

TITLE SLIDE 1

Our Stories Are Not Footnotes: Culture, Memory, and the Right to Shape Caribbean Research

Good morning to everyone joining from Sint Maarten, St. Martin, Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Saba, St. Eustatius, the Netherlands, and the wider Caribbean.
First, let me thank the organisers of the Dutch Caribbean Research Week 2026, NWO, and the programme committee for inviting me.
It is an honour to be here.

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And it matters that this conference is happening across the islands.
Because too often, the islands are spoken about separately.
Too often, our histories are boxed up separately.
Too often, our struggles are treated separately.
Too often, our people are studied separately.
And too often, we are invited into the discussion only after the framework is already built.
But many of the questions we face are connected.
Questions of culture.
Questions of memory.
Questions of language.
Questions of labour.
Questions of belonging.
Questions of dignity.
Questions of justice.
Questions of who gets heard.
Questions of who gets counted.
Questions of who gets left out.
And questions of who gets to shape the future.
So today I want to speak plainly.
I do not want to hide behind conference language.
I do not want to speak in a way that sounds impressive but leaves the people of the islands outside the room.
I want to say something simple and clear:
Our stories are not footnotes.
Our culture is not decoration.
Our language is not a problem to be corrected.
Our memory is not secondary.
And our people are not here only to be studied by others.

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We are here.
We think.
We remember.

We create.
We analyse.
We organize.
We survive.
We resist.
And we have the right to shape the research that is done about us, with us, and for us.
That is the heart of what I want to say today.

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When some people hear the words culture, literature, and arts, they still think of something extra.
Something nice.
Something soft.
Something for after the serious business is done.
Something for the opening event.
Something for the brochure.
Something for the side programme.
I reject that completely.

Culture is serious business.
Culture is how a people remember when official records leave them out.
Culture is how a people explain themselves when outsiders explain them badly.
Culture is how a people protect dignity when systems reduce them.
Culture is how a people pass on truth from one generation to the next.
Culture is how a people keep breathing through history.
That is true across the Caribbean.
It is true in song.
It is true in storytelling.
It is true in language.
It is true in oral history.
It is true in poetry.
It is true in ritual.
It is true in memory.
It is true in how families carry names, pain, struggle, and survival across time.
And if research in the Caribbean is supposed to benefit Caribbean people, then culture cannot sit on the side.

Culture has to be at the centre.
Because if you ignore culture, you ignore memory.
If you ignore language, you ignore meaning.
If you ignore history, you misread the people.
And if you ignore the people, then your research may produce a report, but it will not produce justice.
And let us be honest: this has happened too often.

Too much research about the Caribbean still starts somewhere else.
The questions are shaped elsewhere.
The categories are shaped elsewhere.
The funding rules are shaped elsewhere.
The methods are shaped elsewhere.
The approval systems are shaped elsewhere.
The reports are shaped elsewhere.
And then the islands are asked to fit into frameworks that were not built from our reality.
That is not neutral.
That is not harmless.
And that is not good enough anymore.
Because when others define us before they really listen to us, they flatten us.
They flatten our history.
They flatten our language.
They flatten our identity.
They flatten our struggles.
They flatten our complexity.
They flatten our intelligence.
And then our communities become “cases.”
Our lives become “data.”
Our people become “subjects.”
But not decision-makers.
That has to change.
And that is why I say culture must not only be studied.
Culture must help shape the way research itself is done.

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Now let me take this deeper.
Some histories are not silent because our people had no voice.
They are silent because the official record did not listen.
They are silent because families had to survive.
They are silent because shame interrupted the telling.
They are silent because migration scattered the memory.
They are silent because poverty narrowed what could be preserved.
They are silent because language loss broke the chain.
They are silent because colonial power decided whose story was worth writing down and whose was not.
So when we do research in the Caribbean, our task is not only to collect data.
Our task is to listen for the silences.
That is a different kind of research responsibility.
It means that when there is a gap, we do not assume there was nothing there.
When a family cannot trace a line, we do not assume there was no history.
When a record is missing, we do not assume the person was insignificant.
When memory is broken, we ask what violence broke it.

