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Autobiography, critical fabulation, and African voices in the Archive of Dutch Slavery: John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative* (1790;1796) and Joachim Nettelbeck's *Ein Mann* (1910)[1]

There's a curious contradiction about the case of Suriname in the history of slavery. On the one hand, it is virtually unknown globally except for scholars of slavery, and on the other hand, Suriname serves as one of the most recognized backdrops for early plantation slavery. Suriname features in Voltaire's classic *Candide* (1759) as an example of the cruellest instances of slavery. But it's the William Blake plates based on paintings from John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname* (1790;96) that have taken on almost iconic universal meaning, rather than depicting a particular moment in the Surinamese archive of slavery.[2] The classic plate "a group of Africans, as imported to be sold for Slaves" (1795) features prominently in lessons on the history of slavery as an example of the transatlantic slave trade.

Rather than seeing the people depicted here as 'a group,' or as types, or as generic examples of slavery, I will attempt to find their particular stories and histories as far as possible within

the archive of Surinamese slavery. But here we have that familiar problem; the depiction occurs from the perspective of a white narrator and the voices of the represented are silenced. To counter that master voice, I will rely heavily on Saidiya Hartman's methodology of 'critical fabulation.'

When Hartman proposed to re-examine the archive of slavery in her 2006 article "Venus in two Acts," via a method of "critical fabulation," it produced quite a stir.[3] Hartman highlights the silence and violence of the record keeping in the archival sources, "The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history" (2). Rather than repeating that representation, Hartman proposes a probable 'what if' (subjunctive) scenario, one that combines rigorous scholarship and narrative:

> The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather labouring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible [….] The method guiding this writing practice is best described as 'critical fabulation.' (2)

The methodology importantly consists of both these elements: 'critical' as in scholarship from various archives and sources and 'fabula' as in the elements that constitute a story, with all its various narratological rules and markers.[4]

I've gone into detail about the methodology and its relation to the archive of slavery because it's apt in a particular subsection of the archive, autobiography. Autobiography notoriously combines real lives and fictional methodology to tell its story, with record keeping, memory, desire, politics, subjectivity, confession, contradictions and power, for example, all muddled up. I will mainly focus on two such 'archival' autobiographies, John Gabriel Stedman's

Narrative and Joachim Nettelbeck's *Ein Mann Des Seefarers und aufrechten Bürgers* (1910).[5] These autobiographies also exemplify a complicated relationship to Anglo-Atlantic slavery in terms of language and national status, Stedman's Dutch/Scottish heritage and choice of language, Nettelbeck's German while employed for a private Dutch company, and ideas about the triangular trade. As Brian Connolly and Marisa Fuentes put it: "Is it *the* archive—monolithic, imposing, domineering? Or is it multiple archives, where one archive might serve as the structure and logic of another?" [6] In these cases, the archives surrounding this Stedman/Blake print exist in multilingual and multinational contexts, presented in both text and image. In their monumental *Five Hundred African Voices*, Aaron Spencer Fogleman and Robert Hanserd present a catalogue of published accounts by Africans enslaved in the Transatlantic Slave trade, with linguistic records ranging across the globe, from Arabic to German, for example.[7] And even in this case, it's only examining printed sources, leaving aside a vast oral culture, and many of the '500'-voices are 'mediated' through judicial and church records. In this article on 'Dutch' slavery, there is little Dutch language. In spite of all these contexts, characters in autobiographies are still embedded or 'mediated' within the dominant master voice of the authors. How do we find the counter-voices with these autobiographies?

As a narratological model, the narrators here feature as the quintessential unreliable narrators. From Wayne Booth's pioneering *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1968) to narrative focalization models of Gerard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980), the narrative position of author/narrator has become a focal point of critical analysis. The distinction between story (what happens) and discourse (how it is told) holds special relevance in transatlantic slavery autobiographies. What that model allows one to do is to delve into strategies that silence and misrepresent others and attach value to representations distinct from the authors' intentions. Can we trust the narrator while he/she records facts and instances? These are eyewitness accounts, after all. But is the moment of writing different from the time of the action and does

that affect the text? All the authors of these memoirs are necessarily 'diegetic narrators,' in Genette's scheme, i.e. they perform a role in the action they describe; however, their distance from the action and their knowing what happened also makes them 'observers' (non-diegetic) as they comment on the action. We receive multiple interpretations, one from the authors' adventure, as it were, and one from the perspective of the current writer.

As an example, here is an instance in *Ein Mann*: When Captain Jan Harmel assigns first officer Joachim Nettelbeck the task of refilling their water supply on the Gold Coast, he describes the delicate process of negotiating with the inhabitants. The slavers remain at a few hundred meters offshore (because they're afraid of being captured or slaughtered), just behind the breakers. The Africans will swim to their sloop, collect the empty vats, fill them on shore, and deliver them back to Nettelbeck and company for an agreed price. He describes some remarkable swimming feats (including playing 'games' with them which involves the Africans having to dive for their earnings such as a tobacco pipe), and remarks frequently that he is astounded at the "tremendous physical strength of the N—r'" (129).[8] However, when Nettelbeck and crew wait one morning, the Africans don't appear and he stipulates it is because they'd rather continue sleeping in their comfortable huts. They become increasingly impatient, and an English crew member suggests he can swim over to wake them. When they warn him about sharks, he argues that since the Africans swim freely it's safe for him as well. He jumps in and within ten feet is caught and eaten by a shark. Nettelbeck muses: "What is strange, however, is the assurance of the N—r, which is also confirmed by visual evidence, that none of their kind has anything to fear from these sharks (130).[9] He just doesn't understand why the African swimmers don't suffer the same fate. He records a fact here (the adventure, the diegetic narrator; swimming in shark-infested waters on the Gold Coast, the Africans not being attacked, and a crew member killed. But his observation seems to be that

of the writer (who is eighty years old, by the way, the non-diegetic narrator), and his observation is still based on ignorance, incapable of comprehending local African knowledge.

