

**Does the University of Groningen have a Responsibility to Redress its Colonial History?**

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### **Preface**

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Maeve McKeown, for her pointed feedback and guidance throughout this process. This dissertation would not have been possible without her support. I am also grateful to Arianna Rotulo for her encouragement in studying this topic.

Thank you to the scholars I met at The Histories of (Post-)Colonial Universities in the Netherlands conference for their thoughtful discussions. And a heartfelt thanks to my friends who listened to my endless rants, answered my many questions, and supported me throughout.

Finally, I want to express deep appreciation for those, both within and beyond academia, who continue to fight for justice and decolonisation. Your dedication inspires this dissertation and reminds us of the importance of confronting the past to build a more equitable future.

### **Abstract**

This dissertation answers the question: In what ways is the University of Groningen (RUG) historically connected to Dutch colonialism, and should the university address this legacy? Through analysing historical artifacts, including gravestones located in the Academy Building, the university's founding act (*The Eternal Edict*), and *The Tree of Knowledge* mural, this study demonstrates that the RUG has been linked to colonial structures since its foundation in 1614. Drawing on Alasia Nuti's (2019:30-51) framework of historical-structural injustice and Gloria Wekker's (2016:39) concept of the cultural archive, I argue that based on the RUG's historical connection to colonialism, along with its continued reproduction of colonial structures and its failure to intervene in this reproduction and prevent further harm, it has acquired a structural debt that necessitates redress. To address this, I propose several interventions including contextualising colonial artefacts, revising the *Tree of Knowledge* mural, and establishing further research initiatives. Ultimately, this dissertation calls for a deeper reckoning with the university's past as a crucial step toward meaningful decolonisation and institutional accountability.

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## Introduction

The call to *decolonise*, has gained considerable traction, both abroad and within the Netherlands. However, as a student of the University of Groningen (RUG), I have noticed that its colonial history remains mostly overlooked, despite its status at the second-oldest university in the Netherlands. This reflects a broader Dutch tendency toward ‘smug ignorance’: dismissing and neglecting colonial ties while maintaining a sense moral righteousness (Essed and Hoving, 2014; Wekker, 2016:166). Following Iris Marion Young’s (2006) argument that individuals hold the most power within the institutions they are part of, I aim to investigate this absence. Therefore, the aim of this dissertation is to answer the question: In what ways is the University of Groningen historically connected to Dutch colonialism, and should the university address this legacy?

My dissertation is structured as follows. Part One, outlines my methods and historical background. First, I clarify key terms, such as colonialism and decolonisation. Then I outline my dual methodology, including my approach to historical analysis and the theoretical framework I rely on to build a normative argument. Finally, I provide a brief overview of Dutch colonial history contextualise the RUG.

Part two, investigates the RUG’s connection to colonialism. To answer the empirical question: In what ways is the University of Groningen connected to colonial history? To answer this, I analyse three artefacts: the gravestones in the basement of the main building, the university’s founding act (Emmius, 1614) and *The Tree of Knowledge* mural in the auditorium (Röling and Muller, 1987). Based on the themes identified, I conclude that the RUG has been connected to Dutch colonialism since its foundation.

Part Three, answers the question: Should the RUG address its colonial history? Here, I shift gears from historical analysis to normative political philosophy, specifically structural

injustice theory. I build on Alasia Nuti's (2019:30) 'historical-structural injustice' (HSI) framework which explains how past injustices are reproduced over time through ongoing structural inequalities, even after the original forms of injustice have ended. According to this framework, collective agents that contribute to- and fail to address such injustices acquire a structural debt and bear a moral responsibility for redress. By linking Gloria Wekker's (2016:39) concept of the 'cultural archive' to Dutch colonialism, I demonstrate how colonialism has last effects in the Netherlands today and can be considered a HSI. Following from this, I argue that the RUG has acquired a structural debt, through its connections to Dutch colonialism, and its failure to intervene, leading to the reproduction of colonial narratives. Finally, to address this debt, I propose several interventions, these include repainting the *Tree of Knowledge* mural, contextualising colonial artefacts like the gravestones with informative plaques, and funding further research to investigate the university's colonial history. These steps, while not exhaustive, offer a foundation for the RUG to reckon with its past and take responsibility for shaping a more just future.

In sum, I argue that the University of Groningen is historically connected to colonialism and based on this connection, along with its continued reproduction of colonial structures and its failure to intervene in this reproduction and prevent further harm, it has a moral obligation towards redress. With this dissertation, I seek to challenge dominant Dutch narratives of disavowal and dismissal in our involvement with colonialism, racism and slavery. Instead, I situate the RUG within its historical context, and demonstrate how it continues to reproduce unjust structures. Since confronting our past is the first step towards decolonisation, and the foundation for meaningful redress.

## I: Methods and Background

### What is colonialism?

To understand the colonial history of the University of Groningen (RUG), I first need to define colonialism.<sup>1</sup> This is not an easy feat; colonial history traces back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, spans over hundreds of countries, and is often used interchangeably with a variety of other terms, such as imperialism (Kohn and Reddy, 2024). Anne McClintock (1992: 88) defines colonisation as a system involving the direct appropriation of another geo-political entity, combined with the exploitation of its resources and labour, and a systematic interference in the capacity of the colonised culture's ability to organise its own systems of power and governance. Colonisation takes various forms (McClintock, 1992). Internal colonisation refers to when a dominant groups treats a specific population as it would a foreign colony. Imperial colonisation, as defined by Marxist theory, refers to large-scale, economically driven territorial domination, such as that of the British Empire's control over 80% of the world. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines imperialism as a form of domination where a foreign government administers a territory without significant settlement (Kohn and Reddy, 2024).

Dutch colonialism varied across regions and time periods (Bosma, 2014). For example, in the Cape Colony (South Africa) Dutch settlers displaced local populations and established communities, in this case the most specific definition would be settler-colonialism (Cavanagh, 2013). Whereas in the Dutch-East Indies (now Indonesia), imperialism might be more appropriate, since control was both administrative and territorial, and maintained

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<sup>1</sup> Colonisation refers to the act or practise of colonising a territory, whereas colonialism refers to the form of governance. These are often used almost interchangeably, such as McClintock (1992: 88) refers to the system using the word *colonization*.

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through military force and centralised governance rather than widespread settlement (Bosma, 2014; Lindblad, 1989; Locher Scholten, 1994).<sup>2</sup>

I recognise the current debates and nuanced ways in Dutch colonialism functioned. Because of that, I will be referring to the terms *colonialism* and *colonisation*, as these are the most general and therefore encapsulate the broadest meaning.

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<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that this matter is not settled, several Dutch historians argue that though the Netherlands was imperial in terms of economic approach, it was not so much (aspiring to) have control over a large landmass with a considerable population (e.g. Emmer and Gommans, 2012). However, those working in the field of critical race and post-colonial theory do generally consider it imperial, which is the perspective I am writing from (see e.g. Wekker, 2016). The Dutch settler-colonies, including South Africa, can be interpreted as part of this broader imperial project.



### **What is Decolonisation?**

The call to disentangle the colonial histories from current narratives, is at the centre of the broader decolonisation movement. Arguably the most famous work on decolonisation within education is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by Paulo Freire (2018). Freire argues that the liberation of individuals from colonial oppression requires *conscientização*, or critical consciousness-raising. *Conscientização* is developed through a dynamic and non-hierarchical pedagogy based on dialogue, rather than the way that is currently taught passive knowledge transfer from teacher to student (Mendieta, 2020). This is necessary because colonisation is not just material, but also a psychological and cultural domination (Bhambra, 2018). Through this praxis of liberation, the oppressed can create new autonomous identities, that are not rooted in their oppression (Mendieta, 2020).

In *Decolonisation is not a Metaphor*, Tuck and Yang (2012) critique Freire's approach to decolonisation. They write that decolonisation at its core means the repatriation of dispossessed Indigenous land. By framing colonialism as cultural or psychological rather than material, they contend we risk reinforcing Eurocentric frames and soothing colonisers guilt, rather than achieving genuine decolonisation.

However, Gurminder K. Bhambra, Dalia Gebrial and Kerem Nişancıoğlu argue in *Decolonising the University* (2018) that if we see decolonisation only as a historically specific and geographically particular articulation of the colonial project, we neglect colonial relations that were not directly settler projects and overlook the discursive projects associated with these practices (such as white supremacy and Orientalism). It would remove from our view both the complicated and nuanced relations of the colonial project. Instead, Bhambra et. al, argue that to decolonise the university is to question the epistemological authority of the western university as the primary site of knowledge production, and to contribute to the broader project of decolonisation through a discussion of strategies and interventions

emanating from within the imperial metropolises. This process works from the imperial centre to the periphery and vice versa. As such, efforts to decolonise seek plural perspectives that expand both academic inquiry and political practice (2014:3).