Because the Caribbean did not become fragmented by accident.
Our memory did not become interrupted by accident.
Our archives did not become uneven by accident.
Our languages did not become ranked by accident.
History did that.
Colonialism did that.
Power did that.
And serious research has to be honest about that.

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There is a St. Martin example that helps us understand this clearly: the work of Lasana M. Sekou.

Lasana reminds us that culture is not decoration.

Culture is archive.

Culture is evidence.

Culture is method.

In his work, the salt pond is not simply a pond.

Salt is memory.

Salt is labour.

Salt is sweat.

Salt is wound.

Salt is preservation.

Salt is also resistance.

When we look at the Great Salt Pond only as geography, we miss its historical meaning.

When we look at it only as land for planning, tourism, or development, we miss the people whose labour made that landscape speak.

But when we read the salt as memory, we begin to understand that St. Martin's history is written not only in government documents, but also in ponds, roads, family names, burial grounds, songs, stories, and silences.

This is why Caribbean research cannot limit itself to the official record.

The official record often tells us what power wanted to count.

Culture tells us what people had to carry.

Lasana Sekou also helps us say something important about language.

St. Martin is not a one-language island.

It is not a one-border island.

It is not a one-archive island.

Our people have lived across English, Dutch, French, Spanish, Creole, African memory, Caribbean movement, and migration.

So to speak in more than one language is not confusion.

It is historical intelligence.

It is how a divided island speaks in more than one register at the same time.

And that has consequences for research.

If our methods cannot hear the language of the people, they cannot understand the people.

If our archives cannot hold oral memory, family memory, performance, poetry, and local speech, then our archives are incomplete.

If our academic frameworks cannot understand the salt, the sea, the plantation, the contract, the migration route, the tourism worker, and the divided island, then those frameworks must be expanded.

Lasana Sekou also gives us a model of the Caribbean activist-intellectual.

The researcher in the Caribbean is not only a neutral collector of data.

The researcher must also be a listener to silences.

An interpreter of interrupted histories.

A witness.

A translator.

A defender of community memory.

And sometimes a disturber of comfortable official stories.

That does not mean abandoning rigor.

It means understanding that rigor in the Caribbean must include historical accountability, community memory, and moral clarity.

And Lasana Sekou helps us connect culture to workers' rights.

The salt image lets us connect slavery, post-emancipation labour, contract labour, migration, tourism labour, and present-day precarity.

It reminds us again that colonialism did not abandon its labour logic when slavery was abolished.

It reorganised that logic through contracts, debt, law, migration, borders, race, and dependency.

So when we speak about culture in research, we are not moving away from serious scholarship.

We are moving toward fuller scholarship.

A scholarship that understands that the salt pond is an archive.

The poem is an archive.

The family story is an archive.

The language of the people is an archive.

And the task of research is not only to extract information, but to restore meaning, dignity, and accountability.

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But we also have to go one step further.

Research must listen for silences, and it must also examine whether its own tools continue the silence.

Its archives.

Its databases.

Its categories.

Its maps.

Its surveys.

Its digital platforms.

Because if those tools are not guided by descendant knowledge, oral memory, and community truth, then they can reproduce the same colonial blindness in a newer form.

So let me say something directly to researchers.
Digitization is important.
Accessibility is important.
Digital humanities can be useful.
Historical databases can help families recover names, dates, places, and fragments of life that once felt unreachable.

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But digitization is not the same as decolonization.
A colonial record remains a colonial record even when it is scanned, cleaned, linked, and placed online.
A slave register placed in a database is still a record created under slavery.
An emancipation entry is still shaped by the logic of the system that produced it.
A searchable archive can still preserve hierarchy while appearing modern.
So we have to ask harder questions.
Who wrote this record?
For what purpose?
Who is named?
Who is reduced to a number?
Who is described as a problem?
Who is categorized only as labour?
Who is tracked more clearly as property than as family?
And who must we go back to in the community to complete the truth?
Those are not optional questions in Caribbean research.
Those are basic ethical questions.
Because official archives remember unequally.
They do not remember everyone with the same dignity.
They do not remember everyone with the same depth.
They do not remember everyone as fully human.
Some people enter the archive as landowners, officials, clergy, employers, inheritors.
Others enter only as bodies, labour units, property, disciplinary cases, taxable subjects, or a number on a line.
And many are missing altogether.
That is why we must be careful with the language of digital recovery.

