

The final work I created for this fellowship is a creative audiovisual piece titled 'Talking to the Wall'. On our final day I presented it as a live lecture-performance which is the script the reader can find at the end of this report. I had initially thought of making a speculative audio guide on selected pieces but my visceral experience of entering the Special Collections room led to this experimentation. Using liminagraphy, a decolonial, relational approach to knowledge by Dr Zuleika Bibi Sheik, the work shows a collapsing of histories and contemporary relational knottings through an embodied experience of the Rijksmuseum, their 18th century textile collection, VOC archives and literature on the history of slavery, highlighting microhistories. The work retains the form of a speculative audio guide with my voice in the background while the visuals, sometimes videos, sometimes stills, takes the form of a walkthrough. In doing so, I seek to disrupt the museum's distant, neutralising and thus depoliticised (re)presentation of history. My work thus brings attention to the museum's centrality in the colonial, capitalist machinery and to the material injustices it continues to inflict.

As the audience sees Rijksmuseum's carefully preserved (read:gatekept) muslins and ari appropriated vests on the screen, they hear stories of enslavement in the years these textiles were transported. The Indian Ocean is mostly associated with indentured labour exploitation after the official abolishment of slavery but slavery was widespread across the Indian Ocean even preceding it. My work thus points to the need to study the history of textile and fashion along with its connections to slavery and enslavement in the Indian Ocean in its overlooked relation to the transatlantic slave trade and. It also highlights the need to centre caste in the study of the Indian Ocean slave trade history because of the role the caste system occupies in South Asia and to understand enslavement within casteist societies and how structures of caste and colonialism together sustained colonial slave trade.

While seeing a neat collection of muslins, the audience hears about women textile workers enslaved in undivided Bengal and VOC's history of slave trade, an institution written off as a 'multinational trading company' by the museum. We learn how depending on skills, women were either abducted to be sold in Transatlantic markets of Batavia and Cape Town or to local communities of dominant caste Stotra Brahmins as 'brides'. These are histories of slavery that unravel us, possibly causing an uncomfortable realisation that we cannot view the muslins, embroidered jackets, housecoats, gowns and textiles as merely beautiful pieces. That the history of beauty is itself violent and to do any justice to it is to let this discomfort unravel us so we can attend to histories of resistance and refusal that upend how dominant narratives are constructed. Doing so is an opportunity for a critical understanding of our histories and its contemporary continuities to work against the material persistence of the violence of oppressive systems like caste, colonialism and capitalism and therein hold institutions to account. It is also a call to break away from the illusory promise of institutions, in order to be attentive to the death these institutions facilitate and the life that refusal and resistance affirm.

## *Talking to the wall*

15 May 2025, 12:15pm.

A second visit to the 'Special Collections' at the Rijksmuseum. The darkness consumes me a second time.

*Textile, trade, travel, trend, time, transatlantic, Indian Ocean, VOC.*

Travelling through hands that make, to those that wear, what tensions do threads bear and bare?  
The first room spotlights shiny, grand, VOC ship models. A collection given to the museum by the Dutch Navy.

*Have you ever felt out of breath in a museum?*

Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, my tongue can't quite wrap around the word but it is one of the many East India Companies, you know?

According to the museum the VOC is 'a multinational trading company' that was 'at the heart of a globalising world, operating between the Dutch Republic and East Asia' bridging the two for 200 years with a highly profitable trade in spices, tea, silk, cotton, porcelain, tropical wood and so forth. Alongside trade was Western curiosity about exotic regions, societies, flora and fauna. And the museum concludes there was more to it than trade and curiosity alone.

'Far overseas a battle was being waged with trade competitors from Europe, with the local population often being forced to cater to its appetite for territorial expansion and profit motive.' So many words working together so a museum does not have to say colonisation. I continue reading, 'The crew of East Indiamen also felt the negative aspects of this enterprise. A monotonous and unhealthy diet, bad weather and the chance of shipwreck made the months of travelling a risky undertaking.'

Bridging Europe and Asia was surely no easy feat, the museum teaches me, as the VOC crew struggled a lot. The big ship with projections of sailors working hard onboard makes the Dutch seem like adventurous sailors, diligent hustlers.

Textbook colonial propaganda.

'Almost 250 VOC ships never reached their destinations, sinking to the bottom of the sea.'

Glory be to the sea gods, I pray for all colonisers to sink.

Here is the textile section. It features an array of finished and unfinished vests, suits, coats that pioneered colonial bourgeois fashion. The museum notes on its wall text 'Dutch fashion was also influenced by China, Japan, and particularly India, as seen in the long housecoats made of cotton chintz. Merchants sought riches from across the globe often through coercion and exploitation. Silks, cottons, linens were among the many goods traded by the Dutch East India Company (VOC).'

*Influence. Inspiration. Trade.* Ah the tranquiliser gun called neutrality.

See this beautiful white cotton skirt with multicoloured floral motifs. 'Roodgetamboueerde', the museum records. The favourite beading technique of Parisian haute coutures - Chanel, Gaultier and other words to choke on.

Aesthetics.

Tambour, the famous french embroidery technique, gets its name from the drum because of how fabric is stretched across a wooden frame. Tambou drums, the heartbeat of Haitian revolution. Skin.

The technique tambour uses is unique to embroiders from the Kachchh region of Gujarat, western India. In Gujarati it is called ari/mochi bharat, meaning cobbler's stitch, done using ari, the cobbler's hook meant for leatherwork. As the French claimed to develop 'tambour', it quickly became an 'exotic' craft for elite European women. Aari embroidery on Dutch colonial aristocrats.

We know tambour but what tambour knows is ari and yet we do not know ari. What is knowledge?

