

LITERATURE, HISTORY, AND CROSSING BOUNDARIES

HISTORICAL NOVELS AND THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY IN THE DUTCH CARIBBEAN

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The historical novel in Europe had its heyday as the nation states of Europe became consolidated in the 19th century, as exemplified by the publication of *Ivanhoe* in 1819 by Sir Walter Scott, *De Leeuw van Vlaanderen* (The Lion of Flanders) in 1838 by Hendrik Conscience and *War and Peace* in 1869 by Leo Tolstoy. These books use a narrative style to focus on certain historic events or to evoke the atmosphere and the mentality of a certain epoch. In these times, when the European nation-state is becoming to some extent a thing of the past, interest in all things historical flourishes. There is certainly a comparable correlation between the appearance of historical novels and the development of national self-awareness in the former Dutch West Indies, with two provisos: a) in general, the relationship between empiric reality and the novel is different in the Caribbean from that found in Western literature; and b) the correlation between historical narrative subject matter and identity development cannot be pegged down to a certain period of increased nationalistic awareness in the Antilles. I will treat both of these points in this article.

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First of all, to examine the relation between the novel and empiric reality we must have a look at one of the most remarkable novels in Dutch from the year 2008: *Alleen maar nette mensen* (Only decent people) by Robert Vuijsje. This book narrates a Moroccan-looking Jewish young man's obsession for black women with huge buttocks. In the process the life of the Surinamese working class in Amsterdam Southeast is portrayed in detail. Whatever one's opinion may be about the book, it is a modern sketch of inter-ethnic relations amongst the younger generations in the Netherlands, and on the manner in which those generations communicate: texting, chatting, emailing, etc. One could thus say that Vuijsje provides us with a snapshot of the contemporary Amsterdam society, and therefore he has written a historical novel. For many readers, that's also where the difficulty lies, with debates ranging around the question as to whether Vuijsje portrays a realistic picture or not, and around the extent to which his portrayal is sexist. The novel made its name largely from these debates. It was therefore somewhat disappointing that Vuijsje defended himself in a certain

moment of weakness by hiding behind the argument that the book was purely a work of literary imagination. With this line of argumentation, he may have succeeded in defusing the debate, but he also diminished the potential significance of his book.

It is often said that Caribbean literature is characterized by social engagement. While it wouldn't be difficult to nuance this characterization of Caribbean literature, let's just assume that the basis of this assertion is correct. This would then imply that all novels from Surinam, the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba are simultaneously historical novels. After all, there is no set definition which specifies precisely how much reference must be made to actual historical events in given work for it to qualify as a historical novel. For instance, *Die revolutie niet begrepen* (The not understood revolution) (2005) by Surinamese writer Cynthia McLeod correctly claims to be a historical novel. The story takes place between 1979 and 1987, and depicts the years of military repression in Suriname. An even more convincing example can be found in Edgar Cairo's novel *De smaak van Sranan libre* (The taste of Sranan libre), which he wrote during the week after the infamous December murders. The work was first broadcast as a radio play at the end of December 1982, and then published as a novel 25 years later, but there is no doubt that from its very inception it was a historical novel, albeit one about contemporary events of historical import.

In examining the correlation between nationalism and the historical novel in the former Dutch West Indies, it is important to note that Antillean and Aruban authors have not written many historical novels, and those that they have written tend not to be about Antillean history. An intensive search by Aart Broek, Wim Rutgers and myself indicates that the silence here is particularly deafening when it comes to works on the era of colonial slavery. A few serialized historical novels were published in newspapers, such as the work about slave leader and freedom fighter Tula, entitled *E rais ku no ke muri* (1969) written in Papiamentu by Guillermo Rosario. That book is primarily a fictional account of Tula's two love affairs and hardly a careful documentation of historical events (Cain, 2009). In the newspaper *Civilisadó* from 1873-1873, an adaptation of a North American abolitionist narrative *John Brown* by Henri E. Marquand was published in Papiamentu (Rutgers, this volume). In 1911, *Catibu Samboe i su famia* was published in the periodical *La Cruz* on the conversion of an African slave to Catholicism (Broek, 2006: 9-20). Then there's the short booklet *E negrita stima di Shon Marein* (1990) by Guiselle Chea Gumares, which recounts: a romance between a *shon* (slave master) and his beautiful female slave, and the intervention therein of his jealous wife. The novella *Katibu di Shon* by Carel de Haseth, published in Papiamentu in 1988, and then in Dutch as *Slaaf en Meester* (Slave and Master) in 2002, presents the 'double perspective of the slave Louis and