How do we read these eyewitness accounts of the slave trade? As Karwan Fatah-Black and Camilla de Koning write in their recent *Ooggetuigen van de Nederlandse slavernij* (2024), the kilometres of the Dutch archive

> has been produced to exercise power […..] Counter-voices, resistance, and different perspectives hardly appear, and if so then they are controlled by the author and his/her cultural context.[10]

I want to suggest Nettelbeck's book offers a plethora of embedded signs, voices and experiences that counter the pro-slavery archive. However, we must read him both as the classic unreliable and ignorant narrator, both as diegetic and non-diegetic narrator. In the shark attack example above, Nettelbeck appears incapable of reading the signs of Gold Coast tribal culture—assuming 'laziness' rather than 'indigenous knowledge.'

Reading the archive

In order to read Stedman's depiction of the group, I will follow the following strands: using various archives to research the context and specificity of the print, Stedman's interpretation of the scene, and examining counter-narratives and voices through the unreliable narrator model.

Stedman was an obsessive record keeper. His English/Dutch diaries have survived (even from the bottom of the Commewijne river—he had dropped his little green notebook and the African divers recovered it) and the history of his autobiography and the various versions have been well researched, eventually culminating in the Price edition of 1987 which restored the original 1790 text rather than the censored 1796 one.[11] However, the textual archive of his text is one that suffers from abbreviated versions, translations based on different versions,

censorship, and carelessness.[12] Even now, there is no complete Dutch translation of the 1790 version. The text surrounding this particular print exists in many versions with deletions of passages more than in other part of the text. Stedman muses about the fate of the people being sold and about the transatlantic slave trade, contradicting himself frequently and clearly affected by the scene which he decides to paint. This is how he describes the scene in the 1790 edition:

> "I stopt the Carriage at the Waters Side, to behold a groop of human beings, who had deservedly attracted my particular attention, and which groop I shall Circumstantially endeavour to describe—
>
> They were a drove of newly imported Negroe's Men, and Women, with a few Children, who had just landed from on board a Guinea-Man that lay at Anchor in the roads to be sold for Slaves to the best bidder in the Colony, and were such a set of living automatons, such a resurrection of Skin and bones, as justly put me in mind of the last trumpet; seeming that moment to be rose from the grave, or deserted from the Surgeons Hall at the old Bailey—and of which no better description can be given than by comparing them to walking Skeletons covered over with a piece of tand-leather.[13] (chapter 9, 166)

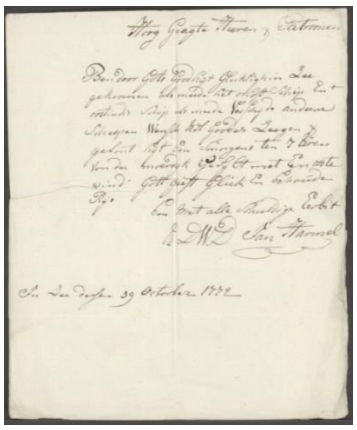
He then goes on the cite Ezekiel 37: 2-3 "And he said unto me Son of Man can these bones live?' In Ezekiel the bones will become an army and enact vengeance, suggesting that they might in fact join the Maroons eventually. A recovering Captain Stedman (he now suffers from two 'enormous boils' on his left thigh, one of many ailments during his four years in Suriname) is part of the force fighting the rebellious Maroons and he recognizes in this scene some of the future resistance fighters and the origins for vengeance, it seems.

> Before these wretches/who might be in all about 60 in number/-walked a Sailor, and another followed behind, with a bamboo rattan; the one serving as a Shepherd to lead them along, and the other as his Dog to bite them occasionally should any one lay behind, or wander away from the blisted flock; while at the same time equity claims of me to acknowledge, that in place of all those horrid and dejected Countenances that are with so much industry described in Pamphlets and Newspapers, I perceived not one Single down-cast look amongst them all, and the bite of the bamboo was inflicted with the utmost moderation by the Sailor who nine times out of ten exchanged it to a bark or a Grin—Having view'd this sad Cluster of my fellow Creatures with amasement, I drove home to me lodgings with no less Humiliation—where I noted down what I could learn from the best Authority, both white and black, what is really the fate of these people, from the last moment of theyr liberty in Africa, to theyr present period of their Slavery in America, and which I shall endeavour to relate, together with a few of my own unbiased Sentiments upon the Slave trade. (168)

This is the full description of the 1790 text. The scene leads him to contemplate the slave trade, noting the various tribes and countries from Africa they'd been taken from. As we can also see in the drawing, not a single head was down and he recognizes his 'fellow creatures.' In the print itself, we also note different hairstyles, coral ornaments, facial expressions, and people dressed in the leftover 'gargizoen' of the cotton they were traded for. There's much more to be said about text versus image and Stedman's musings and omitted passages in various editions but that goes beyond the remits of this article. For now, I wish to focus on the people's journey, history and specifics beyond the Stedman text.