## Methodology

The second section of this paper relies on historical research from primary and secondary sources, primarily through literature review. Recent studies have shed light on the colonial history of Groningen, as well as the history of the university. One of the first works I engaged with was *Sporen van het Slavernij Verleden in Groningen* by Barbara Henkes, Lieuwe Jongsma and Margriet Fokken (2024), part of the broader *Mapping Slavery* project (2017), which puts colonial history and slavery on the map by pinpointing significant locations. The tour also makes several stops at the Academy building of the university, from which I study the gravestones in the basement and the *Tree of Knowledge* mural in the auditorium (Röling and Muller, 1987). All these artifacts can be accessed freely by students and staff. Additionally, I look at the *Eternal Edict* (Emmius, 1614), the founding act, of the university to understand the motivations for its establishment. These provided me with a concrete entry point into my research.

By cross-referencing these primary sources with secondary sources, I retrieved insights into both tangible and ideological ties between the university and the Dutch colonial empire. Several recent studies were particularly valuable. First of all, Singh, Tánczos and Jongsma (2024) studied in request of the municipality, regional government involvement with the Dutch colonial companies. The project *Bitterzoet Erfgoed* (2022) at the Groninger Museum investigates the history of slavery in Groningen. Additionally, Lieuwe Jongsma's master's thesis, *Slavery Dynasties: networks of kinship around transatlantic slave trade in the province of Groningen (1622-1863)* (2014), traces the prominent elite networks that were involved with the chamber of the *West-Indische Compagnie* (WIC) in Groningen, this was particularly useful to shed light on the founders of the university. Additionally, the letters from the Fockens Family (Schutte, 2014), provided further details. For the university history,

my main source is the three-volume *Universiteit van het Noorden*, which in great detail records the history of the university (Van Berkel, 2014, 2017, 2023).

To make my approach more create, I will illustrate my working method. For example, take the Alting gravestone, I first verified the name in *Universiteit van het Noorden* (Van Berkel, 2014), to investigate this individual's role in the university. Alting came up a couple of times this verifying his relevance, in this case he was a professor. From there, I cross-reference all names with my Jongsma (2014) to see if he was part of any of the WIC-linked families, as well as with the other aforementioned sources. Alting also made an appearance in the research by Singh (2024) and in the Letters from the family Fockens (2014). This method consistently yielded enough information to construct biographies of individuals or artifacts. Thus, by picking apart the artifacts and histories of the university, and tracing them in the existing research on colonial networks, I am placing them back into their historical contexts.

Building on that, in the third part of the dissertation, I aim to answer the question: Should the University of Groningen address its colonial history? In the Theoretical Framework I elaborate on the political philosophical theories I rely on to answer this question.

## Theoretical Framework

This dissertation situates its analysis within critical race theory, post-colonial studies, decolonial thought, and structural injustice theory.

In the Dutch context, Gloria Wekker is one of the most prominent authors in post-colonial and critical race theory. In *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016:2) she writes how 400 years of colonialism shape the 'Dutch Cultural Archive': the fabric of what makes up the total repository of culture, our social and political institutions. One of the ways that colonial narratives are expressed in the Netherlands today is through what Essed and Hoving (2014) call 'smug ignorance' (Wekker, 2016:18). This term describes a common Dutch paradox: slavery and colonial involved are dismissed or outright rejected, while vehemently holding on to moral superiority by priding itself on being tolerant and progressive.

These works build on *Orientalism* by Edward Said (1978). He investigates the ideals of rational scientific inquiry, humanism and progress underlying western society, as originating from the Enlightenment. He describes a dichotomy between the East and the West where the Occident (the west) is considered rational, of the mind, ordered and civilised. And in turn, its antithesis, the Orient, as irrational, of the body, the disorderly and barbaric (Kohn and Reddy, 2024). This dichotomy provides the moral and epistemological justification of the colonial project, as a 'civilising mission' to control the barbaric other and teach superior European values, including religion and reason (Said, 1978).

In the introduction to *Decolonising the University*, Bhambra et al. (2018:5), argue Western universities act as a key sit through which colonialism is produced; by supressing Indigenous knowledge and while being funded through the spoils of colonial plunder, enslavement and dispossession. Rooted in Orientalist ideals, these institutions supported

colonial expansion by developing scientific knowledge, such as shipbuilding and navigation tools, while legitimising Western epistemologies as objective and superior. This notion of knowledge as rational and apolitical obscures the political circumstances enabling its production (Said, 1978; Bhambra et al., 2018).

To answer the question: Should the RUG address its colonial history? I turn to structural injustice theory. Traditional accounts of responsibility, such as the ‘liability model’, identify harm that was directly caused by an agent with intent and knowledge (Young, 2011:97-98). However, for structural injustices (such as colonialism) this model is inadequate, since no single agent has caused the injustice and intended the harm. Instead, injustice is the baseline condition, and agents (of any type) are merely existing within those structures. Therefore, as an alternative, Young presents the ‘social connection model’ of responsibility. On this model, all agents connected to structural injustices share a non-blameworthy, political responsibility to engage in collective action to overcome the injustices (Young, 2011:104-113).

Building on that, Alasia Nuti (2019) has developed the framework of historical-structural injustice (HSI). By de-temporalising history she conceptualises structural injustices, such as colonialism, as not just events but embedded in ongoing structures, perpetuated over time and across generations. And because certain collective agents are connected to these HSI over time, and have failed to intervene, they have accumulated a ‘structural debt’ (153). Using this framework, I connect the University of Groningen’s colonial history to a normative argument for institutional redress.

## Colonialism and the Netherlands

The period from approximately 1588 to 1672, is often regarded in the Netherlands as a time of immense wealth and cultural flourishing, as recent research has argued, generated in large part by the dominance of global trade facilitated through the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC, or the Dutch East-India Company) and the *Verenigde West-Indische Compagnie* (WIC, or the Dutch West-India Company) (Acemoglu et. al, 2005; Van Rossum and Fatah-Black, 2012), transforming the small nation into a global power (De Zwart, 2015). This prosperity funded a cultural Renaissance, known for famous artists such as Vermeer and Rembrandt. It also contributed to the establishment of Dutch universities, including in Leiden (1575), Franeker (1585) and Groningen (1614). As a result, history books, museums, and media often refer to this period as the ‘Dutch Golden Age’, reaffirming images of and prosperity in business and art (Helmert and Janssen, 2018). From this it becomes clear that in the dominant culture our colonial history is often regarded with pride (Singh et. al, 2024). A survey by YouGov (2019) confirms this, approximately 50% of Dutch people are proud of the Dutch colonial empire, this is the highest number of any of the surveyed countries.

Established in 1602, the VOC mainly traded in Asia, monopolising the lucrative spice trade before branching into textiles, coffee and tea (Oostindie, 2008:1). Among its rule was the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Gujurat and Coromandel (now part of India), Dutch Formosa (now Taiwan) and the Cape Colony (now in South Africa). The WIC, founded in 1621, concentrated on the Atlantic, engaging in the triangular transatlantic slave trade and sugar production in territorial colonies in Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, parts of Brazil (notably Dutch Brazil in the northeast), and areas in West Africa such as Elmina (in present-day Ghana) (Oostindie, 2008: 8). VOC and WIC were deeply intertwined in the sense that they were created by a similar ideology, but also in operation (Singh et. al, 2024). Both had a national monopoly on colonial trade and quasi-sovereign

powers, including the ability to wage war, negotiate treaties, and govern territories, often with brutal coercion and force. Between the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Netherlands enslaved and shipped approximately 600.000 Africans to north and South America and between 660.000 and 1.1 million people around the Indian ocean (Holtrop, 2021). These actions entrenched systems of racialisation, plantation slavery and forced indentured indigenous labour and have left enduring legacies of economic extraction, social inequality and political instability (Rodríguez et. al, 2017; Singh et. al, 2024).

For this reason, the term ‘Golden Age’ has recently come under scrutiny. For example, in 2019, the Amsterdam Museum decided to stop using it, as it ‘ignores the negative sides [of colonialism]’ (Visser, 2019). In recent years, a substantial amount of scholarship has emerged from within the Netherlands that is critical of Dutch treatment of colonialism, slavery and racism. One of the most prominent being Gloria Wekker, in *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism* and race she critically examines how Dutch society maintains a narrative of ‘smug ignorance’ towards its colonial past (2016:18). This narrative portrays the Netherlands as a tolerant, egalitarian, and progressive country while downplaying or denying its complicity in colonialism, slavery, and racism. Wekker argues that this denial is sustained through the ‘cultural archive’, a deeply embedded repository of colonial knowledge, attitudes, and practices that continue to shape societal norms and identities (39). Wekker contends that this erasure not only perpetuates structural racism but also obstructs efforts to address contemporary inequalities.

Despite post-colonial critiques, most mainstream academia and dominant Dutch culture still downplay the role of colonial exploitation as the central mechanism underpinning prosperity during the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Rodríguez et. al, 2017). For example, Melissa Weiner (2014) demonstrates that Dutch school textbooks rarely address slavery and colonisation, and

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when they do, they often frame Dutch traders as shrewd businessmen rather than exploitative figures, while portraying enslaved Africans as aggressive and lacking humanity.

## Colonialism and Groningen

Groningen is often seen as less involved in slavery and colonialism than, for example, Zeeland or Amsterdam due to its peripheral location (Jongsma, 2014). However, as discussed in the methodology, recent research has shown Groningen was both directly and indirectly involved in and profited from colonial trade (see Singh et. al 2024, Jongsma, 2014). To understand the possible connection between the RUG's establishment and colonialism, we must examine the structures of the VOC and WIC and Groningen's role within them.