his master Wilmoë' on the slave rebellion of August 17th 1795 on Curaçao. The main character of this work is a girl Anita who is desired by both men.

Other fiction by Antillean authors with historical subject matter includes the tendentious serialized novel about a strike *Un yiu di pueblo* by M.A. Fraai, published in the newspaper *La Union* in 1931-1932. *De verwachting* (The expectation) (1959) by Maria Miranda (ps. Van Ethel Krenz-Senior) recounts how a 19th century priest converts a Jew to Christianity. From the same author we have *De Costelijke Paerel* (The Precious Pearl) (1977) on the Marranos (converted Jews) on Curaçao. *E dia di mas históriko* (1970) by Edward de Jongh is a documentary-like novel on the May Revolt of 1969. The May Revolt also serves as the backdrop to *Het hiernamaals van Doña Lisa* (The hereafter of Doña Lisa) (2009) by Eric de Brabander. The May Revolt also plays a modest role in Frank Martinus Arion's well-known *Dubbelspel* (Double play) (1973), but that book is only very remotely classifiable as a historical novel. However, Arion's *De deserteurs* (The deserters) (2006) is a historical novel on the American war of liberation. And then there is the novella by Cola Debrot *De vervolgden* (The pursued) (1982) on the initial years of the *conquista* on the Caribbean islands. Almost all of these texts are dealt with in Rutgers (2007).

If we broaden our scope slightly and consider works by transient expatriates on the Antilles – which Rutgers (2007) calls Caribbean-Dutch literature, we end up with a few more titles of historically oriented prose. These writers include Gabriël Gorris, Peter Dicker, W. van Mancius, Miriam Sluis, Johan van de Walle and Cornelis Goslinga. With the exception of the latter two, however, we find little written by this group about the period of colonial slavery. However, there were a few short stories with slavery as subject by Pierre Lauffer in his collection *Kwenta pa kaminda* (1969) and by Camille Baly (published in the English and Dutch translation, in Wim Rutgers' anthology *Tropentaal*, 2001) and dramas about the rebel slave leader Tula, for example, by Pacheco Domacassé (1970/71). Miep Diekmann – Dutch but born on Curaçao – wrote a juvenile novel on slavery *Marijn bij de lorredraaiers* (1965). In 2008, *Dottie* by R.V. Arrendell was published, containing the memoirs of an old female slave written down by her granddaughter: I thank Aart Broek and Wim Rutgers, who searched the bare out-bush with me for slavery literature from the Antilles and Aruba.

It is difficult to explain how this absence of attention to the period of colonial slavery came about in the literature. No doubt, the *hollandisashon* of the first half of the twentieth century played a significant part. With the arrival of the oil industry, the Antilles stepped into the modern world, and it was no longer important to look back on days gone by, especially the unhappy days of slavery (Voorhoeve, 1966: 33).

Slavery seems to play a more important role in Surinamese literature than it does in that of the former Dutch Antilles. I believe there are two main reasons for this. The first is a demographic one: the Antillean population has been from the beginning of colonial rule and most certainly from the second half of the 19th century onward much less divided in national identity than that of Surinam. A second reason is that Surinam has provided the subject matter for well-known international books on slavery to a much greater extent than the Antilles. In this regard we can mention works by Aphra Behn, Voltaire, Benoit, and others. Of special importance is Captain Stedman's *Narrative of a five year expedition against the rebel Negroes of Surinam* (1796). That work was published in numerous editions (including juvenile books) and in numerous languages. The engravings in Stedman's work became icons not only for slavery in Dutch Surinam in particular, but also for international slavery in general. A similar work on the Antilles simply never existed.