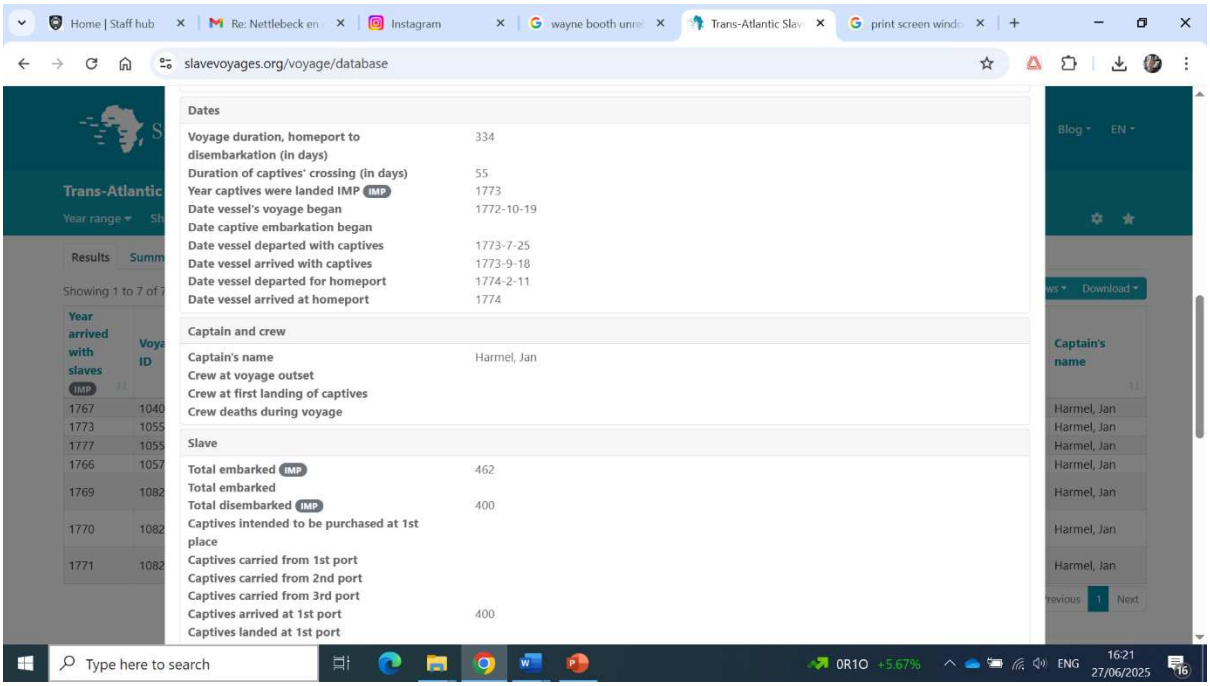
There's a slave ship in the background. With Stedman's approximate dating of the chapter is it possible to identify the vessel and the journey? What ships were in port around September to October 1773? On slavevoyages.org there were a few candidates, and after filtering

through results, contemporary newspapers articles and other records, it seems most likely to be the *Vrouwe Elisabeth*, captained by Jan Harmel. Owned by Coopstad and Rochussen, The *Vrouwe Elisabeth* left Moerdijk Oct 10, 1772, Harmel thanking his bosses in a letter.[14]

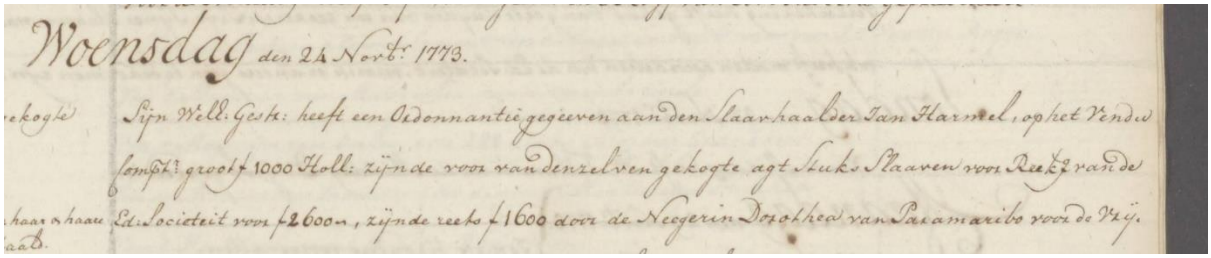


> Dear Sirs and Patrons, By God's goodness I fortunately came to sea alongside some other ships. Sailed from the Moerdijk at seven o'clock in the morning with an easterly wind. God grants happiness and a safe journey. With all respect, Jan Harmel.(dated 19 October, 1772).

When we look at the data on slavevoyages.org, we see the cold numbers and figures of the journey:



Embarked Africans, 462, disembarked, 400. It arrived in Suriname 18 September 1773. And the clincher for identification was when 'slaafhaalder' (slave-getter) Harmel appears with a sale in the Archive of the Society of Suriname on November 24, 1773.[15]


Woensdag den 24 Novbr 1773.

Zijn Well. Geste: heeft een Ordonnantie gegeeven aan den Slaavhaalder Jan Harmel, op het Vendu
somptr groot f 1000 Holl: zijnde voor vandenzelven gekogte agt Stuks Slaaven voor Riekje van de
Ed. Societeit voor f2600 -, zijnde reets f1600 door de Negerin Dorothea van Paramaribo voor de Hrs.

Zijn Well Geste: heeft een ordonantie uitgegeven aan de slaafhaalder Jan Harmel op het vendet som groot f1000 Holland: zijn de voor vandenzelfde gekochte agent stuks slaven voor Riekje van de ed. Societeit van f2600

Trans: has issued an ordinance to the slave collector Jan Harmel on the sale of the sum of f1000 Holland: the slaves purchased from the same agent are for Riekje of the ed. Societeit of f2600

From these documents, it's almost certain that the group of Africans were on board this journey. The cold figures tell only so much of the story; it is possible to research captain Jan Harmel more. He appears to be a particularly 'successful' captain for C&R, with no less than seven separate journeys between 1765 and 1777. For the C&R, we can also see that he was well acquainted with governor of Elmina, Jan Woortman; his children were baptised in the Lutheran church and there are some more intriguing details.[16] In the end, if we add all the captured Africans on the journey, Captain Harmel transported the horrific figure of 2691 people.