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A database can follow a person through ownership, sale, manumission, or emancipation.
But that does not mean it reconstructs the family.
A database can track the owner more clearly than the mother.
It can preserve property transfer more clearly than family separation.
It can record the name assigned by law more clearly than the name remembered by kin.
So Caribbean research must move from person as record to person as relative, worker, ancestor, neighbour, speaker of language, bearer of dignity, and member of violated family lines.
And let me say something else clearly.

Missing fathers in the archive are not only a technical gap.
Paternal erasure is also part of colonial violence.
When paternity is not recorded, when family ties are distorted by slavery law, when informal unions are ignored, when coercive relations disappear into silence, that is not just incomplete paperwork.
That is a wound in the record.
That is why uncertainty matters.

Standardization is useful.
Linkage is useful.
Name cleaning is useful.
Searchability is useful.
But standardization can also flatten the very uncertainty that tells the truth.
Variant names may carry migration.
Different spellings may carry language worlds.
Approximate dates may carry fragility in memory and record.
Contradictions may show the violence of the archive.
Oral history may preserve what the register erased.
So not every inconsistency is a defect.
Sometimes uncertainty is the evidence.
Sometimes ambiguity is the trace of damage.
Sometimes what does not line up neatly is exactly what tells us how power operated.
That is why descendant-centred research matters.
Because family memory, oral knowledge, local language, naming practices, and community accountability are not sentimental extras.
They are part of method.
They help us read against the archive.
They help us correct the archive.
They help us complete what the archive never intended to preserve.
And they remind us that our ancestors were not data points.
They were mothers, fathers, children, workers, believers, neighbours, speakers of language, carriers of culture, and builders of family under impossible conditions.

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Now let me speak about language more directly.
On our islands, language is never just language.
Language carries memory.
Language carries class.
Language carries humour.
Language carries shame.
Language carries struggle.
Language carries tenderness.

Language carries resistance.
Language carries belonging.
Language carries home.
People know this already.
You can feel it in school.
You can feel it in the office.
You can feel it in church.
You can feel it in the court.
You can feel it in the neighbourhood.
You can feel it when someone changes how they speak because a certain person walked into the room.
That is not accidental.
That is history living inside daily life.
And in the Caribbean, many of us live in more than one language every day.
That is not confusion.
That is competence.
That is not weakness.
That is strength.
That is not backwardness.
That is intelligence shaped by history.
We move across languages because history moved across us.
We translate because survival taught us to.
We code-switch because power is uneven.
We adapt because our people had to.
So any research that treats Caribbean multilingual life as a side note will never fully understand us.
And any system of research or education that does not respect the language reality of the people will keep reproducing distance between knowledge and community.

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And here I also want to say something about education.
Colonial schooling did not only educate.
It also trained minds for empire.
It rewarded assimilation.
It pushed metropolitan standards as the measure of intelligence.
It taught too many of our children that what came from outside carried more value than what came from home.
Too often, education in our region prepared people to serve external systems, external bureaucracies, external labour markets, and external ideas of success.
Instead of building self-confidence and self-determination, it often filtered talent outward.
So we must ask:

Are we still training our young people mainly to leave?
Are we still validating them only when they fit outside standards?
Are we still teaching them to mistrust their own languages, histories, and communities?
Because if we do not ask that, then colonial education simply changes clothes and keeps walking.

