Reseña de "Paradise Overseas: The Dutch Caribbean, Colonialism and its Transatlantic Legacies" de Gert Oostindie
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In The Netherlands colonial history is often presented heroically: the adventurous and valiant Dutch sailors conquered the seas of the world, discovered exotic lands and obtained valuable goods. Four hundred years ago, these Dutch sailors left the deltas of the Low Lands on their voyage to the Caribbean with high expectations to find *Paradise Overseas*. Centuries later, the search for paradise has been reversed, as the Dutch Caribbean diaspora moved towards the metropolis, in hopes to find a better life.

*Paradise Overseas* discusses the main themes of Dutch colonial history, and attempts to analyze how this history created an uneasy link between the Caribbean and The Netherlands up to the 21st century. The tone is set from the book’s start, “…paradise was barely found”. Oostindie describes the Dutch presence in the Caribbean as “out of place” and questions in amazement why this chapter of national history had not ended much earlier. Accordingly, and in comparison to the colonies of the East Indies, the author argues that the Dutch Caribbean were “liabilities rather than assets” and of little significance to The Netherlands. Dutch colonialism in the West Indies is presented as a tragic, shameful and unsuccessful history. This view contrasts sharply with the more known and celebrated history of the 17th century Dutch Golden Age, which demonstrated the excellent capacity of the Dutch to dominate the world trade of that time. Dutch success was based on trading goods while generating enormous profits. They were never really interested in possessing overseas territories or “civilizing the savages”. Rather, they were primarily dedicated to
securing their access to merchandise for retail in European and global markets.

In Chapter One, entitled “Worlds Apart”, Oostindie argues that Dutch reality had little to do with life in the Caribbean. In contrast to other colonial experiences, like that of Spain and France, The Netherlands did not embrace the colonies of that region under their empire. Furthermore, he treats seriously the historical and popular comparisons between Indonesia and the Dutch Caribbean. While the first entailed a relationship with a much richer territory populated by already established native cultures, in the Caribbean the Dutch ruled over a large majority of people whom the colonists themselves congregated. In other words, the Dutch created new societies in the Caribbean that are even to this day considered to be of insignificance to the metropolis. Unfortunately, the author does not explain how Dutch colonization and imperialism in Asia is less out of place than in the Caribbean. He only mentions that geographically, politically and economically the East Indies appear to have been more beneficial. The disturbing part of this recount of history is that the author presents these common and popular arguments as a given.

Oostindie continues to emphasize that the West Indies did not produce the material goods that the empire expected. What these “expectations” were are not made clear in the reading. Instead, Oostindie uses unsubstantiated generalizations of plantation output and slave holdings to argue that the Caribbean became increasingly insignificant to Dutch wealth and power from the eighteenth up until the twentieth century. The book fails to explain in detail what the Dutch colonizers and the rulers of the empire had in mind. He concludes his first chapter by stating that the relationship between The Netherlands and its Caribbean subjects can even be considered absurd. Meanwhile, Oostindie recognizes that the Kingdom of The Netherlands is found unable to detach itself from this “tragic” scenario, because antillanos might suspect that a retreat from the Caribbean can only serve metropolitan interests. These possible metropolitan interests are not detailed.
The second chapter “Slave, black, human?” analyzes the legacy of servitude and racism. The debate about slavery was never a pressing issue in Dutch politics. The author recognizes, consequently, that very little has been written on this topic. Oostindie looks to the liberal Enlightenment, attitudes produced during the Dutch Republic and the dominant Reformed Church for motives promoting the abolition of slavery. None of these elements provide him with a satisfying answer. The author yields to traditional analyses of transition from mercantile to industrial capitalism, which in comparison to Britain occurred very late; this explains the tardiness of abolition in the Dutch Caribbean. The eventual emancipation of slaves was due more to changes in the political economy rather than any moral impetus. To supplement the argument with minor contributing factors, the book takes the scant presence of black people in The Netherlands (as compared to Britain and France), as an explanation for the lack of debate. As far as the influence of the national Church, missionaries launched a late campaign to Christianize the slaves in order to keep them docile and prepare them for a responsible freedom.

The book’s appreciation of the (in-) significance of slavery to the Dutch economy begins first with a comparison between the number of slaves in Suriname and that of the islands. Whereas Suriname had at one time 75% of their population dedicated to forced labor, the Antilles for the same period had a relatively smaller proportion (35%) of their population enslaved. Making an unfounded leap, he uses this comparison to emphasize what he already argued in Chapter One, concerning the “scant relevance” of the West Indian islands to the metropolis.

Later, after the abolition of slavery, the plantation economy—especially in Suriname—came to rely primarily on indentured labor from British India, Indonesia and China. In Curacao, the transition to a free labor economy became a problem as the labor supply exceeded the market’s demand. An alternative labor market emerged for the Antilles only after the 1920s, when the oil refineries became a source of income for the region. Where
the petroleum actually came from remains a mystery in this book. From this point on, Dutch colonial rule in the West Indies supposedly moved towards a new policy of assimilation; there was an attempt to homogenize the diverse population to Dutch standards of respectability. And here Oostindie sets the stage for the third chapter of *Paradise Overseas*.