Both companies were governed in a similar manner: by a national Board of Directors (*Heeren XVII* for the VOC and *Heeren XIX* for the WIC) made up of nineteen seats distributed among the different Chambers (*Kamers*). A Chamber refers to the regional sub-division or department of the company that is contributing a fixed share to the company's activities, and takes on responsibility for organisational and financial matters (Nationaal Archief, 2024).

At the establishment of the WIC, the province of Groningen was eager to join after failing secure membership of the earlier VOC (Singh et. al, 2024). This is because having a regional Chamber of the WIC was a promise of wealth, as well as a status symbol. This Chamber in Groningen was named *Kamer ter Stad en Lande*, or Chamber of City and Country after the name of the province,<sup>3</sup> and was located at the Munnekeholm. The members of the regional WIC and VOC chambers were called *bewindhebbers*, translating to directors or administrators (Jongsma, 2014), and were responsible for overseeing and organising the financial and logistic aspects of its operation. The position of director was obtained by purchasing shares within the company. As such, the individuals came from a select network

<sup>3</sup> The province of Groningen was established after the Reduction of Groningen in 1594: the defeat of King Filips II, after which it entered the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands. The province of Groningen was consolidation of the city of Groningen, and the Ommelanden (the surrounding countryside) (Boels and Buursma, 2025).

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of the wealthiest families in Groningen (Jongsma, 2014). These shares were purchased for their hope of profitability after the great financial success of the VOC, but also for the prestige. We can recognise this in the book *Der Pilaren ende Peerlen* (2020) by Bernhard Alting (1660-1729).<sup>4</sup> He writes how to climb the social ladder in Groningen: by first accumulating wealth from buying shares in the WIC; then, purchasing real estate to symbolise status; and finally, fulfilling political positions. Boels and Feenstra (2008) also argue that the position of director was valued mainly because of the prestige. Singh et. al, (2024) further found that many directors held roles within the regional government.

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<sup>4</sup> Related to Alting family members (Jongsma, 2014) mentioned in the next section.

## II: Colonialism and the RUG

In this section, I present my empirical research using the approach detailed in the methodology. I show how the gravestones at the RUG, *the Eternal Edict* (RUG, 2024a) and the *Tree of Knowledge* (Röling and Muller, 1987) mural demonstrate how the RUG has been connected to colonialism since its foundations.

### The Gravestones

The gravestones were originally located at the *Broerkerk*, which at the universities establishment 1614, became the university church (*Academiakerk*) (Van Berkel, 2014). At the associated cemetery, individuals affiliated with the RUG and their families could be buried (Hofstede and de Groot, 1832; Henkes et. al, , 2024). However, the old church was demolished in 1896, replaced by the new Sint Martinus church, and later by the university library in 1982 (Van Berkel, 2023; Henkes et. al, 2024). In 1909 twelve of gravestones were transferred to the university of Groningen, those of: Ubbo Emmius, Samuël Maresius, Henricus Alting<sup>5</sup>, Jacobus Alting, Johannes Freytag, Matthias Pasor, Tobias Andreae, Cornelis van Velzen, Carolus Mulerius, Menso Alting, the descendants of Menso Alting and Johan Rufelaert (RUG, 2024) (Fig. A1). The human remains (many of which were strict Calvinists) were reburied at the Roman-Catholic cemetery on the Herenweg (Huisman, 2014). In 2007 the stones were restored due to damage (Huisman, 2014). I connected seven out of the twelve gravestones to the Chamber of the WIC in Groningen (Henkes et. al, , 2024).

### *Emmius-family*

The only stone outside the basement is Ubbo Emmius', mounted on the Academy Building's entrance wall (Huisman, 2014). The Emmius-family was originally from Ostfriesland, however became prominent members of the Groningen elite network after the Reduction<sup>3</sup>. Ubbo Emmius became the rector of the Latin school in 1594, a position he

fulfilled until the University was founded in 1614 (Van Berkel, 2014). Though Ubbo Emmius himself has not been linked to any investments in the VOC or WIC, his family was part of the wider urban elite-networks in Groningen (Jongsma, 2014), through which he and his family garnered its status. This is according to the description of Alting<sup>4</sup> (1648/2020) on how to climb the social ladder and become part of the elite networks of Groningen: by buying shares in the WIC to assert and keep social status, and in turn also the key to fulfilling political roles.

Ubbo Emmius' son Wessel Emmius (1589-1654) was one of the main participants in the WIC chamber Stad en Lande in 1643, with a stake of *f*4200<sup>5</sup> (Jongsma, 2014). And Wessel Emmius' son, Samuel Emmius also became a director of the regional Chamber of the WIC in 1675 (Jongsma, 2014). He was also a member of the city council from 1660, and mayor of Groningen several times from 1676 (Jongsma, 2014; Groninger Museum, 2024). These are just a few names of the relatives of Ubbo Emmius mentioned within the work of Jongsma (2014).

### ***The Alting-Family***

In the basement, four graves honour members of the Alting family<sup>6</sup>. The Alting name has a long history with the university. As mentioned earlier, Joachim Alting fulfilled an important role in the university's establishment<sup>7</sup> (Van Berkel, 2023), as the mayor of Groningen and devoted humanist, he used his position to advocate for the establishment of the RUG (Van Berkel, 2014). In 1618 he took up a curating role for the university, he bought under the instructions of Ubbo Emmius 403 books for the new university library (as noted by Nicolaas Mulerius) (Jonckbloet:391 and 607). He was also one of the directors of the WIC in

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<sup>5</sup> *f* refers to Dutch guilders.

<sup>6</sup> Alternatively spelled as Althing (Jongsma, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Joachim Alting's painting can also be found in the senate room of the university, this was a gift by his relative Menso Alting in 1707 (Jonckbloet, 1864).

Groningen. His family was a part of the elite networks governing the city and involved with the WIC (Jongsma, 2014).

Henricus Alting (1583-1644) (Fig. A2), a professor of theology in Heidelberg and son of Calvinist preacher Menso Alting (1541-1612) (Fig. A3), is also memorialised here (van Berkel, 2014). His son, Jacobus Alting (1618-1679) (Fig. A4), became a professor of eastern languages in 1647 and theology in 1667, serving as academy preacher for students and faculty (Van Berkel, 2014; Jonckbloet, 1864). Another son, Menso Alting Jr. (1636-1712/13), was a WIC director in Groningen (from 1691), mayor (1686-1712), and university curator (1684) (Jongsma, 2014; Mulier and Anton, 1990).

Additionally, a grave that honours the descendants of Menso Alting Jr. (Fig. A5), one of these descendants is Willem Alting (1724-1800). Willem Alting played a prominent role in the VOC (Singh, et. al., 2024). He became Master of the Law at the University of Groningen, for which he travelled to Batavia in 1705 for the VOC, and he remained there for the rest of life (Putten, 2002). Over the years, he rose through ranks, becoming Director-General in 1777, and in 1780 Governor-General. He held the position for 17 years. Alting's tenure was marked by the VOC's decline, worsened by the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784). Much of the VOC's territories were seized by the British, with little resistance from Batavia (Putten, 2002). Despite this, he enjoyed great luxuries throughout this career. In the letters from the Fockens family (Schutte, 2014), he is mentioned as someone who, for his own amusement, taught his slaves to play musical instruments (Singh, 2024).

These findings demonstrate the Alting family took on both an influential role in the elite network of Groningen, as well as within the university.

### ***Mulerius family***

In the basement, we can also find the grave of Carolus Mulerius (1601-1638) (Fig. A5), a RUG student and Grammarian who wrote the first Dutch grammar of Spanish (Swiggers, 2009). Carolus Mulerius a son of Nicolaas Mulerius<sup>8</sup> (1564-1630), who was the first professor of medicine, as well as professor of mathematics, and appointed by his good friend Ubbo Emmius at the founding of the university in 1614 (Van Berkel, 2014), as well as the then librarian of the university library. This highlights the close-knit connections in the Groningen elite-network (Jongsma, 2014). A portrait of Nicolaas Mulerius can also be found in the Senate Chamber. According to Henkes et. al (2024) and Van Netten (2010), Mulerius was among the early directors of the *Chamber of Stad en Lande* of the WIC and invested the considerable sum of *f*17.500 equivalent to approximately €300.000 today (Henkes et. al, 2024). He obtained the position of director due to his expertise in mathematics and astronomy, which could be applied to charting overseas trade routes (Henkes et. al, 2024). He is memorialised today through the Nicolaas Mulerius Fund which promotes RUG's classical and academic reputation abroad (RUG, 2024b). His successor in the academy was Matthias Pasor (van Berkel, 2014).

His other son, Petrus Mulerius (1599-1647), also professor, invested an unknown sum in the WIC chamber in Groningen, as well *f*3000 in the WIC Chamber of Amsterdam in 1637 (Jongsma, 2014). Neither he, nor his descendants, married within the kinship network around slavery, and his family name soon disappears from the lists (Jongsma, 2014).