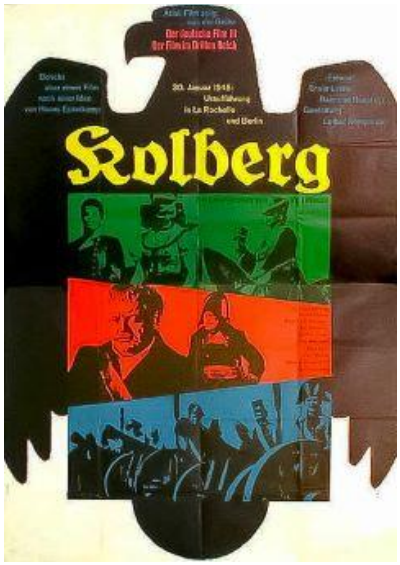
The figures from the archives, as Hartman argued, abound in silences, economic facts, and untold horror. The group of Africans survived the journey on de *Vrouwe Elizabeth*, and held their heads high, maintaining a humanity that moves Stedman. Stedman's autobiographical archive remains a puzzle. While he paints this iconic scene of the transatlantic slave trade, he also produces iconic images of Surinamese resistance of the maroons and shows a deep affinity with Maroon leader Boni.[17] Most readers highlight Stedman's romance with the enslaved Joanne and the spin offs of the *Narrative* recreate this supposed love story. But the images of fighters and his stories of Boni's military strategies have been tremendously important in producing a Suriname history from the perspective of the enslaved. The iconic image of the maroon is another Stedman print, used for the 2022 Exposition in the Black Archives in Amsterdam:[18]

Important stories of resistance, first narrated in Stedman's *Narrative*, feature in Anton de Kom's seminal *We Slaves of Suriname*, and have been re-told again and again. Fogleman and Hansed have also included five Africans from Stedman's autobiographies as African stories.[19] Stedman presents these stories in 'their own voices' offset in quotation marks—but, as I have remarked elsewhere, still in translated English.[20] The pictures, however, have not had the same critical scrutiny. I'd like to think of the images of the "Group of Enslaved Africans" and "A Rebel armed & on his guard" (chapter 20, 391; the image from the Black Archives Exposition) as working in juxtaposition, demonstrating the deeply conflicted autobiographical rendition of Suriname, countering the figures of traditional archive. We will return to the print and its accompanying text later.

Joachim Nettelbeck, *Ein Mann*

On researching the *Vrouwe Elisabeth*, the story took on another unexpected turn. The journey also features in Joachim Nettelbeck's *Ein Mann* as part of his confession of participating in

the slave trade. Nettelbeck's autobiography is an account of his life at sea and also as a defender of Kolberg against the Napoleonic forces of 1807. In fact, there's still a statue of him there, and Nettelbeck was the hero of a Goebbels1945 Nazi propaganda film celebrating his defence of Kolberg.



His legacy throughout Germany was and is profound; according to Linz and Lerner no less than thirty public spaces were named after him, continued in Berlin until very recently (March 2025) with the Nettelbeckplaz and in Kolberg with a statue, depicting the 1807 defence.[21]

Nettelbeckplaz, Berlin (March 2025, Martha-Ndumbe-Platz)[22]

Kolberg, Nettelbeck Statue[23]

As den Heijer illustrates, Nettelbeck was on the *Vrouwe Elisabeth*, captained by Jan Harmel which left port October 1772.[24] When Nettelbeck is writing his autobiography he is 82 years old and confuses dates and names and it's a true puzzle trying to match his journeys and events with those in archival databases.[25] But there are numerous events from this journey which map on to the vessel and dates, including several visits to Governor Woortman. In their insightful article on Nettelbeck's legacy, Sarah Lenz and Urs Linder also confirm the dates, relying on the transatlanticvoyages database and German archival sources.[26] Some of the main characters here, Nettelbeck, Harmel and Woortman not only share their 'Pommeren' roots, but also their church affiliation, Lutheran. In Suriname, the Lutheran church was built by the Knöffel brothers and Nettelbeck knows them well, even sending their niece to Suriname to better her life; the impressive church burned down in 1832 (a new one was built in 1834 which still stands on the Waterkant—near the place where the Africans in the Stedman print were paraded). This German church slavery network, spanning Germany, the Netherlands, and Suriname warrants more research and complicates national slavery narratives.[27]

Lutherse Kerk, Waterkant, Parimaribo (Schets van architect J.A. Voigt).[28]

How does Nettelbeck's autobiography fit into the slavery archive? As a narrative text, it is unique, especially in the Dutch archive.[29] Den Heijer asks,

> Oddly enough, Joachim Nettelbeck is the only sailor who published his experiences aboard a Dutch slave ship. Why didn't more captains, helmsmen or ordinary crew members share their memories with the public? Did they find life aboard slave ships so normal that it didn't occur to them to publish about it?[30] (3)

The typical archive consists of Captains' logs, bookkeeping, company records, and maybe letters. In *500*, there are no accounts of African voices on board Dutch Middle Passage vessels. In *Ein Mann*, Nettelbeck's object is to share his life story and to narrate his innumerable adventures, with himself featuring as the hero in almost all the stories. In 1928, Staal already offers a useful, if fairly uncritical, summary of the book's detailed description of slavery.[31] A significant section of the text details his travels on board Dutch slavery ships, accounts of the operation of slavery on the Gold Coast, and his stays in Suriname. His eyewitness account there in 1758 on the plantation Maastroom certainly raises some eyebrows in terms of reliability, as he describes 400 enslaved crying and hugging their master Polack as he says his goodbyes. His most extended story is the one on board the *Vrouwe Elizabeth* as a first officer, captained by Jan Harmel—exactly the one visible in Stedman's print. He describes the journey from the moment of departure to the months along the Gold Coast and the manner of transactions, what happens on board, what occurs along the coast, the interactions with competing vessels from other nations, negotiations with Africans, the rule of law conducted from Elmina, the excruciating daily schedule during the Middle Passage, and the arrival at port and the sale of the enslaved. Rather than re-telling Nettelbeck's logistics (they are immensely important and useful in the archive), I want to focus more on Nettelbeck's first person-narrative and his manner of telling. By focusing on some of the interactions with the Africans and enslaved, we can note, for example, that rather

than the ‘hero’ of his own narrative, Nettelbeck unwittingly acknowledges the skill, resistance, and power of the Africans. It is also intriguing to imagine that these interactions occur with some of the very people portrayed by Stedman in his print.