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Now I want to speak about labour.
Because when we talk about culture and memory in the Caribbean, we must also talk about work.
Work built these islands.
Work shaped our people.
Work shaped our movement.
Work shaped our language.
Work shaped our social life.
Work shaped our dignity.
And work also shaped our suffering.
Too often, slavery is spoken about as if it ended and then the labour question simply disappeared.
That is not true.
Colonialism did not end its labour logic when slavery was abolished.
It reorganised labour.
It renamed coercion.
It used contracts, migration, debt, law, race, and dependency to keep cheap labour available.
So if we are serious about Caribbean history, we must say clearly: the end of slavery did not mean the end of exploitation.
The system changed form.
The pressure changed form.
The vocabulary changed form.
But the hunger for cheap labour remained.
And our history is not only a history of extraction of bodies.
It is also a history of extraction of labour power.
A history of extraction of intellect.
A history of extraction of cultural continuity.
From slavery, to indentureship, to colonial schooling, to modern skilled migration, the Caribbean has too often been treated as a supplier of labour for somebody else's development.
First coerced labour.
Then contract labour.
Then trained labour.
Then skilled labour.
Different stages.
Same world system.

And that is why I sometimes say this is not only brain drain.

It is brain robbery.

Because who paid to educate the nurse, the teacher, the engineer, the doctor, the scholar?

Who carried the social cost of raising them?

Who loses when the wealthy countries recruit them away?

And who benefits from not having to train their own workforce?

We have to ask these questions honestly.

And still, we must also be fair.

People do have agency.

People do move to survive.

People do migrate to support family.

People do seek opportunity, safety, dignity, and a future.

So we should not speak as if Caribbean migrants are passive victims with no choice.

But it is also true that those choices are made inside unequal structures.

So both things must be said together.

Agency is real.

Structure is real.

Migration can contain courage and coercion at the same time.

Hope and loss at the same time.

Survival and extraction at the same time.

That is the Caribbean truth.

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And this matters because even our public language can soften hard history.

We often say our ancestors contributed.

Yes, they contributed.

But we must be careful with that word.

Because some contributed under bondage.

Some contributed under violence.

Some contributed under contract systems they did not fully control.

Some contributed because the colonial economy gave them no fair choice.

Some contributed under pressure, dependency, and unequal law.

So yes, we must honour contribution.

But we must not honour contribution in a way that hides exploitation.

We must not use polite language to clean up hard history.

Because when we soften exploitation, we also soften responsibility.

And when we soften responsibility, we make repair easier to avoid.

That is why the link between slavery and contract labour matters so much.

It reminds us that colonialism was not only about race and rule.

It was also about organizing labour.

Controlling labour.

Cheapening labour.

Moving labour.

Replacing one labour regime with another when needed.
And making sure wealth flowed upward while dependency stayed below.
This is not only old history.
This is part of the afterlife of the Caribbean.
It shaped our class structure.
It shaped our migration patterns.
It shaped our family stories.
It shaped who was recorded and how.
It shaped language hierarchies.
It shaped education.
It shaped belonging.
And it shaped what kinds of labour were respected and what kinds were treated as ordinary, invisible, or expendable.

So when I speak about culture, I am not leaving labour behind.

I am saying culture helps us remember the labour history official narratives often clean up.
Culture remembers the worker.
Culture remembers the woman who carried family through hardship.
Culture remembers the migrant who built while remaining marginal.
Culture remembers those who kept society alive without ever becoming central in the official story.
That is why culture matters.

Now let me return to archives, because this point also stretches beyond emancipation.
A digitized emancipation record is not the end of the story.
It is often only one fragment in a dispersed Caribbean family history.
Our family lines did not stop at emancipation.
They continued through migration.
Through contract labour.
Through movement across islands.
Through routes into Suriname, Curaçao, Aruba, Sint Maarten, the Netherlands, the United States, and beyond.
Through interethnic contact.
Through new forms of labour, dependency, and community-building.
So if research stops at the archival moment most convenient to the database, then it can once again cut the people off from themselves.
That is why Caribbean research needs a longer arc.
Not only slavery.
Not only abolition.
But afterlives.
Continuities.
Reorganizations of labour.
Diaspora movement.

Family rebuilding.
Renaming.
Silence.
And return.
That is what a people-centred method looks like.