In “Stubborn plurality” (Chapter Three), the author provides an overview of the role of ethnicity in Dutch Caribbean society. References are made to the socio-economic developments that were set in motion by labor migrations. An interesting question that this study poses is: “Did the colonial authorities systematically play ethnic groups or ‘colour classes’ off against one another?” Without entering into details, the author recognizes that the colonists indeed helped to maintain animosities among the ethnic groups by implementing unequal policies. He does, however, conclude that ethnic divisions have a way of maintaining themselves even without colonial interference.

In Chapter Four, “A Dutch model for decolonization?” the author introduces the theme by stating that The Netherlands was dealt an unfortunate hand in its decolonization process. He offers three examples of how the Dutch were unsuccessful de-colonizers. First, Oostindie recalls the bloody and futile attempts to obstruct the Indonesian independence movement that culminated in an embarrassing war which ended in 1949. Second, there was the hurried and unpopular independence of Suriname in 1975, which was accompanied by a mass migration of nearly half the population to The Netherlands. Finally and despite all efforts, The Netherlands failed to mobilize the Antilles into independence. Oostindie recognizes that the Dutch model compared to other models was the least “successful”, although the Dutch decolonization process in the Caribbean was at best peaceful.

Oostindie argues, however, that the crisis ridden state-of-affairs after independence in Suriname cannot be blamed entirely on failed Dutch policies. He recounts that large amounts of aid were/are given by The Hague to the Netherlands Antilles and Suri-
name, and these have been taken for granted. According to this author, Dutch foreign policy is strongly impregnated with Calvinist tendencies, which promote a sense of guilt, moral responsibility, and stewardship. Good intentions are often manifested into higher expectations and ill-considered plans. The Dutch merchant wakes up and realizes that his “money is being thrown down the drain”. And on Sunday morning, the reverend of the church warns not to throw the pearls to the swine.

On the one hand, the Dutch feel a sense of moral responsibility in maintaining ties to their Caribbean possessions. On the other, they ask themselves how The Netherlands benefits from the relationship. Oostindie questions whether the feelings of guilt are founded in the first place. But then the reader is forced to ask him/herself: If this is the bottom line on Dutch sentiments towards their dependencies in the Caribbean, how does it differ from the racist-colonial views expressed four centuries ago?

In the book’s best chapter, “Uphill Nation Building” (Chapter Five), the author takes a look at the arduous experience of nation building in the Caribbean. Recognizing that Dutch Caribbean societies were created on the basis of imported ethnic groups and strains of apartheid (especially in the case of Suriname), it has been extremely difficult to create a sense of national identity. Oostindie does acknowledge, however, that throughout the Antilles, Latino influences and unique linguistic formations (Papiamento) have helped to foster a sense of unifying identity. The exception would be St. Maarten. Nevertheless, the identities continuously in the making are deemed obsolete for creating an independent national system and economic order. The perfect example is Aruba’s option for separating itself from the rest of the Netherlands Antilles.

In Chapter Six, “The delusive continuities of the diaspora”, Oostindie documents his anthropological study based on interviews with early Caribbean immigrant subjects, beginning firstly with his late father-in-law. He finds that the presence of pre-World War II immigrants was “qualitatively”, and in terms of numbers,
different from those members of the Caribbean communities in the Netherlands today. The first were the well educated elite; the latter are welfare-seekers from low socio-economic standing. The author attempts to argue that there exists no continuity between the blacks of the past and Caribbean people in today’s metropolis. He uses this posture in order to generate a debate about the significance of knowing history for understanding the marginalization of contemporary Dutch Caribbean diaspora.

Oostindie continues to defend this notion of discontinuity by comparing the Caribbean diaspora experiences of The Netherlands with that of France and England. Due to what he calls a relatively negligible number of blacks in the metropolis during 19th-century Holland, little continuity in identity can be found. The author makes the mistake of comparing larger countries of much broader colonial reach to his own, and taking into consideration only poorly documented real numbers, as indicators that blackness in The Netherlands is a new concept. Another misconception is found in his treatment of pre- and post-World War II Caribbean immigrants. Oostindie writes as if the difference between the educated elite from the first half of the twentieth century and the working class poor of the second half of the twentieth century is a unique Dutch phenomenon. The same experience, however, is said about Puerto Ricans in the U.S., Jamaicans in the U.K. and French Antilleans in France.

Furthermore, the author tends to make a sweeping generalization, based on his street interviews, about the meaning of history for Surinamers and Antilleans living in The Netherlands today. Oostindie argues that Caribbean people in The Netherlands have no interest in the history of the early diaspora. Why should the history of a small minority of compatriots have any meaning to the unemployed Antillean youth? One might wonder if people generally speaking—including white Dutch in The Netherlands—show a deep interest in their own history and are well-informed about their past. I, as a Dutch woman living in the 21st-century Caribbean, certainly do not identify with the Dutch merchant sailors.
and pirates of long ago. I understand, nevertheless, the need some Caribbean people might have to position me as a privileged white colonizer.