### ***Rufelaert***

Another of the gravestones is of Johan Rufelaert (1601-1671) (Fig. A7), who was a guarantor from Groningen and a curator for the academy. He also was a director responsible

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<sup>8</sup> Alternatively spelled as Nicolaus (Van Berkel, 2014).

for representing the Ommelanden (province) for the Groningen' chamber of the WIC. In 1643 he is in the list of head participants in the Chamber by investing *f*8.100 (€101.200 today), and 1649 he is mentioned again as a director of the Chamber (Henkes et. al, 2024; Singh, 2024).

According to Jongasma (2014), his family moved to Groningen from the south of the Netherlands, and married into the elite network.

### ***Remaining gravestones***

The remaining gravestones memorialise professor of theology Cornelis van Velzen, professor of Greek and librarian Tobias Andreae,<sup>9</sup> professor of theology Samuel Maresius, professor of medicine Johannes Freytag and headmaster and professor of mathematics Matthias Pasor (Van Berkel, 2014). Within the scope of my research, I have not been able to trace these individuals to the WIC and VOC directly.

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<sup>9</sup> For Tobias Andreae (1604-1679) I could not trace any direct connections to the WIC or VIC. However, he was a friend of the Alting family, and through this connection to the elite network of Groningen established a career for himself (Van Berkel, 2014)



## The Eternal Edict

This section analyses the *Eeuwige Edict* (Eternal Edict), the founding act of the RUG. The act is written by Ubbo Emmius (most likely) (RUG, 2024a; Emmius, 1614; Krop, 2014), and issued by the council of the province Groningen and the Ommelanden in 1614. It makes an argument for the establishment of the university. Appendix A includes an translation from Old Dutch to modern Dutch, as available on the RUG website (2024a). In appendix B, I organise the motivations for establishment of the RUG into several themes: (1) the necessity of education for good governance and rule, (2) in praise to the king and royal family, (3) the establishment of the university as a way to honour God, (4) the necessity of education to combat savagery and barbarism and finally (5) financial justifications. The *Eternal Edict* (RUG, 2024a) never explicitly refers to colonialism. However, within the themes several indirect references can be identified, among which: the development of the skills necessary for colonial governance and colonial conquest, and the task of the university to spread civilisation and religion.

The first theme, is the need of a university for good governance as well as financial benefit. Emmius describes scholarship and learning as essential for a well-functioning society led by educated leaders, even referring to scholarship as the ‘other military service’ (see appendix 1, RUG, 2024a). This idea was especially relevant after the Reduction when Groningen went from Catholic Spanish and became part of the Calvinist Dutch Republic (Boels and Buursma, 2025). Around the same time, in 1602, the VOC (Dutch East India Company) was established, and discussions began about creating a second royal Dutch trading company (Singh et al., 2024). Both developments created a demand for new political and religious leaders.

The Academy of Groningen would become a place where they would educate the governors necessary for the new Dutch Republic and its trading colonial companies (see

appendix 2: theme 1). The courses taught at the university: theology, law, medicine, philosophy, logic, ethics, physics, history, mathematics, Greek and Hebrew (Krop, 2014), were instrumental in supporting colonial power and efficiently managing overseas territories, as discussed in the previous section. For example, Mulerius obtained his role as a director in the WIC due to his expertise in mathematics and astronomy (Henkes et. al, 2024). Similarly, many individuals who aspired to work for Dutch colonial companies studied law in Groningen, including Willem Alting (Singh et al., 2024). This demonstrates how the university contributed to the practical execution of colonialism by preparing leaders and administrators equipped with the intellectual tools necessary for the efficient (colonial) government.

The second connection identified within my themes is the university teaching the discursive tools that justified colonialism. Emmius justifies the establishment of the Academy as way to honour God: as an appreciation of His creations (see appendix 2: theme 3). According to him university education can combat ignorance and barbarism (*'onwetendheid en barbarij'*) (theme 4). In this quote, we can recognise early 17<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment ideals of the civilising mission to spread western religion and ideas of rationality and science outside the west (Said, 1978). These ideals have legitimised colonial expansion that paints the non-European as savage and lacking knowledge (Andrews, 2018:140). As discussed in the theoretical framework, post-colonial thinkers such as Edward Said (1978) have theorised, that during this time theories of western superiority have emerged that depict the west as scientific and rational, versus a savage and barbaric other.

In sum, in the Eternal Edict we can identify two ways the RUG is historically connected to Dutch colonial history: it taught the tools necessary for colonial governance, and disseminated the ideologies used to justify colonialism.

## The Tree of Knowledge

*Fig. 1: The Tree of Knowledge*



*Note.* By Matthijs Röling and Wout Muller (1987). Photo: M. De Groot (2023).

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This section analyses the *Tree of Knowledge* (1987), by Matthijs Röling and Wout Muller, for colonial themes.

The *Tree of Knowledge* (1987) mural (De Groot, 2023), located in the Auditorium of the Academy Building at the RUG, serves as the backdrop today for important university ceremonies, such as the opening of the academic year and inaugural lectures. It replaced an earlier painting by the German Linnemann brothers, depicting the allegorical ‘triumph of science’, which was painted over in 1953 due to mould. Henkes et. al (2024) references the mural in her historical mapping of slavery in Groningen, due to its colonial themes.

Firstly, on the mural you can see black men climbing palm trees barefoot.

Additionally, the lanterns also reference the Dutch presence at the trading posts in Deshima (Japan) and Formosa (Taiwan). These elements evoke romantic stories of the Dutch colonial past (Henkes et. al, 2024). On the forefront of the painting, we can also recognise a dark-skinned man dancing, clad in a red skirt and holding (what is most likely) a fan. Likely this is a generalised reference to the many Indonesian traditional performance arts, which were hugely popular in the Netherlands in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and often reproduced stereotypical imagery of the uncivilised other (Cohen, 2014: 232). Combined these elements of this painting evoke a romanticised image of the Dutch colonial past.

The mural's central theme, the *Tree of Knowledge* alludes to the well-known phrase *scientia potentia est*, or knowledge is power (Henkes et. al, 2024:36). This takes on a layered significance in the context of the previous references. It suggests that the production of scientific knowledge was integral to the expansion of Dutch colonial influence. In *Sporen van het Slavernij Verleden* (2024:36), Barbara Henkes et. al point out that knowledge is power, but power is also knowledge. Or in other words, the control the Netherlands exerted over its colonies was not just physical and material, but epistemic. The colonial project relied on mapping, documenting, and categorising colonised lands and peoples within the universities and reinforcing the dominance of European worldviews over other knowledge systems (Bhambra et. al, 2018:5), and the RUG was part of this. In this way, the *Tree of Knowledge* reflects the colonial legacy of the University of Groningen today, not only through its specific depictions but also in its broader implications about the relationship between knowledge, power, and empire.

## Conclusion

In the previous sections, I traced the historical connections of the gravestones located in the Academy Building of the RUG, the *Eternal Edict* (RUG,2020a) and the *Tree of Knowledge* (Röling and Muller, 1987) to Dutch colonialism.

Many of those memorialised in the basement played important roles in the founding of the RUG, as well as the Dutch West India Chamber in Groningen. This demonstrates the interplay between the Groningen elite circles as identified by Jongsma (2014) and the RUG. It also highlights the university's foundational connection to Dutch colonialism.

The *Eternal Edict* (RUG, 2024a; Emmius, 1618) reveals through its themes how the university is intertwined with the intellectual and practical support of colonial power since its foundation. Both by preparing new political leaders which, as I illustrated in the analysis of the gravestones, often took on an important role in the colonial trading companies and government. And secondly through contributing and spreading the ideologies used to justify colonialism.

Building on that the *Tree of Knowledge* (Röling and Muller, 1987) exemplifies how the university continues to reproduce Dutch colonial narratives. Its visual elements romanticises Dutch colonialism, while the central theme, 'knowledge is power,' reflects how scientific knowledge produced at institutions like the RUG contributed to and justified colonial expansion. The painting is the background of many important university ceremonies today and remains unchallenged, illustrating the continued presence of colonial narratives at the RUG.

This historical connection of the RUG to Dutch colonialism provides the foundation for my argument in the next section, that the university has a normative responsibility of redress.

### III: Should the RUG Redress its Colonial History?

Some people will read this dissertation and think the materials I have presented so far are in the past, and therefore the RUG has no responsibility to deal with this. But in this section I demonstrate that the colonial history of the RUG is reproduced over time, and that because of this reproduction, as well as its connection to colonialism and its continued failure to intervene, the RUG has acquired a structural debt, that the RUG has a responsibility to redress.

#### The Historical-Structural Injustice (HSI) framework

In *Injustice and the Reproduction of History: Structural Inequalities, Gender and Redress* (2019), Alasia Nuti developed a framework of ‘historical-structural injustice’ (HSI) to theorise the persistence and change of historical injustice. To do so, she combines Iris Marion Young’s (2011) notion of structural injustice, as well a conception of history as structural, based on Reinhart Koselleck (2005).