First of all, Nettelbeck is a rather unapologetic apologist for his participation in the slave trade. Written from 1821-3, Nettelbeck professes to be pleased that the trade has been banned, but he defends his participation as part of the times with ‘good profits,’ and the cruelty and horrors associated with the slave trade were part of the harsh profession of seamen anyway. And, he hastens to add, “I have never advised or helped anyone to do so” (116).[32] He also highlights that he describes a Dutch practice, how this ‘trade’ ‘was carried out by the Dutch” (117).[33] Lentz and Lindner, however, have found that Nettelbeck tried to persuade no less than three Prussian elites, Frederick the Great for Prussia, his successor Frederick Wilhelm II, and finally, his friend the great military reformer August Neidhardt von Gneisenau even in 1815 to acquire supposedly unclaimed land around the river Corantijn for slavery.[34] They all rejected the proposal. It’s clear that he remained an active figure in the slave trade after supposedly denouncing it. The autobiography itself collates three volumes, parts I and II published in 1821 and a final volume in 1823.[35]

In *Ein Mann*, he gives an eerie description of the entire process of the journey, from the nervous moments of being captured themselves by the Ottoman empire as they sail around Morocco, the lucrative find of an abandoned French ship, the arrival along the Gold Coast, and the extended confused stay there. The ship stays a safe distance away from the coastline while smaller vessels negotiate with local traders, tribal leaders, gangs, always in danger of themselves being captured or shot. As first officer, Nettelbeck captains the smaller vessel (Schaluppe; sloep) and we witness his actions and decisions. Rather than the all-powerful Western force unleashing itself on the African coast, Nettelbeck and his crew are constantly in danger and afraid of everything around them. The main motive for action is always profit,

including finding gold. During the three weeks, he manages to disrupt a Portuguese tobacco racket, discovers Woortman is a fellow 'Pommer' from Groningen who left for Africa after his Dutch wife cheated on him, witnesses a court session at the Governor's mansion in Elmina, and speaks to other Dutch captains and their struggles.[36] In everything, he reads himself as the hero in these tales, always at the centre of the action. When he encounters a stranded English vessel, captured by Africans, he plots to recapture it and claim the ship and its profit. To scare the Africans occupiers, he fills a gun with gunpowder and shoots to create noise and confusion. It works. The Africans dive from the ship and escape, leaving it ready to be claimed. However, the gunpowder has backfired and Nettelbeck's own vessel has a massive hole, sinks, and the crew needs to be rescued. Rather than outwitting the pirate Africans, Nettelbeck has lost not only the ship but managed to destroy a valuable vessel and its contents. So much for the hero of his tale. Harmel, drunk according to Nettelbeck, "wanted to stab me to death, shoot me to death"[37] (141) and Nettelbeck faces disciplinary actioned, chaired by Woortman.

His interaction with the African inhabitants is characterized by some level of sympathy and acknowledgment of local knowledge but mostly by profound racism. What is striking in these interactions is that he immediately classifies what he doesn't understand as "Apes and Clowns"[38]—animalistic and performative. Here's a portrait of 'King Sorgo' and his 'Aufzug':

> He was wearing old, torn, linen breeches and a sleeveless white cotton vest; his even greater affront, however, was the red and white makeup with which he had horribly painted his face and hands. With this fool and his subjects, we agreed on the price for filling the water and kept us busy the next day. (128)[39]

He describes particularities but doesn't understand the signs of culture, and instead becomes a clown in his own narrative. The King, however, has signs of power and wealth Nettelbeck

can't read—the paints, clothing, and his position in the negotiation make it clear who is in charge here. It's the same when he encounters the local slave traders—they are always situations of extreme danger, emotion and horror, and unclear whether the traders are actually from the coastline themselves. Every situation needs to be interpreted but with a 'trade' and price at the end.

The coastline narrative revolves around the acquisition of enslaved Africans, who are delivered to them as criminals; when the captives have been branded, re-dressed in the cotton on board, chained, fumigated (the doctor is the first point of inspection and handling) and are being seen now as almost different people than when they captured and traded for them. As I've indicated before, these narratives of the Dutch Middle Passage are rare in the archive.

It could be months from the moment of capture to the actual departure for Suriname—as Nettelbeck's stories demonstrate. The routine on board before the actual Middle Passage already duplicates that on the journey itself with total separation of gender, airing, eating, and being crammed below deck. Nettelbeck's descriptions waver between sympathetic and rather matter of fact statements, omitting facts we know from various other sources, about stench, sexual abuse, suicide, and rebellion. His manner of telling, however, once again complicates his narrative of relative order. His description of women on board, unwittingly, reveals much about sexual abuse, cultural identity, Nettelbeck's own participation, and rebellion. In the Stedman print, we see pregnant women and women with young children. In the case of the *Vrouwe Elisabeth*, the ship departed the Gold Coast July 7, 1773, and arrived in Suriname the 18th of September 1773. It departed Moerdijk October 19, 1772; its stay along the Gold Coast must have been almost 6 months (allowing for two months from Moerdijk to the Gold Coast). Clearly, pregnant women and women with young children must have been among the captives, but pregnancies must have started on board.

Nettelbeck describes, what he calls, a privileged group of young handsome women, the 'Hofdamen' (ladies of the court). As 'reward' for their company, the women receive presents they gather and hold on to in a bundle. Presents, Nettelbeck once again reverts to his animalistic racism, "with which they dress up the apes" (150)[40]: cotton, corral, bands--all part of the "Cargazoen" (the trade items) on board. They are then 'paraded' around the men. He also reveals that when they enter on board, they have nothing and are naked. The new ship society 'civilizes' these men and women by giving them clothes and status, according to the author. But something baffles Nettelbeck: in the weeks and months that they are on board, the women gather 'stuff':

> which they carry around with them under their arms. As one can easily imagine, however, this entire wealth consists of nothing but all sorts of trifles they have accidentally found on the deck and picked up—broken pipe stems, scraps of inscribed and printed paper, colourful patches of cloth, bits of broomstick, and similar trinkets. For this purpose, they ask the sailors for the tail of a shirt or other worn-out item of clothing in which to bundle their treasure.[41] (150)

And there's a twist to these individual treasures. Nettelbeck describes an odd kind of ritual, where he once again resorts to his racist interpretations to make sense of it all.

