winti among descendants, including an altar was a bold move. Religious expressions in the space of the secular state (in this case, City Hall) can be sensitive. Also, our choice for Winti, and not, for instance, the Curaçaoan Montamentu, might have been interpreted as privileging one religious tradition over another. Would the exhibition be rejected because of the presence of Winti?

The working group did reflect on this together and also consulted some of the respondents. We felt that going for the safe option would not do, but that these undercurrents needed to be approached head on. For us, co-creation is not about reaching for the safe option, but about bringing into relief 'agonistic pluralism' in a respectful way. In the end, we have not received any complaints about the *begi*, in fact, visitors told us that they were deeply moved by it.

Conclusion

In this essay we discussed a co-creative exhibition on the commemoration of slavery in Amsterdam, named *Herdenken en Helen*. Thinking and writing about this project we came to the realization that co-creative projects tend to be framed in a way that shies away from what we call the undercurrents. Yet it is precisely within these undercurrents that we see the opportunities for coming together *while* sustaining the differences and discomfort. In

particular, we found that the term 'community' – an often used term when speaking about co-creation – does not capture the multiplicity, and indeed sometimes oppositionality of positions in the memory field around the Dutch slavery past. Also, an emphasis on 'empowerment', another central term in co-creation theory, is not sufficiently equipped to describe the intricate, capillary, and shifting relations of power and authority involved in commemorating slavery. What we found was that multivocality can be harmonious, but can just as often be dissonant and jarring. We believe that co-creative projects are more likely to fail in their aim for multivocality if they do not allow these undercurrents the space they need.

In the exhibition we tried to let the different perspectives speak for themselves, without trying to resolve oppositional views into the homogenizing narrative of community or nation. In this way we hope to have contributed to developing a sense for what we call the undercurrents of co-creation: an 'agonistic pluralism' that undergirds all co-creative projects, precisely because they are embedded in existing social relations.

The undercurrents of co-creation pose a challenge, but also an opportunity: undercurrents generate movement and dynamism. They are the motor of innovation. Co-creative projects who ignore these undercurrents do so at their own peril, risking failure at best, and reproducing power relations at worst.

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Endnotes

1 glam.ox.ac.uk/co-creation-of-content

2 For instance: European Landscape Convention, Council of Europe 2000; Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, UNESCO 2001; Faro Convention, Council of Europe 2005; Fribourg Declaration, UNESCO 2007.

3 For instance in the toolkit developed by the Amsterdam Museum: amsterdammuseum.nl/publicaties/publications/5195

4 Tula was a leader of the 1795 slave revolt in Curaçao, fighting against Dutch colonial slavery. Though the uprising was defeated and Tula was captured and executed, he became a symbol of resistance and the fight for freedom. His legacy continues to

inspire movements for justice. Anton de Kom (1898-1945) was a Surinamese-Dutch writer and activist, renowned for his book Wij slaven van Suriname (1934), in which he described the horrors of slavery in Suriname.
He opposed colonialism and racism, both in Suriname and in the Netherlands. During World War II, he joined the resistance but was arrested by the Nazis in 1944 and died in 1945. De Kom is included in the Dutch Canon of History as a significant figure in the struggle against oppression and for equality.

5 rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/toespraken/2022/12/19/toespraak-minister-president-rutte-over-het-slavernijverleden, accessed 19 February 2025. See also (Esajas and Krouwel 2024, 485), who point out that the metaphor of the comma was originally introduced by Serana Angelista.

6 Focused life story interviews seek to embed specific themes or periods of a respondent's life in their biography as a whole (Atkinson 1998).

7 Participants were selected through the researchers' networks, established through their decades of engagement with the commemoration of slavery. We sought to include both prominent pioneers as well as people whose involvement was more recent. Next to people of African-Caribbean descent, participants also included people of Surinamese-indigenous and Hindostani descent.

8 We use the terms 'Antillean', 'Surinamese', 'African Surinamese', 'Maroon', 'Surinamese-indigenous (inheems)' and 'Javanese-Surinamese' because they are self-identifications by our interlocutors.

9 In reference to the metaphor the Prime Minister used in his apologies, described above.

10 In the 2023 elections the right-wing populist Freedom Party became the largest party in the Dutch Parliament after having campaigned for 'the strictest asylum policy ever'.