According to Young (2011), structural injustice exists when social systems put large groups of people at a systemic disadvantage, limiting their opportunities and ability to thrive, while at the same time benefiting others by giving them more power and opportunities. Unlike individual wrongdoing or oppressive government policies, structural injustice is not caused by one person’s actions but results from many people and institutions following accepted rules and norms while pursuing their own goals.

To understand certain structural injustices that occurred in the past as persistent, it requires a conceptualisation of historical time that recognises these historical injustices as continuously reproduced and changing over time. To ‘de-temporalise’ historical injustice, Nuti builds on Koselleck’s (2005) theory of historical temporality (19-29). Koselleck distinguishes between events and structures, events occur over a distinct period of time: there

is an end and a start, and can be perceived as unique. Meanwhile, long-term structures endure over time, and cannot be reduced to a series of events. Instead, structures are at the root of the (re)occurrence of historical events (2019:25).

Certain historical injustices can be understood as structures, as these unjust events are presently reproduced (though in different fashion to their original form): they continue to shape the fabric of our societies by establishing (at least partially) the background conditions in which individuals and collective agents interact and relate to each other and it constructs the script in which persons daily act and reproduce with their (in)actions. This can be in both more 'banal' ways like stereotypes, and radical ways, such as through racialised violence (39). In that way, it continuously adapts and changes, and through this changing nature it can remain part of the social and political institutions over time and generations. Later I demonstrate how certain collective agents have the ability to intervene in this reproduction. Nuti refers to this as a 'structural understanding of history' (25).

By combining the structural understanding of history and structural injustice theory Nuti defines historical-structural injustice as: 'unjust social-structural processes enabling asymmetries between differently positioned persons, which started in the past and are reproduced in a different fashion, even if the original form of injustice may appear to have ended.' (Nuti 2019:44). In sum, HSI is embedded within a complex working of social systems and not caused by one agent (Young, 2011) and persist over time, and continued through the (in)actions of collective agents (Koselleck, 2005).

### **Structural Debt**

By theorising history as structural, it becomes evident how certain injustices persist over time rather than being resolved or interrupted. In this section, I present Nuti's (2019) normative argument about who should have responsibility for certain historical injustices, which forms the basis for my argument that the University of Groningen has a responsibility of redress towards its colonial past.

To assign responsibility for historical-structural injustice to collective agents, Nuti relies on the notion of 'structural debt'. This refers to the 'debt [collective agents] have accumulated over time through their actions (and inactions) within unjust structures' (Nuti 2019: 157). In other words, in cases where we speak of historical-structural injustice (as defined in the previous section), collective agents which have contributed to and perpetuated these historical-injustices, while failing to intervene despite having the ability to do so, accumulate a structural debt over time. This debt presses an increasing demand on the collective agent to take accountability for their actions, and act to redress the injustice. Thus, it is not only about taking responsibility for the actions an agent has caused, as per a traditional liability-model of responsibility (Young 2011: 97), but through the connection an agent has to this action and the compounding failure to intervene and perpetuate historical injustice (Nuti, 2019).

Nuti illustrates this with an example. When we look at the structural injustice that is racism against African-Americans in the US through the de-temporal HSI-model, we see that though the event of slavery ended after abolition, the underlying conditions of racism are still reproduced in many ways. Take for example in policymaking: in the aftermath of the Civil War and abolition, former slave states in the US instated the 'black codes' which criminalised certain behaviours (e.g. vagrancy, drunkenness and absence from work) only for black people in order to regulate the behaviour of free black people in a similar manner as during slavery,



and this led to mass-incarceration forcing many people to work for free as prisoners (Nuti, 2019; Davis, 2003). Rather than offer reparations, such as the infamous but unfulfilled promise of 40 acres and a mule (Myers, 2005), and thereby addressing (at least in part) the underlying structures which first facilitated slavery, the United States continued to neglect the structural injustice at hand, and instead perpetuated the same racialised narratives over time (Nuti, 2019: 36). Hence, in the HSI framework the US has accumulated a structural debt arising from its connection to slavery, and its repeated failure to intervene and continued reproduction of the structures of racism and inequality today. This debt that can only be redressed by recognising and paying for harm caused in the past, as well as the ways harm is still reproduced today.

### **The Cultural-Archive and Historical-Structural Injustice**

In this section I will bring forward the ways historical-structural injustice emerging from Dutch colonialism is present in the context of the Netherlands. To do so, I rely on the concept of the 'cultural archive' by Gloria Wekker.

In *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism*, Gloria Wekker (2016) presents how the Dutch colonial past underlies current dynamics of racism and inequality in Dutch society. To do so, she has developed the conceptual tool of 'the cultural archive' (2), which explains how Dutch colonial history is internalised and reproduced over time and as a result is still present today. Though not explicitly so, her understanding of how history is internalised and reproduced mirrors the historical-structural injustice (HSI) model. Building on the work of Wekker, I therefore will make the case that Dutch colonialism can be considered a HSI.

The 'cultural archive' is a tool developed by Wekker (2016), building on Edward Said (1978). She defines the cultural archive as: 'the unacknowledged reservoir of knowledge and affects based on four hundred years of Dutch imperial rule [...] It is located in many things, in the way we think, do things, and look at the world, in what we find (sexually) attractive, in how our affective and rational economies are organized and intertwined' (Wekker, 2016: 2). In other words, the cultural archive makes up the total repository of culture, both in the artistic sense but also broader through shared practices and sentiments within a community. These sentiments manifest in policy, organisational rules, popular and sexual cultures, and commonsense understandings of race and power.

The Dutch cultural archive, reflects the historical and ongoing racialised self-representation of the Dutch metropole. This includes over 400 years of colonialism (Wekker, 2016), and is not suddenly lost after slavery was abolished and colonial expansion ended. It has become part of the discursive, symbolic and cultural channels that influence and create

Dutch society and its (political) institutions. It still determines how we think about racism and inequality (Wekker, 2016:2). That Dutch self-perception is often self-congratulatory, looking at the so-called 'Golden Age' as a time of prosperity, and considering itself a 'progressive' and 'tolerant' nation (Wekker, 2016:1). While in reality, it has committed colonial violence including slavery and appropriation of land, and continues to normalise racism and discrimination. She refers to this as 'smug ignorance': the way that dominant Dutch culture neglects its colonial and racist injustices, while proclaiming itself as standing for values of tolerance and justice (Wekker, 2016:18). As the title of her book alludes to, Wekker considers this paradox to be at the centre of the Dutch cultural archive (5).

The Dutch colonial history, as analysed through the lens of Wekker's cultural archive, exemplifies the characteristics of historical-structural injustice (HSI) as theorised by Nuti (2019). First of all, the concept of the Dutch cultural archive captures how the complex social dynamics involving multiple agents, from individuals to institutions, rather than being caused by any single actor. Secondly, the persistence of colonial narratives in the Dutch cultural archive aligns with Nuti's conception of history as de-temporal. It shows us that rather than being an 'event' that is confined to a specific time-frame, Dutch colonialism is a 'structure', its conditions still exist and continue to be reproduced through the Dutch cultural archive. For example, even in the absence of overt colonial domination, the glorification of the so-called Dutch 'Golden Age' continues to perpetuates ideas of the Dutch colonial expansion as a powerful enterprise that triumphed over the backwards colonised other. Colonisation is not just a past event, but a collective history to be proud of and that still rings true. Not only does this illustrate how Dutch colonialism is de-temporal, but also how it is internalised within its culture. As Young writes, structural injustices are often not recognised as injustices at all (2011:45-52). Like in the Netherlands, how colonial history and its everlasting effects are dismissed, and its racist and discriminatory notions are internalised as simple truths. Crucially

this continued reproduction of the colonial structures through its internalisation of the Dutch cultural archive, and the repeated failure of powerful agents such as the state to intervene reinforce these injustices. As Nuti (2019) highlights, the failure to address these injustices creates and sustains structural debt. Dutch colonial history, therefore, fulfils the criteria of HSI: it is embedded, persists over time, involves multiple agents, and remains unaddressed.

### Assigning Responsibility to the RUG

Though Nuti (2019) uses states as her paradigmatic example, other collective agents can also accumulate structural debt (Nuti, 2021). In fact, she argues that the only way to address historical-structural injustice is for a variety of different agents to take responsibility. In the previous section I demonstrated the presence of historical-structural injustice in the Netherlands rooted in colonialism. In this section, I first argue that the University of Groningen is part of this narrative: it has contributed to- and reproduced colonial historical-structural injustice within the Netherlands. I then conclude that because of this connection – its continued reproduction of colonial narratives exacerbated by its position as a site of knowledge production, and its failure to intervene – the University of Groningen has accumulated a structural debt, and has a responsibility towards redress.

As I argued previously, the University of Groningen has been entangled with Dutch colonialism from its very beginnings. This is evidenced through its historical, material, and ideological ties to Dutch colonial expansion. The gravestones housed in the university, originating from prominent figures such as Ubbo Emmius, the Alting family, and Nicolaas Mulerius, memorialise individuals who were embedded in elite networks of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) and Dutch East India Company (VOC). These networks leveraged the university as a site for training colonial administrators and producing and teaching the knowledge necessary for colonial governance. Like Singh et. al (2024) demonstrated, many of the individuals studying at the RUG (especially law), took on important roles in the colonial companies. An example of this is Willem Alting, who after he obtained the position of Master in Law, went to Batavia where he became a governor and slave owner. We can also see this represented in the founding act, the *Eternal Edict* (1614), which announces a university in Groningen is to be established to train new political leaders, as well as to keep people from succumbing to barbarism and ignorance, emphasising governance, science, and religion to

sustain colonial dominance. Based on this, I argue that the university has been connected to colonialism since its beginning.