> But all too often their greed is not satisfied with what fortune throws their way; instead, they steal from one another, and then one complaint after another arises, as if they had lost all the treasures of the world. The helmsman on watch then performs the strict office of judge, conducting investigations, during which everyone must show and rummage through their bundles, and during which it is often difficult enough for his gravity to refrain from laughing, and finally, he delivers a few gentle lashes to the

> caught thief. So it goes today, tomorrow, and every other day during the journey; just as if one were dealing with nothing but monkeys and fools.[42] (151)

Their bundle is tied up in a piece of men's clothing. It's their 'treasure,' he says. According to Nettelbeck, the women then steal from each other, and the officers conduct a trial to find the thief and bring back the peace. This happens day after day during the Middle Passage, as if, Nettelbeck concludes, "as if you were dealing with a bunch of monkeys and fools" (151).[43] No doubt, Nettelbeck was one of the officers in question and he cannot acknowledge the women as individual human beings. There's no description of the horror. Instead, it seems Nettelbeck remembers his time on board with his Hofdamen most fondly. The white capturers are the animalistic, the feared cannibals, and ghosts; Nettelbeck reads the culture on board in obscene high court language, revealing himself as the animalistic barbarian. He cannot read the signs of horror and desperation and imagine the women as human beings because that would make him complicit. Instead, all his own obsessions with material wealth (he brags frequently) are projected onto the women and their 'treasures.' It is also utterly bizarre to read the commotion and distress on board in the terms of a royal court. Nettelbeck always ignores the pointed cannons on board and the threat of rebellion. Any unrest on board and especially such 'daily' behaviour points to some kind of communication among the women and desperate attempts to communicate messages, reminiscent of Herman Melville's classic "Benito Cereno" (1856). Captain Delano, in that short story, cannot read the signs of the captured slave vessel and instead sees the action on board as an example of classic race relations.

Nettelbeck is an unreliable narrator but how to find other voices? It's necessary to go outside of the text and find more confessional autobiographies, if possible. Of course, the secret communication between women is speculation, but more likely when we compare it with other eyewitness accounts. Of all of Harmel's journeys, de *Vrouwe Elisabeth* had the highest

deathrate amongst the captives, 62 of the 460. What happened? Was this as 'peaceful' a journey as Nettelbeck suggests? No rebellion is mentioned in any of Harmel's journeys on slavevoyages.org, making it the exception; I also find this record highly suspicious and most likely he didn't report rebellions to keep his 'perfect record.'[44] When we compare this journey to another eyewitness account, we see similar logistics but vastly different interpretations and reporting. John Newton's *Thoughts on the Slave Trade* (1788) cites rebellions on every journey he captained (as confirmed on slavevoyages.org). Better known as the writer of "Amazing Grace" (1772), John Newton was a slave Captain until his conversion and became an important abolitionist. John Coffey convincingly suggests he also authored the abolitionist pamphlet *Relation* (1762), identifying himself as an eyewitness to the slave-trade.[45] His confession and arguments against the slave trade take us through similar moments as Nettelbeck but with vastly different conclusions. Newton offers his text, written at the height of transatlantic slavery, as an atonement for participation in "that Wicked Traffic"; let's not forget that he was an active participant, captaining three voyages.[46] Mostly writing as a non-diegetic narrator, observing rather than participating directly, he argues that involvement in the slave trade changes humanity, African wars are instigated by the Europeans, and tribal African life very far removed from that portrayed by the enslavers. Who are the civilized and who are the barbarians; who are the 'Narren' und 'Affen'? Compare this paragraph of what happened to the women on board to that of Nettelbeck:

> [P]erhaps no part of the distress affects a feeling mind more, than the treatment to which the women are exposed. But the enormities frequently committed, in an African ship, though equally flagrant, are little known *here*, and are considered, *there*, only as matters of course. When the Women and Girls are taken on board a ship, naked, trembling, terrified, perhaps almost exhausted with cold, fatigue, and hunger, they are often exposed to the wanton rudeness of white Savages. The poor creatures cannot

> understand the language they hear, but the looks and manner of the speakers, are sufficiently intelligible. In imagination, the prey is divided, upon the spot, and only reserved till opportunity offers. Where resistance, or refusal, would be utterly in vain, even the solicitation of consent is seldom thought of. But I forbear.—This is not a subject for declamation. Facts like these, so certain, and so numerous, speak for themselves. (21)[47]

He explicitly refers to the slavers as 'white Savages,' implied in Nettelbeck's tales of horror. Instead of the women as ladies of the court, they are utterly subjected and stripped of all humanity. They become prey to the animals. Newton's argument about how slavery changes humanity is especially relevant to the slavers who become beasts and lose all sense of civilization. Newton's time-gap between his captaincy and writing is far closer than that of Nettelbeck; the slave trade flourishes still in the 1780s and his text is meant to stir the abolitionist cause, actively assisting proceedings in parliament to outlaw the transatlantic slave trade. Reading Newton to counter Nettelbeck—describing as it were the same event on board the ship—we can both have archival knowledge on board and counters to a singular unreliable autobiographical voice.

Those counters become even more complex by comparing them with the description of the Middle Passage in the slave narrative of Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African. Written by Himself* (1789).[48] Equiano's narrative details his life in Africa, his kidnapping by other African kingdoms, travelling the Middle Passage to Barbados, and eventually (this is very quick short-hand) becoming a free man, living in London. The first-person narrative, from the previously enslaved African takes on revolutionary meaning; the first-person writer is the ultimate evidence of a civilized intelligent human, contradicting pro-slavery ideologies on many levels.