Slavery immediately comes to the fore in the very first literature on Surinam. *Oroenoko or The royal slave* (1688) by Aphra Behn occupies a key position in the entire canon of colonial literature. Behn creates her story around the character of the noble prince Oroenoko and his beautiful Imoinda, with all ingredients of later slavery literature: snippets of African history, the story of an impossible love, the middle passage, the trade in Africans, a slave rebellion, the cruelty of slave drivers and planters, etc. Frank Martinus Arion (1997) even sees the beginnings of the novel as a genre in Behn's text.

Aphra Behn now was of course a transient expatriate, and it would be difficult to consider her work to be part of Surinamese literature, as it was written at a time when there were only a few scattered colonial settlements on the coast of the Guianas. That her work is in the vein of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, as studies have demonstrated, is quite another matter, however, because in the final analysis, one can hardly name a single historic novel to which that characterization does not in some way also apply.

The rudimentary beginnings of literary life in Surinam emerge at the end of the 18th century, with the first novels appearing in the middle of the 19th century. Slavery plays a major role in these early novels, including the two novels by Kwamina, *Jetta: Schetsen en beelden uit een vreemd land* (Jetta: Sketches and images from a strange country) (1869), and *Nanni of vruchten van het vooroordeel* (Nanni or fruits of the prejudice) (1881), which both take place in the first half of the 19th century. Kwamina was the pseudonym of A. Lionarons, a teacher from Paramaribo who was descended from old Surinamese Jewish stock. Kwamina's gaze is typically colonial: the planters' society was in rapid decline as were 'the good old days' of slavery. To Kwamina the African descended slaves working on the plantations, were not much better than the maroons and Indians, as far as 'civilization' goes. As the earliest Surinam slave

novels, he reasoned from a worldview in which the equality of planter and worker was no more evident than that of the Dutch colonial writers before him.

Surinamese literature continued to develop in fits and starts and only gained broad momentum after 1957. Despite this, historical context has remained of central importance throughout. At the turn of the 20th century, Richard O’Ferrall wrote a novel on the construction of the Lawa-railway, while François Henri Rikken penned three voluminous historical novels, of which *Codjo, the arsonist* (1902) who was responsible for the huge fire of Paramaribo in 1832 remains the most widely known, and the blind writer Johann Heymans produced two ‘romantic historical’ novels. In 1912, J.G. Spalburg published the booklet *Bruine Mina de koto-missi*, which contains extensive material on colonial era slavery. In 1916, E.J. Bartelink produced the non-fiction, but extremely well narrated account of his time as a European descended officer in *Hoe de tijden veranderen* (How the times change).

Subsequently, Albert Helman began to create the first modern Surinamese classic historical novels, including *Zuid-Zuid-West* (South-South-West) (1926) and *De stille plantage* (The quiet plantation) (1931), the latter of which he refashioned completely to produce the prize-winning *De laaiende stilte* (The blazing silence) in 1951. In the meantime, *Wij slaven van Suriname* (We slaves of Surinam) the first comprehensive account by a fellow countryman on the history of slavery, was published by Anton de Kom in 1934. Anton de Kom also wrote the historical novel *Ons bloed is rood* (Our blood is red) about the (mythic) maroon hero Kwakoe, a text that is largely unknown because – even though it was of exceptional quality – it was never published (van Kempen, 2006; 2010). Finally, Eddy Bruma used historical material as the basis for his legendary piece *De geboorte van Boni* (The birth of Boni) (1952).