However, I argue that the RUG's connections to colonialism are not confined to its past but continue to be reproduced today, aligning with Gloria Wekker's concept of the Dutch cultural archive. To do so, I will base my arguments on the artefacts I analysed. *The Tree of Knowledge* (De Groot, 2023), which I analysed previously underscore how colonial legacies are maintained through the artistic symbolism within the university. Drawing on Henkes et. al (2024), I have argued its imagery and themes symbolises the epistemic power used to justify and perpetuate colonial hierarchies which contributed to Dutch colonial success. Notably, this mural was painted as recently as 1987 and still serves as the backdrop for many important university ceremonies, reinforcing these legacies in a modern context. Similarly, the gravestones, though well-maintained, are hidden away in the university's basement and can only be found by those who know of their existence. This perfectly embodies Wekker's notion of 'smug ignorance,' (2016: 18) where colonial history neglected or outright dismissed, while only the positive aspects of Dutch history are emphasised. The fact that this mural, the gravestones, along with many other artifacts and symbols, remains integrated into the university's architecture and art without critical engagement or acknowledgment of its colonial past perpetuates the portrayal of Dutch colonial history as something to be proud of while obscuring its transgressions. Together, these elements reflect how the RUG's cultural archive continues to obscure and reproduce colonial legacies. I do note critics might argue the these specific ways colonialism is reproduced are too vague, and I should give more concrete examples. However, this is outside the scope of this dissertation. Further research could reveal more about this.

Thirdly, I argue that the RUG is not merely connected to and reproducing the Dutch HSI of colonialism, but has also has failed to intervene and redress. As far as I have been able

to trace the university of Groningen not engaged in many efforts to 'decolonise'. All I was able to find is that the RUG has recently started an investigation into some of the artifacts at the University Museum, which include human remains (RUG, 2023). Additionally, there exists a 'Decolonize Hub' (2024c), which collects information on decolonization and anti-racism. However, this exists mostly as a network, and is independent from the governing and decision-making board of the university. Beyond that, I have been unable to uncover any ways the university systematically has taken accountability, nor internally acknowledged this connection to Dutch colonialism or engaged in any efforts of redress. Other Dutch universities have begun to critically interrogate their colonial connections through funded research and institutional initiatives. While I was in attendance at a conference on the colonial history of Dutch universities, it became apparent that other prominent Dutch universities have engaged in this research already and fund PhDs and research groups, such as at the Leiden University by Alicia Schrikker and Ligia Giay, the Wageningen University by Larissa Schulte Nordholt, the Protestant Theological University by Martijn Stoutjesdijk, the University of Utrecht by Sophie Bijleveld and the Delft University by Abel Streefland (Schulte-Nordholt, 2024), As well as by universities in former colonies such as the research from Kavita Jiawan at the Anton de Kom university in Suriname. But there was a striking absence from the RUG: there were no speakers from the RUG, and only two attendees including myself.

On top of that, the effect of the continued reproduction of colonial narratives is compounded by the role the university generally occupies in contributing to structural processes. Within the west, universities are perceived as the most privileged site of knowledge production. What the university says is scientific fact (Freire; 2018). The university does not generate knowledge in a vacuum, rather it is shaped by the ideals of the individuals within the institution, and the wider academic world (Bhabra et. al, 2018). Universities also consecrate knowledge, acting as a sort of gatekeeper, determining which histories, ideas, and

contributions are deemed valuable and worthy of further attention (Bhambra et. al, 2018:5). Wekker's view is similar: according to her, universities play an important role in producing knowledge and thereby influencing the cultural archive (2016:65-69). Of course, the RUG is only a small part of this, but with 34.047 students it is the third biggest in the Netherlands (UvNL, 2023), and therefore cannot not be completely dismissed in its contributions. This influence on the Dutch cultural archive further cements the need for the University of Groningen to face its contribution to historical-structural injustices. Or as Nuti (2021: 1247) says: 'as institutions of knowledge and often sites of privilege, universities have arguably an important role in influencing structural processes. On this basis, they should be held accountable for their contributions to the reproduction of, say, racialised unjust structures over history.'

In sum, the University of Groningen has contributed to, and continues to reproduce colonial historical-structural injustice within the Netherlands. Compounded with the RUG's failure to intervene, a structural debt is accumulated. Based on this structural debt, the university has a moral responsibility of redress. In the next section, I will be outlining some possible interventions the university could take to fulfil this responsibility.



## Redress

Within the limited scope of my dissertation, I have found that the university engaged with colonialism by contributing to the discursive, symbolic and cultural channels necessary to reproduce colonial history. In this section, I propose several ways the RUG could begin addressing its structural debt.

According to Nuti (2019), redressing past injustice means embarking on a long process aimed at dismantling the institutional material, cultural, discursive and symbolic channels whereby the unjust history is reproduced in the present, and constructing new forms of organisation of our societies, the transnational order and our personal relations. One of the main approaches to redress as outlined by Nuti (2019: 171-177) is counter-historical institutional justification. This involves questioning and criticising dominant narratives at the foundation of our societal institutions, and offering alternative narratives of how social problems should be understood and addressed. By disrupting the status quo, these interventions help reimagine institutional structures to break cycles of oppression and create new opportunities for justice. Importantly, counter-historical institutional justifications do not include financial reparations. This is outside of the scope of my research.<sup>10</sup>

I acknowledge the limitations of my study. I am aware I could not identify the specific ways that colonial history has been reproduced over time, within the scope of my research. I am also aware that I have not been able to consult any victim groups or historical structural groups. However, based on my findings, I propose these initial interventions as a starting point for the RUG to engage in redress.

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<sup>10</sup> Nuti (2019:180) proposes a three-fold approach: reparations, transformative policymaking, and counter-historical institutional justifications. However, since the university does not create external policy (like the state) and I have not examined its financial ties, my focus will be primarily on counter-historical institutional justifications.

### ***Adding context with plaques and folders***

My first recommendation is the simplest, and is primarily about recognising the past: placing plaques to memorialise colonial history. As I noted, the gravestones in the basement have been recently restored and purposefully placed there. The location of the stones is very hidden and no extra information is provided. This can be easily improved by placing small plaques or informative folders, such the Groninger Museum (2025) already provides, that give insight into the history of the gravestones. Additionally, it would be valuable to add this information to the university website, as well as provide additional information on the webpage of the RUG on the history of the university, which already includes the *Eternal Edict*. This would improve transparency and availability of information.

### ***Repainting the Tree of Knowledge***

Another way to address the university's structural debt is through the repainting of the *Tree of Knowledge* mural, which serves as the iconic backdrop of the auditorium. Such an act would be a powerful, transformative act, aligning with the broader global movement for decolonization, exemplified by the *Rhodes Must Fall* campaign (Gebrial, 2018:19-34). The repainting of the wall for a third time would capture a conscious shift in the university's historical narrative, and new narrative. It would be a counter-historical institutional justification. This is not intended to forget or hide it, rather it is the opposite. It tells us there is a break in history and functions as a public reminder, always visible at significant university ceremonies and event.

### ***Commemoration***

These both can be combined with a commemorative effort. For example, holding open lectures that tell us more about this history. This can be combined with existing holidays such

as Keti Koti,<sup>11</sup> which memorialises the victims of slavery and celebrates its abolition (KIEN, 2021). Additionally, the RUG can collaborate with organisations led by individuals from former colonies, for example Brisa in Groningen which represent and ensures the wellbeing for people from the Caribbean in the Netherlands.

### ***Establishing a research group***

Another recommendation is the establishment of a research centre or group focused on investigating the colonial history of the RUG. While several studies on colonial history have taken place in Groningen, none are specifically examine the university itself. As I have demonstrated, many universities in (and outside) the Netherlands have already started such research, yet the RUG is strikingly behind.

As Wekker (Lootens, 2022) states, ‘decolonising and diversifying should be among the main goals of a university.’ A research centre would allow for a more in-depth exploration of the university’s colonial connections, as well as could look into issues of diversity and inclusion. Given the very limited scope of my dissertation and the general lack of research on this topic such an initiative is necessary as the basis for any further interventions towards redress. For example, my research has not addressed financial ties, such as the Groningen University Funds’ investments,<sup>12</sup> nor has it examined the curriculum or faculty composition in relation to colonial legacies.

Additionally, it would be particularly important to prioritise opportunities for individuals from current or former Dutch colonies to take on key roles within this initiative.

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<sup>11</sup> On the 1<sup>st</sup> of July, Keti Koti (Sranan Tongo: the chain is broken) is celebrated, on this day in 1863 slavery was legally abolished in the Suriname and the Dutch Caribbean. We remember the victims of trans-Atlantic slavery, as well as celebrate its end. Since 2022, Keti Koti is also celebrated in Groningen (KIEN, 2021; Akerk, 2022).