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Now I want to speak about repair.
We cannot speak honestly about Caribbean culture without speaking about historical harm.
And we cannot speak honestly about historical harm without speaking about the present.
Because the past is not dead if its structure still lives on.
If the old harm still shapes inequality, dignity, land, labour, language status, education, and institutional weakness, then history is not over.
That is why apology matters, but is not enough.
Truth-telling matters.
Recognition matters.
Naming the crime matters.
But apology alone is not enough.
Not when the damage still lives on.
Not when weak institutions still live on.
Not when educational gaps still live on.
Not when language hierarchies still live on.
Not when labour exploitation changes form but continues.
Not when exclusion still lives on.

So when we talk about repair, let us be serious.
Repair must include memory.
Repair must include education.
Repair must include access to archives.
Repair must include stronger institutions.
Repair must include language dignity.
Repair must include equal rights and fair treatment now.
Repair must include changing systems, not only changing speeches.
Because people cannot build a future on symbolism alone.
Young people cannot defend themselves with ceremony alone.
Communities cannot heal on acknowledgement alone.
Repair has to touch life.
It has to touch what children learn.
It has to touch what teachers can teach.
It has to touch what communities can access.
It has to touch which institutions are strengthened.
It has to touch whose knowledge is respected.
It has to touch who has the tools to know themselves and speak in their own name.
That is why I keep saying:

Culture is not separate from justice.
Language is not separate from justice.
Heritage is not separate from justice.
Labour is not separate from justice.
Research is not separate from justice.
They are all connected.

And I also want to say something difficult.
In small island societies, power can stay in too few hands.
We know this.
Sometimes access depends on networks.
Sometimes visibility depends on who knows whom.
Sometimes the same people get invited.
Sometimes the same people get funded.
Sometimes the same stories are repeated as if they are the whole story.
Sometimes some people are treated as the face of “the nation” while others remain invisible.
And culture itself can be shaped by this.
Whose story gets archived?
Whose history gets funded?
Whose language gets respected?
Whose art gets platform?
Whose pain gets remembered?
Whose labour gets honoured?
Whose name gets taught?
And whose life stays outside the frame?
These are not easy questions.
But serious research must ask them.
Serious cultural work must ask them.
And serious institutions must not be afraid of them.
Because culture is not only about celebration.
Culture is also about truth.
And truth is sometimes uncomfortable.

Now let me speak directly about the people whose knowledge is so often pushed aside.
The worker knows something.
The fisherman knows something.
The domestic worker knows something.
The market vendor knows something.
The retired elder knows something.
The teacher knows something.
The youth know something.
The artist knows something.
The unionist knows something.
The church mother knows something.

The community historian knows something.
The person who lived through migration, underpayment, disaster, school failure, language shame, institutional neglect, and still kept going knows something.
And too often these people are treated as “sources,” but not as thinkers.
That is wrong.

Knowledge does not only live in universities.
Knowledge does not only live in ministries.
Knowledge does not only live in reports.
Knowledge does not only live in academic language.
Knowledge lives in communities.
Knowledge lives in practice.
Knowledge lives in memory.
Knowledge lives in oral history.
Knowledge lives in work.
Knowledge lives in survival.
That does not mean all knowledge is the same.
It does mean serious research must learn how to listen.
And listening is not the same as extracting.
Listening means taking people seriously before the report is drafted.
Listening means asking questions people recognize as real.
Listening means returning results in language and formats people can use.
Listening means not disappearing after data collection.
Listening means leaving behind something of value:
skills,
access,
training,
archives,
materials,
institutional strength,
or a stronger ability for the community to speak for itself.
That is what accountable research looks like.

Now let me turn to young people.
Because if we are serious about culture, memory, labour, education, and the future, then we must be serious about youth.
Our students must not grow up thinking that knowledge only becomes serious when it comes from outside.
They must not feel that local experience is interesting but not intelligent.
They must not feel that the islands produce stories while others produce theory.
They must not be ashamed of how they speak.
They must not be cut off from their own history.
No.
They must know that serious thinking also comes from here.