Oostindie concludes that “history has just begun” for the Caribbean diaspora in The Netherlands. This escapes the historical reality of continuous discrimination, everyday racism and paternalistic attitudes directed towards immigrants; elements which surely link all diaspora throughout time. Additionally, who is to say that slavery, Dutch apartheid and colonial oppression has been forgotten by the diaspora when these left their home? Unfortunately, no position is taken on whether discrimination and paternalism has had an effect on Antillean peoples as they have had on the Puerto Ricans of New York or the Jamaicans of Manchester. Another critique that can be made about this chapter concerns the use of the term post-colonial when making reference to Puerto Rico and The Netherlands Antilles. A more appropriate term for describing current relations within the Dutch Kingdom as well as the U.S. would be modern-colonial, as unequal relations continue to exist.

In the book’s concluding chapter, “Colonial past, contemporary identities” (Chapter Seven), the author embarks upon a personal voyage to discover his role as an historian. He makes a call to reconsider Dutch-Caribbean relations in a balanced view. Oostindie recognizes that Dutch Caribbean identity is based on the history of slavery and colonial oppression. He questions, however, the validity of claims that contemporary Dutch Caribbean people might make, concerning the harshness of their colonial past and the relevance that a questionable history might have for their current condition. Oostindie reminds the reader that colonial history in the Caribbean has been “irrevocably lost”, that there is very little documented on colonial regulations. At the same time, and in a contradictory fashion, he hints that figures concerning the slave trade linking colonialism to the kingdom’s wealth are exaggerated for the purposes of forging a Dutch Caribbean identity.

Another aspect found in this final chapter concerns the strug-
gle that the Dutch have in comprehending their country’s colonial history. Oostindie attempts to create the “balance between empathy and distance”. On the one hand, some attitudes seem to convey a sense of guilt and the need for reparations. On the other, a position of detachment is composed of recognizing that postcolonial identity is based on “myths” of exploitation. In a search for truth, the author is clearly inclined to opt for distance.

In this 2005 edition of *Paradise Overseas*, Oostindie adds a Postscript to reflect minor changes alongside a predominant continuity of contemporary links between the Dutch Caribbean and The Netherlands. He correctly describes the political structure of the Kingdom and the social forces of change now competing to either bring Suriname and the Netherlands Antilles closer to The Hague or to entirely disconnect. This occurs in a present day climate of rising xenophobia in The Netherlands. Additionally he documents the current rediscovery of the downside of Dutch Caribbean history, resulting in the establishment of an institute dedicated to the study of slavery and the unveiling of a national monument commemorating the Atlantic slave trade. Ignored in recalling this last event is the exclusive character of the ceremony which unveiled the sculpture. Present was Her Majesty Queen Beatrix together with representatives of the Dutch and Caribbean elite. This resulted in simultaneous protests and disgust expressed by larger portions of the Caribbean diaspora. Forgetting these details reflects a tendency to disregard essential Caribbean experiences, leaving the reader with many questions concerning Surinamese and Antillean points of view.

To conclude, Oostindie expects that the Dutch will not change their attitudes or reinforce their commitment to the former colonies. More relevant to him, is how the diasporas will position themselves in the future of Dutch society and what direction they will take in terms of commitment to their lands of origin.

So, what is to be made of *Paradise Overseas*? The answer might be found in the consequences of what the author states to this end. If Gert Oostindie, The Netherlands’ authority in Caribbean
studies, places priority on the self-positioning of Surinamese and Antillean diasporas, then this should be interpreted as a welcome to the much needed autochthonous recount of Dutch Caribbean history and its transatlantic legacy.

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If the Cuban Revolution holds inexplicable fascination, then its history and current reality as seen through the lens of a well-informed classic car enthusiast is a delectable read indeed. In *Ché’s Chevrolet, Fidel’s Oldsmobile: On the Road in Cuba*, Richard Schweid carefully and masterfully weaves the myriad stories comprising Cuba’s patrimony amidst a gritty and well-balanced look at the history of automobile culture on the island.

Presented in a pleasant, reader-friendly format, Schweid’s book is reminiscent of that one fantastic history professor that every lucky arts student encounters: it teaches much while the audience actually enjoys the journey. On the very first page of Schweid’s “curriculum,” he introduces the subject with a flair and style that continues throughout: “Numerous North American heroes of the Cuban Revolution, however, remain unsung, and they do have brand names—names like Chevrolet, Ford, Studebaker, Chrysler, Rambler, Cadillac, Plymouth, Dodge and Buick. Unsung, but not unknown, they have served the Revolution tirelessly, and continue to do so on a daily basis, carrying its loads, transporting its people” (p. 5). From such an introduction, the cautious reader may become wary, fearing an overly glorified personification of the automobiles at the expense of the more important stories to be told, those of the Cuban people themselves. Within a few pages, such anxieties are assuaged; Schweid’s analysis swiftly delves beneath the surface veneer, recognizing and