<sup>12</sup> The Groninger University Fund, which finances the RUG through, has been under criticism for investing in companies contributing to settler-colonialism and genocide in Palestine (RUG, 2024d).

The research centre can help to improve transparency, while offering effective continuation forward towards redress.

### ***Decolonising the Curriculum***

Finally, we must also decolonise the curriculum. We cannot address the colonial narratives of a knowledge institution, without considering its current teachings. Within the dissertation, I have not been able to show the extent to which these colonial themes are still present within the curriculum today. However, I have demonstrated that the university's curriculum in the past was rooted in colonial ideology, and has prepared individuals to work for the colonial companies. Additionally, others note that within the Dutch education system there is a lack of attention for colonial and slavery history (Weiner, 2014), and that western universities are often Eurocentric (Maldonado-Torres et. al, 2018: 64).

Many advocates, such as the 'Why is my Curriculum White?' campaign (UCL, 2014), argue that decolonising the curriculum is an important step towards colonial redress and inclusion. Decolonising the curriculum involves a wide range of actions, including re-evaluation of its content, as well as its pedagogy. Key strategies for the RUG would include, investigating the Eurocentric foundations of knowledge, and offering alternative perspectives (counter-institutional historical justifications). This can be done by including more voices in teaching, especially those from the Dutch colonies. However, it also involves how we understand pedagogy, how it involves resistance, oppression, opposition, and 'socio-political struggle' (Dennis, 2018: 198). As Freire writes, the aim is to liberate the mind and begin a reparative process institutions in the west, rather than a meaningless gesture (Freire, 2018: 44).

## Conclusion

The previous section answered the question: Should the university of Groningen address its colonial history? To do so, I relied on Alasia Nuti's (2019) historical-structural injustice (HSI) framework. HSI builds on Young's notion of structural injustice and Koselleck's (2005) conception of history as 'de-temporal'. HSI explains how unjust social-structural processes in the past have enabled asymmetries between differently positioned peoples, and are reproduced today, even if the original form of injustice might have ended. Collective agents, which have meaningfully contributed to the reproduction of these structural injustices and failed to intervene, have acquired a structural debt towards redress (Nuti, 2019). Drawing on the concept of the 'cultural archive' by Gloria Wekker (2016), I have demonstrated how Dutch colonial history – far from being confined to a specific timeframe – is still reproduced in the Netherlands today, and can be considered a historical-structural injustice. Building on my previous findings, I argue the University of Groningen is part of this narrative. Because the RUG has been connected to colonialism over time, failed to reckon with this colonial past and continues to reproduce its practices it has acquired a structural debt. This structural debt means that the university has a responsibility to redress. To do so, I recommend a series of interventions for the University of Groningen aligned with Nuti's counter-historical institutional justifications. These measures range repainting the *Tree of Knowledge* (1987) mural and adding informational plaques to contextualise the gravestones, to the establishment of a dedicated research centre to investigate the university's colonial history. These actions are non-exhaustive and represent a starting point for the university to reckon with its past and reimagine its future.

### Conclusion and Final Remarks

In this dissertation I aimed to answer the question: In what ways is the University of Groningen (RUG) historically connected to Dutch colonialism, and should the university address this legacy?

In part one I laid out my methodology, theoretical framework and explain the historical context. Then in part two, I looked a selection of artefacts building on Henkes et. al (2024) map of slavery in Groningen. I traced the past of the individuals whose gravestones are located in the main building of the RUG, analysed the presence of colonial themes in the founding act of the university (*The Eternal Edict*) as well as the mural in the Auditorium (*The Tree of Knowledge*). Based on these materials, I conclude that the RUG is connected to Dutch colonial history from its foundations, and has helped produce and teach the knowledge necessary for colonial expansion. In part three, I argued that the university has a moral obligation to address this colonial legacy using the structural injustice framework by Nuti (2019). Building on Wekker (2016), I demonstrated Dutch colonialism can be considered a historical-structural injustice, because of the way that its underlying processes are embedded into the Dutch cultural archive and reproduced. I argued that the RUG is part of this narrative, that it has historically been connected to colonialism, and that it continues to reproduce these inequalities today. Based on that, the RUG has acquired a structural debt which it has the moral responsibility to redress. Finally, I recommended a set of interventions.

This dissertation is just a starting point — a first step toward uncovering the University of Groningen's colonial history. My findings highlight how much remains unexplored, including the colonial histories of other areas such as the RUG's botanical garden in Haren, the course curriculum and the funding. I also could not address inequalities in staffing, which recent reports revealed that less than a dozen out of 469 full professors are

non-white (White, 2024). For that reason, research in these areas is essential to deepen our understanding of these connections and their contemporary implications.

Decolonising the university means facing these truths head-on, challenging the structures that sustain inequality, and transforming them through both research and action. It is not a buzzword, or a tick-box exercise, rather it must be beneficial by engaging critically with the curriculum, pedagogy and race. Only then the university can start to acknowledge its colonial connections and take active steps towards redress. Only then, the RUG can truly start to embody its prized position as a knowledge institution which values freedom, justice, and respect for human rights (Puylaert, 2024).

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## Appendices

### I: The Eternal Edict in Translation

*Note.* Groningen, 14 Juli 1614. Translation to Dutch: Von Martels, Z. (2014).

De Staten van Groningen en Ommelanden groeten de lezer de woorden en daden van juist de beste en wijste vorsten en landsbestuurders laten niets te raden over de vraag hoeveel waarde zij toekenden aan de studies van geleerdheid en de kennis die daaruit voortvloeit. Vooral de Spanjaard Alfonso, koning van Aragon, Sicilië, Sardinië en Napels springt hier in het oog, want hij overtrof al de koningen van zijn tijd in wijsheid. Om die reden kende men hem ook de bijnaam 'de wijze' toe. Hij gaf zich zelf met hart en ziel over aan de goede letteren wanneer de zware verplichtingen van zijn koningschap het toelieten, en genoot ervan om met kenners daarvan op te trekken. Daarom was hij tot in zijn ziel geraakt, toen hij eens hoorde dat één van de koningen van Spanje placht te zeggen dat het voorname en edele mannen niet betaamt geleerd te zijn en boeken in handen te nemen. Hij riep uit dat dit hem niet het geluid van een koning toescheen, maar van een rund. Ja zelfs bezwoer hij zeer plechtig dat hij, voor zover het hem aanging, liever zijn rijken, waarvan hij er vele had, wilde verliezen dan dat hij de letteren niet kende, waarvan zijn kennis bescheiden was. En in gesprek met Aeneas Silvius zei hij dat koningen die van geleerdheid verstoken zijn niet erg verschillen van gekroonde ezels. Hij placht te verzekeren dat hij van al zijn raadgevers de overledenen het meest waardeerde – daarmee doelend op boeken die wijs geschreven waren en waarvan hij zei dat ze hem zonder angst, gunstbejag en vleierij antwoord gaven en van advies dienden. En ook was Alfonso als koning zeker niet iemand die werkeloos of met de handen in zijn schoot neerzat, zich vermeiend in afzondering en rust, maar ten tijde van oorlog en vrede was hij voortdurend in beslag genomen door de belangrijkste zaken en meer dan eens heeft hij beide kanten van het lot ervaren. Hij bewees door in beide omstandigheden als het ware dezelfde

gelaatsuitdrukkingen te bewaren hoe wijs, deugdzaam, standvastig en bescheiden van geest hij was.

En toch zijn er ook nu nog steeds mensen die zich zelf wijs toeschijnen, luid klappend voor hun eigen onwetendheid, terwijl ze van elk onderwijs verstoken zijn. Ze schamen zich niet te beweren dat de studie van de goede letteren nutteloos is, dat beschaving in de burgerlijke en kerkelijke maatschappij geheel en al overbodig is en dat allen die zich daaraan wijden, hun tijd en geld verspillen.

Wij echter zijn een geheel andere mening toegedaan en staan in deze aangelegenheid aan de zijde van de zeer wijze en grote koning. Want omdat er twee soorten krijgsdienst zijn, menen wij dat de staat, wil het haar goed gaan, uitgerust moet zijn met de kennis van beide, namelijk die van de wapenen en die van de geleerdheid – met die eerste om niet door de vijand te worden overweldigd, met deze laatste om niet aan onwetendheid en barbarij te bezwijken en ten onder te gaan. En naar ons oordeel moeten goede en verstandige bestuurders geen van beide soorten verwaarlozen. Nu heeft bovendien de oorlog plaats gemaakt voor vrede en is onze aandacht op de vakken van de vrede gericht.

Daarom namen wij – al veel eerder aangezet door de voorbeelden van anderen – als bewijs dat het vaderland ons werkelijk ter harte gaat, het besluit om hier bij ons ook de studies van de letteren, die behoren bij de tweede krijgsdienst, meer en meer aan te sporen. En met betrekking hiertoe hebben we besloten om in GRONINGEN, de moederstad van deze provincie, een illustere school of liever academie te openen. Wij willen dat daarin de drie zogenaamde hogere faculteiten van staatswege worden onderwezen: de theologie, de rechtsgeleerdheid en de medicijnen; voorts alle onderdelen van de filosofie, logica, ethica, fysica, geschiedenis, wiskundige vakken, de Griekse en Hebreeuwse taal, kortom deze dingen die gewoonlijk in andere openbare scholen of liever academies worden geleerd tegelijk met oefeningen in overeenstemmende disputaties.