Legend has it, 250 years ago, a Muslim fakir from Sindh taught his art to families whose caste occupation was cobbler. Caste, a 3000 year old system of slavery that moulds sociability in South Asia. Violence. Untouchability. Skin.

1633, Ethiopia-Surat, voyage 3127, two enslaved people onboard. 1634, Surat-unknown, voyage 2691: 21 prisoners and 3 '[cafferinen](#)' women going with the ships Zeelandia and Leijden, dated 1633-12-25. And more in 1761 and 81.

You see housecoats woven and painted in the Coromandel Coast, 1750-99.

1750-99: the peak of Dutch slave trade amidst a so-called ban. When Pulicat in Tamil Nadu, Coromandel Coast was a major place for Dutch slave trade. VOC factories in Pulicat would bring enslaved people from Bengal and other settlements clothed in coarse dungarees. They were sold at rates anywhere between 4 to 40 guilders and trafficked to Mauritius and Reunion. Colonial archives classify them as Muslim, Hindu, [caffers](#), a slur used for Black Africans.

And now we see muslin, a famous European obsession. Muslin was made in undivided Bengal comprising Bihar and Orissa. Bengal. The ESTA website shows 19 results for Bengal. Almost every ship had enslaved people on board.

In 'Textiles from Bengal: A Shared Legacy' edited by Sonia Ashmore, Tirthankar Roy and Niaz Zaman, Subham China writes an essay about how Bengal textile workers were enslaved because of the high demand for in the textile industries of Mexico and for specific domestic needs in Manila and Cape Town. The Dutch used to traffick women from Baranagar (Barangul in colonial records) to present-day Jakarta or Batavia in colonial imagination.

'The Dutch traded the slaves from Mrauk U to Batavia, and then to the Cape of Good Hope. Slaves were brought by Indian and Dutch trading vessels carrying rice, saltpetre and silk to Batavia, from the Bay of Bengal. Many Cape Town Indian slaves were likely to have been transferred from Batavia and owned there, before being taken to the Cape on the numerous vessels of the return fleet. In 1771, the Governing Council at the Cape officially asked the VOC authorities in Bengal to send a total of one hundred half-grown (i.e. young) slaves for its use. Cape household inventory records suggest that the highest numbers of female slaves were procured from Bengal, peaking in 1750–94. The VOC slaves brought to Cape Town were primarily housed in the Slave Lodge. They were christened and listed in the inventories under the names of their owners.'

Slavery in and caste are intertwined in south asia as enslaved persons largely belonged to caste oppressed backgrounds with lives already bonded to dominant caste landlords or merchants who would sell them to Europeans. Cochin records suggest a majority of enslaved persons sold to VOC crew privately were from caste oppressed backgrounds, often dalit. The Portuguese-Arakanese Maghs also captured and enslaved women from the Bengal Delta in the 17th century and the first half of 18th century. They were then depending on 'skill' either traded to Transatlantic markets of Batavia and Cape Town or sold to Stotra Brahmin communities in Bikrampur, Dhaka and Pipli as brides. These women faced dual social ostracisation called moger dosh for being trafficked and their natal families excommunicated.

What is gender but caste? Stuck to the skin, stitched into flesh.

Scholar Subham China writes about a baby cap, a piece of textile art knitted by Melati, an enslaved Bengali woman at the Iziko Slave Lodge Museum in Cape Town. The accompanying note by Jeffcoat says: "Knitted by a slave of my grandmothers' and worn by me in 1838." The author argues that it shows they had opportunities to engage in leisure activities beyond farm or domestic work. A baby cap knitted for the slave owner's grandchild is domestic work so I disagree with the author. I am not convinced about imposing the author's speculation of Melati continuing a Bengali tradition in leisure because I cannot comprehend leisure in the context of enslavement. I can only see how her art was inseparable from her and how brilliant at knitting she was. I see how enslavement meant it would consume her art, mandating it be done as slave labour. Stuck to the skin, stitched into flesh.

Porous as skin, fabric holds. Textile artists stitch stories on cloth. Every motif a world unto itself. Worlds museums cannot begin to hold because there is not enough light in the 'Golden Age' room, you see. Only shadows cast by each object and every person bringing to the room their histories. This one is wounded by colonialism and caste. The space shared between Europe and Asia for 200 years was no bridge but endless

raging seas and the depths of Kalapani. The Netherlands bridged the gap between itself and its need for goods, labour and land and on this so-called bridge unloaded cargoes: silk, chintz, muslin, spices, flesh.

I visited the Special Collections on 15 May. 15 May is Nakba commemoration day. I started writing this on 18 May, Mullivaikkal-Tamil genocide remembrance day. So I end remembering against the dismembering colonialism leaves in its wake. I recall Melati, Marie, Josephine, Suzanne, Uzirmahmod, Koki, Rosali, Hannibal, Flora, Christina, Anthonij, Filander whose stories I read. I remember Eesoo, incarcerated by the British for refusing to go back to her Brahmin landlord. I honour the memory of such refusal and hope to learn from it. Runaways, revoltors, rioters or 'thieves' as colonial archives would have it, are all histories of resistance.

Coloniality is to consume what you disdain. The ability to strip things down to decorative motifs emptied out of meaning is because of how they were obtained in the first place - found/collected/smuggled/captured/sampled/appropriated/archived/consumed - trapped, rotting and forgotten behind gates too well-kept.

*Have you ever felt out of breath in a museum?* Run.

The museum writes of clothes and jewellery as costumes. Institutions of empire cannot comprehend how textile, in its intimacy to body, land, labour and memory - is sacred.

**Note:** Strikethrough has been used as a means of transparency to both acknowledge the existence of racial slurs in the colonial archive and at the same time to indicate that it is not endorsed and rejected.

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