

GLOBAL SLAVERY HISTORY FELLOWSHIP

FINAL REPORT BY JAVIER ESTUPIÑÁN



Landscape with an Episode from the Conquest of America
Jan Jansz Mostaert (c.1474–1552/53), Haarlem, c. 1535 (Kijksmuseum)

I am Javier Estupiñán, an audiovisual artist and researcher from the Canary Islands whose artistic approach intertwines with curatorial practices. Since 2022, I co-direct Vega de Agua, an art initiative that develops art residencies and other cultural projects focused on collective and multidisciplinary practices. My works are directly linked to experimentation and often delve into potential pasts to reclaim stories that have been marginalized or hidden.

In October-November 2024, I was one of the first two fellows of the Global Slavery History Fellowship, an initiative carried out by a coalition of Amsterdam based Archives, Museums and Historical institutes. During the project, I conducted research and created an audiovisual piece that explores the history of slavery in the Canary Islands while focusing on the involvement of the Netherlands. By highlighting the colonial past and the historical significance of the archipelago as a strategic location in the transatlantic trade of enslaved people, I try to challenge the prevailing 'paradise' image of the Canary Islands in the European collective memory. Through a variety of artworks, archival materials, and other historical documents, the piece constructs a narrative that seeks to provoke critical reflection on the complex history of these islands and their ties to Europe.



Some notes on the history of the Canary Islands



As early as the 14th century, before the conquest of the archipelago, the indigenous people of the islands - the Guanches - were captured in 'razzias' and deported to the earliest European markets of enslaved people. As historian Ana Viña Brito mentions, in 1483 the first sugarcane seedlings were introduced to Gran Canaria, La Gomera, La Palma, and Tenerife, the islands with soil and climate conditions that resembled those of Madeira.

The Guanches became the first enslaved community in the archipelago, forced to work in the sugar cane plantations. With the increasing demand for labor, including domestic service, the system expanded. Since the beginning of the 16th century, records show ships arriving in the Canary Islands with enslaved people from diverse regions of Africa. According to historian Manuel Lobo Cabrera, these communities were mainly classified as 'Moorish' and 'Black'. The archipelago became a laboratory for the system that would later be implemented and developed on a massive scale in the colonies of the Americas.

We cannot study the role of Western countries in the transatlantic trade of enslaved people without considering that the Canary Islands were also a European colony, deeply connected with the histories of other regions such as the Caribbean. The lack of studies regarding this part of the colonial past of my archipelago may derive from a complex mindset that places the islands in a privileged position compared to non-European territories, thereby undervaluing the significance of the Canary Islands' history in both local and global contexts. This perspective is further influenced by a degree of exoticism. The archipelago is a popular tourist destination for Europeans and has historically been linked to the concept of paradise. This portrayal not only overlooks its history but also the current complexities it faces, including mass tourism, resource exploitation, ecosystem degradation, and the high risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Therefore, my main goal during this project was to raise awareness about the need for greater efforts to recover the stories of these forgotten communities that once inhabited a territory that remains European. The vast number of enslaved people deported from Africa to the American continent is indeed incomparable. However, this gap deserves attention as well, especially because it may reveal deeper current issues that should not be overlooked.

The Research

Through an interdisciplinary research, I took diverse approaches. Numerous historical studies served as an introduction to the historical relationship between the Canary Islands and the Netherlands. The personal meeting with Germán Santana Pérez, who is probably the Canary historian who has studied the relationship between the Netherlands and the Canary Islands the most, was also very fruitful. The works by decolonial feminist philosophers, such as Larisa Pérez Flores, have been also a key reference when developing concepts, such as the one referring to the image of paradise implanted in the European collective memory.

In addition, I researched numerous documents from the Stadsarchief Amsterdam (Archives of Amsterdam) and the National Archief of the Netherlands, as well as from the Canary Islands, such as the Archivo Histórico Provincial de Las Palmas and Archivo Museo Canario, among others.

On the other hand, the collaborations with different museums allowed me to delve into their collections in a form of research that took books, manuscripts, paintings, maps, atlases, prints, and other historical documents as tools to discover how the Canary Islands were depicted during the 16th and 17th centuries, while searching for visual elements that would contribute to shaping the narrative of the final audiovisual piece.

Finally, I drew inspiration from elements of Canary oral tradition and folklore, which I have studied over the years in various projects. For the sound part, I started with the “Ranchos de ánimas”, which were religious chants performed for the souls that were believed to inhabit Purgatory. I composed the soundtrack based on these chants and other popular songs from both my hometown and other parts of the archipelago, although creating new melodies.

Durante the research, I traced a web of interconnections between diverse international agents. One of my most relevant findings involves the figure of Melchior van den Kerckhoven, who captained the ship “Drye Conin-gen”, that brought around 100-130 enslaved Africans to Middelburg in 1596. This case is agreed by historians to be the first instance of Dutch participation in the transatlantic trade of enslaved people. My findings questions the popular notion of this arrival of enslaved people as a historical accident, consequence of an act of privateering of Portuguese slave ships. The documents clearly show that Melchior van den Kerckhoven was both experienced with the practices of slavery and slave trade, and deeply connected not only to the Dutch society, but also to the Canary Islands, where he was born. As far as I know, his connections to the archipelago have not been properly studied yet, which relevantly shows the lack of efforts made to study the importance of the Canary Islands as a European strategic point.