En we zullen voor het onderwijs hierin en voor het leiden van deze disputaties met Gods genade professoren aanstellen, vermaard door hun kennis, voldoende in aantal, met een rijkelijk salaris geëerd en door vermaningen en weldaden opgewekt tot een zorgvuldige uitoefening van hun ambt. En we zullen ons er volledig voor inzetten dat het onze instelling op dit gebied aan niets ontbreekt. Ook zullen we de docenten en studenten op gelijke wijze rechten en privileges toekennen die passen bij de instelling en in overeenstemming zijn met het algemene welzijn, en we zullen in alle opzichten een doelmatige en zinvolle organisatie bieden. Ten slotte zullen we ons serieus ten doel stellen dat er goed gelet wordt op het laag houden van de kosten voor de studenten die zich hier zullen willen vestigen, en wel zo dat waar dit soort gunst en vrijgevigheid geldt, niemand met recht en verdienste nog iets meer van ons kan vragen. Eens hebben onze voorvaders, vrijgevig mannen, naar de maat van hun bezittingen met een gezindheid die weliswaar goed en religieus was maar verward en wanke door de duisternis van hun dwalingen, vermogens bijeengebracht voor monastieke oefenscholen. Wij zullen een goed deel daarvan aanwenden voor genoemde zaken en aan veel betere doeleinden besteden.

Wat ons uitnodigde en aanzette tot dit nuttige besluit voor zowel kerk als staat is, behalve dit gebleken vermogen om de kosten te dragen, ook de buitengewone gerieflijkheid van deze plaats die we kunnen beschouwen als van nature bestemd tot woonplaats van de Muzen. Want de bekoorlijke ligging ervan is vermaard, de lucht zuiver en heilzaam, de voedselvoorziening van elk soort overvloedig en gemakkelijk en er is een grote rijkdom aan gerieflijke gastverblijven en andere zaken die daarop betrekking hebben. Nu hebben we ook tot nut van die school, die we de onze noemen, tegen niet geringe kosten in de afgelopen maanden gehoorzalen en gebouwen ingericht. We houden ze in gereedheid in dat stadsdeel dat voor deze onderneming, voor deze oefenschool der Muzen, of liever werkplaats van geleerdheid het aller-geschiktst is, van al het lawaai van mensen en hun bezigheden afgescheiden en

nauw verbonden met een zeer ruime en voortreffelijke kerk. Dit is in hoofdzaak ons besluit en voornemen. Wij hopen op het succes ervan met steun van de allerhoogste God. Diens glorie te dienen samen met het algemeen welzijn is wat wij het liefst willen. En van onze kant zullen wij in overeenstemming met onze middelen er voor zorgen dat er niets ontbreekt.

## II: The Eternal Edict Themes

### **Theme 1:** *The necessity of education for good governance and rule.*

Indeed, he [King Alfonso] swore very solemnly that, as far as he was concerned, he would rather lose his kingdoms—of which he had many—than be ignorant of the Arts.

*Ja zelfs bezwoer hij zeer plechtig dat hij, voor zover het hem aanging, liever zijn rijken, waarvan hij er vele had, wilde verliezen dan dat hij de letteren niet kende (Emmius, 1618:1).*

For since there are two kinds of military service, we believe that the state, if it wishes to prosper, must be equipped with knowledge of both: that of arms and that of scholarship. The first to avoid being ambushed by the enemy, and the second to avoid succumbing to ignorance and barbarism.

*Want omdat er twee soorten krijgsdienst zijn, menen wij dat de staat, wil het haar goed gaan, uitgerust moet zijn met de kennis van beide, namelijk die van de wapenen en die van de geleerdheid – met die eerste om niet door de vijand te worden overweldigd, met deze laatste om niet aan onwetendheid en barbarij te bezwijken en ten onder te gaan (Emmius, 1618:1).*

[..]the decision to promote the studies of the Arts here among us, which belong to the second military service.

*[..]het besluit om hier bij ons ook de studies van de letteren, die behoren bij de tweede krijgsdienst (Emmius, 1618:1).*

### **Theme 2:** *Praising the king and royalty.*

Indeed, he [King Alfonso] swore very solemnly that, as far as he was concerned, he would rather lose his kingdoms—of which he had many—than be ignorant of the Arts.

*Ja zelfs bezwoer hij zeer plechtig dat hij, voor zover het hem aanging, liever zijn rijken, waarvan hij er vele had, wilde verliezen dan dat hij de letteren niet kende (Emmius, 1618:1).*

We [...] stand on the side of the very wise and great king in this matter.

*Wij [...] staan in deze aangelegenheid aan de zijde van de zeer wijze en grote koning (Emmius, 1618:1).*

**Theme 3: Religion and the establishment of the university as a way to honour God.**

We hope for [the universities] success with the support of the Most High God. To serve His glory together with the common good is what we desire most.

*Wij hopen op het succes ervan met steun van de allerhoogste God. Diens glorie te dienen samen met het algemeen welzijn is wat wij het liefst willen (Emmius, 1618:2).*

**Theme 4: Education to prevent savagery barbarism and ignorance.**

And yet, even now, there are still people who consider themselves wise, loudly applauding their own ignorance while being deprived of any education. They do not hesitate to claim that the study of the arts is useless, that civilization in civil and ecclesiastical society is entirely superfluous, and that all who dedicate themselves to it waste their time and money.

*En toch zijn er ook nu nog steeds mensen die zich zelf wijs toeschijnen, luid klappend voor hun eigen onwetendheid, terwijl ze van elk onderwijs verstoken zijn. Ze schamen zich niet te beweren dat de studie van de goede letteren nutteloos is, dat beschaving in de burgerlijke en kerkelijke maatschappij geheel en al overbodig is en dat allen die zich daaraan wijden, hun tijd en geld verspillen (Emmius, 1618:1).*

For since there are two kinds of military service, we believe that the state, if it wishes to prosper, must be equipped with knowledge of both: that of arms and that of scholarship. The

first to avoid being overwhelmed by the enemy, and the second to avoid succumbing to ignorance and barbarism. In our opinion, good and wise rulers must neglect neither of these two types

*Want omdat er twee soorten krijgsdienst zijn, menen wij dat de staat, wil het haar goed gaan, uitgerust moet zijn met de kennis van beide, namelijk die van de wapenen en die van de geleerdheid – met die eerste om niet door de vijand te worden overweldigd, met deze laatste om niet aan onwetendheid en barbarij te bezwijken en ten onder te gaan. En naar ons oordeel moeten goede en verstandige bestuurders geen van beide soorten verwaarlozen (Emmius, 1618:1).*

**Theme 5: Finances, the efficient use of money and time and the return of investment.**

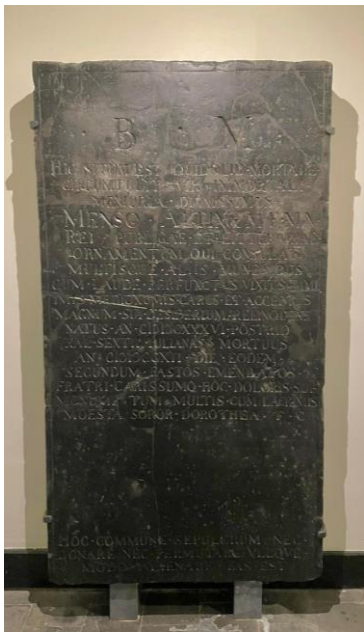
We will devote a good part of it to the aforementioned matters and put it to much better purposes.

*Wij zullen een goed deel daarvan aanwenden voor genoemde zaken en aan veel betere doeleinden besteden (Emmius, 1618:2).*

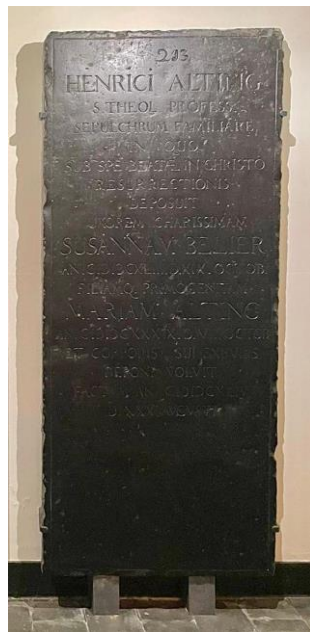
**Figures**



*Fig. A1: The gravestones located in the basement of the Academy Building of the University of Groningen.*



*Fig. 2A The gravestone of Henricus Alting*



*Fig. 3A The gravestone of Menso Alting.*





Fig. 4A: The gravestone of Jacobus Altig



Fig. 5A: The gravestone of descendants Menso Alting Jr.



Fig. 6A: The gravestone of Carolus Mulerius.



Fig. 7A: The gravestone of Johan Rufelaert.