The sixties was a time of great poets. Prose in Surinam generally, and in particular historic prose, flourishes only after independence, with the work of writers such as Ruud Mungroo, André Pakosie, Dorus Vrede, John de Bye and of course Cynthia McLeod, who wrote the classic *Hoe duur was de suiker?* (How much was the sugar?) in 1987. In the Netherlands during the same period we find Surinamese authors such as Edgar Cairo, Johan Edwin Hokstam, Hugo Pos, and more recently Clark Accord, Karin Amatmoekrim and Rihana Jamaludin. There have also been Dutch writers who visited Surinam as transients – writers, teachers, journalists – but who nonetheless have enriched the literature on Surinam. The IBS (Instituut voor bevordering van de Surinamistiek = Institute for the promotion of Surinamistics) website, www.surinamistiek.nl, lists hundreds of published titles. Strictly speaking, these works are not part of Surinamese literature, but there are a few that are certainly worth reading, such as *De manja: familie-tafereel uit het Surinaamsche volksleven* (The

manja, family scene from Surinamese folk life) (1866) by Reverend Cornelis van Schaick with its remarkable dialogues in Sranan, and *Een vlek op de rug* (A mark on the back) by Johan van de Walle (1963), a novel which is widely read in Surinamese schools. As recently as in 2008, this already impressive inventory was expanded to include *Kumanti Kodyo of de liefdes van Lea en Esther* (Kumanti Kodyo or the loves of Lea and Esther), a great novel by Jetty Peverelli on the inter-relationships between people of Jewish and African descent in Surinam.

We now turn to the question of whether there is a correlation between something resembling the awakening of national consciousness and the publishing of novels containing historic subject matter. Undoubtedly, Cynthia McLeod could tell many anecdotes about readers who told her how they discovered the history of Surinam through her novels. However, it should be pointed out that while writing abounds concerning life on the plantations, in the city of Paramaribo and amongst the maroons in the hinterlands, there is little more than a few fleeting flashbacks in this literature about the earlier history of the Africans who were dragged to the Americas in chains. Life in Africa, the societies that emerged around the trading posts along the African West coast, the exodus, the middle passage, and the diaspora via the Windward Antilles, are not usually included in these historical novels. In other words, these writers are not focusing on the proto-history of the slaves, but instead on slavery as part of the colonial history of their own territory in the former Dutch Caribbean. None of the great prose writers from the eighties has attempted to take this courageous leap backward in time and space: not Arion, not Cairo, and not Roemer. This cannot be due to a lack of documentation, because numerous historians had written about African history and the Middle Passage, such as the eyewitness account in the *Logbook of a slave collector* (1978) by Theophilus Conneau, which is based on a manuscript from 1853. I can think of only two reasons for this lack of attention to pre-diasporic history: firstly, the authors (and their readers) were mainly interested in the own, national history, and secondly, that that previous history was already conveyed so masterfully in such works as Maryse Condé's monumental epos, *Ségou* (1985). There are however novels about the crossing of Europeans to the Americas (Van Kempen, 2007).

It should also be mentioned that in the oral traditions of the Maroons, many stories can be found about Africa and the Middle Passage (Andrè Pakosie, personal communication). Narratives going back to Africa usually start with: *Wan Mma... be de a Nengekondee...* 'There was a woman in Africa', or 'There was a woman in Biinya (Kumanti)' or 'in Babalima.(Loango)'. Instead of 'Wan Mma' we could also have *Wan Dda* 'a gentleman', *Wan Kiyoo* 'a young man', *Wan Pikinmuyee* 'a young woman', etc. Narratives about Africa have more substance than stories on forced transport to the Americas. Furthermore, stories on the crossing have remained

preserved for the greater part only in Kumanti, while narratives on life in Africa – besides in the current Maroon languages – were passed on also in Paga, Anpuku, Loangu and Kumanti (Carlin & Arends, 2002).

In the Caribbean-Dutch literature on slavery though, there are books in which the Middle Passage is portrayed extensively. *Reinhart, of Natuur en godsdienst* (Reinhart, or Nature and religion) (1791-1792) by Elisabeth Maria Post, depicts life on the banks of the Senegal River and the dismal crossing to the Americas. *De levende afgod* (The living idol) or *De geschiedenis van een kankantrieboom* (The history of a kankan tree) by J. de Liefde (1891) creates an image of the era of colonial slavery that deviates entirely from the many other narratives about that same period. The author calls this work ‘a story’, but nowadays we would call it a novella.