From island experience.
From local history.
From our writers.
From our artists.
From our teachers.
From our workers.
From our elders.
From our communities.
From our movements.
From our archives.
From our struggles.
The Caribbean has always produced knowledge.
We have always produced analysis.
We have always produced critique.
We have always produced imagination.
We have always produced survival intelligence.
We have always produced ways of naming the world from where we stand.
The problem is not that we have not thought.
The problem is that too often our thinking was not recognised, not funded, not archived, not respected, and not centred.
That is what must change.
And that is why this conference theme matters so much.

Culture, Literature and Arts in the Caribbean.
This is not a side theme.
This is a core theme.
Because culture is where memory is kept alive.
Literature is where people speak back.
Art is where futures are imagined.
Storytelling is where history keeps breathing.
Language is where dignity lives.
And research, if it is honest, should help protect all of that.
But critique alone is not enough.

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Let me say plainly what I believe the islands need.
We need research that starts by listening.
We need research that begins with the people's real questions.
We need research that respects community knowledge before it tries to measure it.
We need research that works in the languages people actually use.
We need research that returns knowledge to schools, families, artists, unions, churches, and neighbourhood groups.
We need research that strengthens local institutions instead of only extracting from them.
We need research that leaves behind tools, training, access, and capacity.

We need research that helps people understand themselves better and defend their future more strongly.

We need research that does not only collect stories, but also builds power.

We need research that does not only produce output, but also produces accountability.

We need research that sees the islands not only as sites of vulnerability, but as sites of thought.

So let me put that into a few plain principles.

Start from island reality.

Use language people can understand.

Return the knowledge.

Strengthen local institutions.

Respect history.

Listen for the silences.

Read against the archive.

Honour contribution without hiding exploitation.

Let uncertainty remain visible where uncertainty is part of the evidence.

Teach our children that knowledge from here is knowledge.

Measure success by community benefit, not only by publication.

That is the research ethic we need.

Now let me come back to the title.

Our Stories Are Not Footnotes.

Because footnotes are where many people place what they do not want to centre.

Interesting, perhaps.

Useful, perhaps.

But not the main thing.

And too often, that is exactly where the islands have been placed.

As a side note.

As a case.

As a dependency.

As a place to collect information.

As a place to test ideas.

As a marginal detail in a bigger story told from somewhere else.

I reject that.

The islands are not footnotes to somebody else's centre.

Our lives are not background material.

Our memories are not decorative context.

Our languages are not obstacles to proper knowledge.

Our culture is not an accessory.

Our institutions are not merely local delivery partners in someone else's design.

We are not the edge of the page.

We are part of the text.

And we have the right to write.

The right to shape the questions.
The right to shape the archive.
The right to shape the method.
The right to shape the meaning.
The right to shape the future.
Not alone.
Not against collaboration.
But not under permanent intellectual supervision either.
Real collaboration is possible.
But real collaboration requires honesty.
It requires reciprocity.
It requires shared authority.
It requires fair resourcing.
It requires respect for local institutions.
It requires outputs communities can use.
It requires patience.
It requires trust.
And it requires letting the islands be more than data providers.

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So let me end with this.
The people of the islands do not need research that only studies them.
They need research that stands with them.
They need research that returns value to them.
They need research that makes their history more visible,
their language more respected,
their labour more honestly understood,
their voices more heard,
their institutions stronger,
and their children more rooted, more confident, and more prepared.
That is the standard.
Not visibility without benefit.
Not consultation without change.
Not inclusion without power.
Not archives without access.
Not memory without repair.
Not contribution language that hides exploitation.
Not digitization without decolonial method.
Not education that trains our people outward while weakening us inward.
Not research without accountability.
But research with the people.
Research for the people.
Research that answers to the people.

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So let me say it one more time.

Our stories are not footnotes.

Our language is not a problem.

Our memory is not secondary.

Our culture is not decoration.

And our people are not just participants in somebody else's project.

They are the reason the work should exist.

Thank you.