International Institute of Social History



I was offered an office at the IISG, which allowed me to constantly surround myself with researchers. Since the beginning, I was supported by Matthias van Rossum and Leo Lucassen, the co-directors of the Global Slavery History Fellowship, as well as by several other colleagues working at the center. On the other hand, the hard work, organization, and guidance of Jacqueline Rutte were essential for the success of both the fellowship and my project.

Currently, the institution is engaged in various projects related to the study of the history of slavery. Getting to know the people involved in these studies and their approaches was deeply meaningful. Additionally, the Communication Department of the KNAW Humanities Cluster assisted me in finding a camera equipment for my final audiovisual piece.

My visits to the Stadsarchief Amsterdam were crucial for my research. The great introduction to the archives by historian Mark Ponte allowed me to discover a great quantity of valuable documents related to the history of the Canary Islands. I focused especially in charter contracts from ships that departed from Amsterdam during the 16th and 17th century.



Stadsarchief Amsterdam

Allard Pierson Museum/UB



The welcome I received from Isabelle Best and Stijn van Rossem was truly warm, and I felt a great sense of creative freedom as well as easy access to the numerous materials located at Allard Pierson. The extensive collection of books allowed me to deeply delve into my research while finding visual materials - especially maps and atlases - that would enhance the layers of narrative in my film. Reinder Storm's expertise in the differences between types of maps and atlases will undoubtedly contribute to the development of some of my future projects.

In the collection, I discovered other fascinating materials, such as a note on the back of a map regarding a mummy from Tenerife that was expropriated and taken to the British Museum, as well as a 17th century cookbook that included a recipe that used Canary sugar.

Curator Tom van der Molen demonstrated a strong understanding of the history of my archipelago and assisted me in navigating the online collection to locate works that may not have been on display. I had the opportunity to visit the exhibition "Panorama Amsterdam", which provided an excellent introduction to the history of the city. I also discovered the exhibition "Manahahtáanung or New Amsterdam?" which left a lasting impression on me, also due to its relevance to my work. Additionally, Silke Kamp supported me during the filming at the Amsterdam Museum.



Amsterdam Museum

Rijksmuseum



Curator Maria Holtrop was not only a perfect person to collaborate with but also put me in contact with curators Stephanie Archangel and Matthias Ubl. My conversations with the three of them were of great value and contributed to my reflection as well as to the development of the overall concept of the project. On the other hand, Brigitte Hewitt and Mark Colly showed a lot of support during the filming at the Rijksmuseum, which was the shooting that took the longest time.

As a departure point for my project, I selected an artwork from their collection titled “Landscape with an Episode from the Conquest of America” (c. 1535) made by Jan Jansz Mostaert. Several authors argue that this is not an episode from the history of the American continent but rather a profound depiction of the conquest of the Canary Islands. It is important to note that the scene was entirely imagined by the artist, who had never actually been in the Canary Islands or the Americas. My analysis and conversation with Matthias Ubl, led me to reflect that, regardless of the specific episode it portrays, the painting serves as a powerful tool to merge the histories that my archipelago shares with the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

Thanks to Julia Noordegraaf from the UvA, I was able to connect with Media Makers, an initiative that supports university students in developing their artistic and professional practices. The assistance from Jamil Fiorino-Habib was instrumental in obtaining additional audiovisual materials necessary to achieve the quality required for the project.



University of Amsterdam and Media Makers

Fortunatae



Fortunatae is an audiovisual piece that explores the overlooked history of slavery in the Canary Islands while focusing on the involvement of the Netherlands. By highlighting the colonial past and the historical significance of the archipelago as a strategic location in the transatlantic trade of enslaved people, Fortunatae challenges the prevailing ‘paradise’ image of the Canary Islands in the European collective memory. Through a variety of artworks, archival materials, and other historical documents, the piece constructs a narrative that seeks to provoke critical reflection on the complex history of these islands and their ties to Europe.

For the audiovisual work, I experimented in the construction of a new form of narrative that intertwined a variety of artworks, archival materials, and other historical documents, seeking to provoke both reflection and an emotional response. Through this structure, I allow historical documents to speak for themselves, revealing the silences that lie beneath the writings made by those who held power. I am currently working on a new audiovisual project that aims to further explore and enhance this narrative form.

It is important to highlight that the final presentation that I conducted at the International Institute of Social History included a performative action, during which historical texts were read. However, the latest version of the audiovisual piece incorporates this element in a textual format, as the spoken aspect was intended to be exclusively presented live.

I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to present, artistically and through my conversations, more about the overlooked history of the Canary Islands and the importance of my archipelago in a global context. Taking into account the complexities of my archipelago implies observing the disparity of privileges that may exist between Europe and other regions, not only the Canary Islands but also other examples across the world.

I could not recommend this experience more to anyone who, regardless of their discipline or place of origin, studies the history of slavery and wishes for their perspective to contribute to this important dialogue. The greatest value of the Global Slavery History Fellowship lies in the transnational, transcommunity, and transdisciplinary dialogue it proposes. Additionally, I share the message that Leo Lucassen conveyed during the final presentation regarding the way the world is developing. We cannot turn our backs on the past, as it also speaks to us about the present and teaches us to make decisions that create fairer futures. For all these reasons, I hope to keep contributing in any form to the development of this initiative, in which I deeply believe.