De Liefde’s decorated title page shows a picture of a slave standing under a huge tree, who apparently struck down another slave with a chopper, while a planter figure and some other slaves excitedly approach the scene of the calamity. Meanwhile, the frontispiece shows a scene in which a European descended man standing on some kind of platform, is chopping away at the tree with an axe.

The text centers around a conversion-history, but in many ways is also a refreshingly authentic and well-documented tale on the period of colonial slavery. The first chapter takes the reader to the end of the year 1699. New slaves from Africa arrive at a Surinamese plantation, where they receive instructions from their new master. It is striking that the newcomers are distinguished according to their region of origin – Sokko, Mandingo, Demakuku, Loango – and that on each of the groups, something is said about their appearance and nature. This is exceptional in nineteenth century literature on Caribbean slavery: in other books, slaves are usually referred to only as African Negroes or saltwater Negroes. The effect of De Liefde’s serious treatment of slaves as individuals and not as members of an amorphous collectivity is that his narrative gains more depth. We are given a more distinct sense of the humanity of the slaves, who so often shuffle through other books as brave Uncle Toms or as tempestuous primitives, while only the European descended characters receive serious development.

The second chapter gives the account of the crossing, of which there are many versions, but the narrative in question is exceptional in many ways. After an introductory paragraph, the floor is given to Codjo, ‘a strong young Mandingo-Negro, who had conducted a retail trade in his native country, but had run up debts and was sold as a slave together with his wife and a young child by a merciless ‘Mussulman’. Codjo’s account is therefore a slave narrative, which is a common and well-known genre (as escape story) in North America, but unique or extremely unusual in Dutch Caribbean literature. Readers of stories on the Middle Passage will undoubtedly have wondered why the captured slaves did not revolt *en masse*. The African narrator

provides the answer to this question here: they did revolt – in their despair and from the understanding they had nothing to lose anyway, they threw themselves upon the ship’s crew, but the latter appeared to be more prepared than anticipated and the revolt in this case resulted in a bloodbath.

The subsequent chapters are devoted to the way of life and rituals of the slaves. The ritual ablution of a rooster, a winti-dance and the consultation of an oracle are described in great detail. The work appears to be well researched although we do not know whether De Liefde had actually been to Surinam.

The narrative then shifts to the period around 1800. Christianization of the slaves had already begun in earnest, but had not yet reached the plantation of the kankan tree. The plantation owner wanted to build a new storehouse where the tree stood and requested permission from his slaves to cut down the tree. The slaves assented to this and were given three days off to perform the appropriate rituals to bid the tree farewell. However, a hysterical slave priest killed one of the lumbermen shortly after the first stroke of the axe, and the tree remained standing.

This extract goes against the tenor of the nineteenth century novel on slavery. That an owner would ask permission from his slaves, does not square with the image of total submission of slaves to their masters that was so eagerly painted in the literature of that period, especially in abolitionist novels. That the slaves would give the planter permission to cut down the tree, also does not fit with the literary image of the ‘primitive’ slaves who supposedly defended everything that had to do with their ‘superstition’ with fire and sword. That the ‘supernatural signs’ (the obsession of the priest) could subsequently cause the slave owner to abandon his project, is undoubtedly in accordance with historic reality, where cautious planters wanted to avoid unnecessary conflict. However, this does not conform to the then-current representation of master-slave relations either.

The last phase of the (hi)story takes place around 1850-1860, when the pragmatic thinking planter allows the conversion of the slaves, all are baptized, with the high priest and the *wintimamas* (‘idolatresses’) the last to be baptized. The tree is finally cut down under the command of a missionary, thus ending a history encompassing well over one hundred and fifty years. The author only needed 53 pages to recount the entire history of slavery by means of a meticulous choice of scenes around a single location, the kankan tree (Van Kempen, 2003, I: 412-415; Van Kempen, 1999; 2002; and Paasman, 1984).

I must make reference here to a very exceptional book *Nyumane* (1986) by Edgar Cairo that could be considered to be a historic-mythological novel on Africa (Van Kempen, 1993). This novel represents a determined attempt to recount the background history to colonial slavery, although more as a fictional evocation of an African

narrative genre than as a realistic version of the historical novel. The destiny of Nduma (human being), the pivotal figure in the novel, is to be the ever-displaced person. Even before his birth, his mother – the Nteke-girl N’ptilamah – was abducted during an Ngo-Ngo raid. This robbers’ tribe compacted with the Ba Portu (the Portuguese conquerors). The twins born to N’ptilamah were to be sacrificed. The shaman Bantagwobo (who delivers a brilliant tirade against Christianity) decapitates the first child. The second child, Nduma, survives in a miraculous way: a giant snake does not strangle the child, and after the mother is speared to death and the father tortured to death, the mythical primitive man Ndu-tata suddenly enters the scene to make sure that the child thrown up high into the air, lands safely.

During the trek from inland to the coast, the Nai-Ng’ga people abduct Nduma. Fifteen years later he will be allowed to wed the queen daughter of the Nai-Ng’ga, after a duel with the mulatto traitor Obanya. However, before this takes place, he becomes rootless again, and falls into the hands of the Portuguese as a slave. During a revolt, he strangles the conquistador Pedro Gonçalves Saavedra, whose soldiers are unable to intervene because Nduma changes into a snake. That is the mythical end of Nduma the human being, which, just as the character of the same name in the novel by Augusto Roa Basto, is the symbol for our human nature and destiny. In this Africa-novel by Edgar Cairo, and basically in every historical novel, the author is confronted by the delicate problem concerning the precarious relation between historical data and what is actually narrated as well as how it is actually narrated. In conclusion, it is necessary to say a few words on this matter.

In historic novels on Surinam, the dialog is often given in Sranantongo, particularly when slaves are quoted. That obviously appears to be in accordance with the historic reality, even if their variety of Sranan would have sounded different compared to what we hear nowadays. Certainly the Sranantongo spoken by the so-called ‘saltwater Negroes’ (those born in Africa) would have shown more influence from West-African languages. In order to accentuate the contrasts in colonial society, these same authors often quote the planters and their family members in Dutch. It doesn’t actually occur to most of us that this is peculiar. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the planters’ class mainly consisted of Jews who spoke Portuguese or German amongst themselves in informal situations. In the 19th century, when the majority of the plantations passed into the hands of African-descended or mulatto families, Sranan would also have been commonly spoken among the planter class. In historical novels we therefore see the juxtaposition of a realistic element (the Sranan spoken by the slave population) with a fictional element (the Dutch spoken by planters’ families), and we accept this just as readily as when we hear SS-Officers speaking English with a German accent in Hollywood movies. For that matter, we must not forget that just about all dialogue occurring in historical novels is purely fictional. Apart from the archives of the Police

and the Courts of Criminal Justice, where we find an occasional literal account of a conversation between a police officer and a witness, we are completely ignorant of precisely how people spoke with each other in centuries past. As readers, we still need those dialogues if we want to avoid the unbearable task of reading novels that consist exclusively of descriptions. What a good writer provides to us as readers is therefore not the reality but the illusion of the reality, and we in turn, want to believe there's truth behind that illusion. The writer is an artist and therefore he or she has the privilege of setting the parameters of subjectivity in a historical narrative. As readers, we must therefore not let ourselves be seduced rashly by the long list of historical sources consulted by the author which is sometimes printed at the back of historical novels as a testimonial to its historical reliability. That 'reliability' cannot help but be very relative.

Nevertheless, something else is going on in the historical novel than in a fairytale or a science fiction story. The genre of the historical novel operates within historical and geographical limits. We would not accept, for example, the incorporation of electrical trains in a narrative on 18th century plantation society. We know that when Cynthia McLeod refers to Governor De Cleusses in her books, the story must take place in the first half of the 18th century and not in the second half. Anachronisms and geographical inaccuracies mar the credibility of the narrative. Every author of historical novels knows this, and if he or she does not, then there are historians who will painfully 'rub the writer's nose in it'. However, the strange thing is that in general, the common reader hardly takes notice of any of this. Concern with the historical truth is often a peripheral one for the reader, who mainly wishes to be entertained by the novel.

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