To contrast even what's at stake in producing an autobiography reveals the world of difference. First-person slave narratives were always questioned in terms of true authorship, and they would need 'white authentication' to be believed.[49] None of that of course happens in the case of Nettelbeck (no matter how unreliable) or Newton's confessional autobiography. Equiano's written text also needs to take account of its readership (an abolitionist English audience) and make sure the message towards them does not implicate them. It explains the curious admiration for English culture at the end of the book, contrasting the actual events in the book. The difference between the diegetic narrator of the action as it occurs (as in the events of the Middle Passage) juxtapose those of the non-diegetic narrator, especially in the final chapters. Similar to Newton's text, his book has an active political cause: abolish the slavery trade. His life story demonstrates that the Africans are civilized human beings and that to enslave them in the manner of the slave trade transforms grand English culture into one of complicity; instead of a noble Christian example to the world, they are the barbarians. As Samual Taylor Coleridge puts it:

> To this grievous failing we must attribute the frequency of wars, and the continuance of the slave-trade. The merchant finds no argument against it in his ledger: the citizen at the crowded feast is not nauseated by the stench and filth of the slave vessel—the fine lady's nerves are not shattered by the shrieks! She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werter or Clementina. Sensibility is not Benevolence.[50]

Coleridge transforms the ladies of sensibility into vampires. For Equiano, the slavers are the 'bad spirits': "Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke." They are uncouth creatures from another world, "those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair" (55). He writes of them as "savages" capable of "brutal cruelty" (56). One of the things that strikes him as well is that there only men on

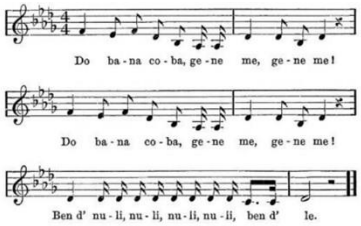
board, and when he is told they left their women behind, he's astonished. He does not describe the sexual abuse on board but this subtle reference to the exclusively white male crew and women left at home hints at the conditions for abuse. Once again, in this narrative the Nettelbeck narrative of Western civilization versus African barbarianism is overturned, with the whites here as evil spirits, or what Newton calls 'the Savages,' and the Africans desperately clinging on to their cultural values and lives.

These autobiographical encounters provide a complex reading of the events, the logistics, and highlights the narrators' role in the descriptions. We can read Nettelbeck's 'critical fabulation' alongside others to note the operations, what's missing, his fabulations of the Hofdamen, and his own role. What makes the Nettelbeck reading stand out in comparison to Newton is that the women on board speak back, even if Nettelbeck cannot and does not want to understand their language or behaviour.

What the collection of *500* does so well is to present so many African individual stories rather than the grouping together of 'enslaved' and characterizing them with their own biases and narrative power. As listed in *500*, Molly's life story, by contrast, is one of survival and constant reinvention rather than one of submission. Her story ends in Suriname, as she relates her life, beginning with her capture and subsequent enslavement by the Danish, how she is baptized Moravian, sold again and taken St. Eustachius, then uprooted again to Antigua only to be taken aboard a Dutch slave vessel without her husband and starting live yet again in Paramaribo. She relates her story to the Moravian missionary, and it's recorded in the Church annals. [51] Or the story of the 'unnamed nursing woman' (147) near Bunce Island in the Sierra Leone River. A British official sees a young woman on board and asks her why she's crying. She points to the milk spilling from her breasts and reveals that her baby "had been torn from her arms." As a punishment for "being saucy to the queen or head-woman," she had been sold into slavery.[52] Her motherhood has been taken from her in a complex transatlantic slave trade

system. These 'mediated' oral autobiographies provide a different picture of the women who survived the Middle Passage and offer backstories to the women depicted by Nettelbeck and Stedman.

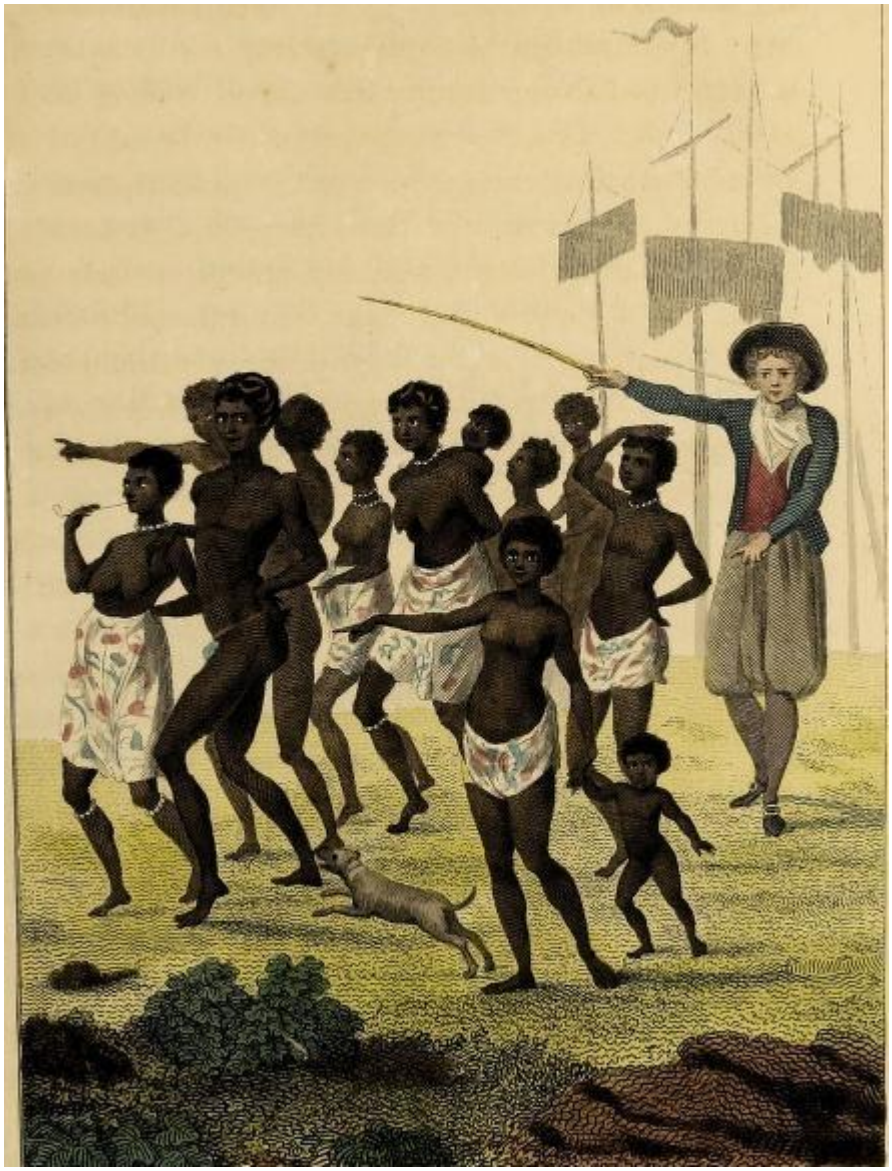
We can delve even further to find voices and traces of the legacy of the Middle Passage. In W.E.B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he writes in the chapter "Sorrow Songs" the story of his ancestral grandmother:

> My grandfather's grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago; and coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees, thus:
>
> 
>
>
> The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music.
>
> This was primitive African music [….]—the voice of exile.[53]

The legacy of the "evil Dutch trader" can still be heard in Du Bois' family and beyond. The African ancestor's voice, the "little black Bantu woman" he calls her elsewhere, survives in a melody, "a voice of exile."[54] The meaning of the words remains unidentified but the 'meaning of the music' feeds the entire text of Souls, with each chapter prefaced by musical bars. He calls the Sorrow Songs, "the articulate message of the slave to the world" (156) and

tellingly notes that “Mother and child are sung, but seldom father” (160). The power of the melody and its untranslatable words have led to much critical speculation.[55] To further Du Bois’ Dutch legacy, his ancestor’s husband was Tom Burghardt, deriving his name from his Dutch master Coenraad Burghardt and by fighting against the British, he earned his freedom. These African voices embedded within African American autobiographies and others are, as of yet, beyond the databases of *500*. I’d like to imagine Jan Harmel as “the evil Dutch trader,” who paraded his captured Africans along the Waterkant in Paramaribo. In spite of Nettelbeck’s overbearing narrative, the captured Africans have made their voices heard and exposed their evil.

In light of the shifting emphasis on the African voices in white authored texts, I’d like to re-examine the print of the captured Africans. We notice corral bracelets and various objects, hairstyles, one captive even smokes a Dutch tabaco pipe, Nettelbeck’s “trifles.” Maybe individuals look back at the voyeur, reversing power dynamics. Here is the coloured print from the Carter Brown edition (one of the original 1796 copies).[56]



While we never hear from the individuals depicted here, their stories resonate through a complex reading of Nettelbeck's autobiography, Stedman's observations, the cold collated archival data of slavevoyages.org and other archives, Captain Jan Harmel's role and even the sale of some of them, and the Gold Coast zone where so much of action unfolds. By investigating the print as African voices it is possible to see them as proud individuals with their own histories and stories. Stedman's observes their resistance, even in this horrific spectacle; re-reading the text the emphasis shifts to African action:

> I perceived not one Single down-cast look amongst them all, and the bite of the bamboo was inflicted with the utmost moderation by the Sailor who nine times out of ten exchanged it to a bark or a Grin. (168)

As he writes, he sees "not a single down-cast look amongst them all" and the response to inflicted pain is "a bark or a Grin." Stedman's sketch has been in 'real time' (in 1772), unlike the writing. The visual haunting portrait survives and makes us re-examine the "evil Dutch trader" and captured Africans. The print characterizes critical fabulation's methodology of Archive, stories, and imagination to paint a picture. As Hartman puts it verbatim, "labouring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible" (2). The impossibility is still in front of us. We don't have names, histories, or records of all those in the painting nor of those still on board nor of the sixty-two who died on the journey. Perhaps we can observe the sketch with those unanswered questions hovering in the painting's background of Suriname's river mist and listening for silenced melodies of African voices. Obscured in the mist, we can see the realities of Surinamese transatlantic slavery, Coopstad and Rochussen's the *Vrouwe Elisabeth* with her masts and flying the Dutch pennon. In the foreground, the African faces and voices of Suriname.

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[1]A note about the language. Nettelbeck's text is filled with racist language and terminology; Stedman also uses offensive terms. I will abbreviate some terms but will also analyse some of Nettelbeck's animalistic language and leave that as is. Furthermore, I will abbreviate racist

terminology as much as possible; in analysis, I rename the main Stedman print ‘a group of Africans.’

[2] Stedman*, Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Suriname* (New York: John Hopkins UP, 1988).

[3] Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 1-14.

[4] The emphasis on ‘fabula’ in history research echoes Hayden White’s ‘narrativizing history.’ White, *The Fiction of Narrative*.

[5] Joachim Nettelbeck, *Ein Mann*.

[6]Connolly and Fuentes, “Introduction: From Archives of Slavery to Liberated Futures," 107.

[7] Fogleman and Hanserd. *Five Hundred African Voices*Hereafter referred to as *500*.

[8] ‘ungeheurer Körperkraft der N—r’

[9] ‘Merkwürdig ist gleichwohl die Versicherung der N—r, die auch Augenschein bestätigt wird, dass keinen Ihresgleichen vor dieser Haien etwas zu fürchten habe‘

[10] Fatah-Black and de Koning*, 18-19.*

[11]Richard and Sally Price, “Introduction,” *Narrative*, p. xxvii. See also van Gelder, *Dichter in de Jungle* Van Gelder writes a spell-bounding account of Stedman’s life and adventures.

[12] Carl Haarnack collected innumerable volumes of Stedman’s *Narrative*; it’s truly astonishing to see the plethora of editions, languages, prints in the BUKU library. I am forever grateful to having seen those volumes there on my visit.

[13] I’ve decided to keep Stedman’s original spelling rather than modernize it.

[14] Archief van Coopstad en Rochussen, inv.nr. 55, Rotterdams Stadsarchief. I’m immensely grateful to prof H.J den Heijer for pointing me to these archival pieces in my hunt for the vessel; the same letter is included in van Stipriaan’s *Slavernij in Rotterdam* and Ineke de Groot-Teunissen, “Herman van Coopstad en Isaac Jacobus Rochussen. Letter p. 189.

[15] Archief van de Sociëteit van Suriname, inv.nr. 207. 314 u Nationaal Archief

[16] Nettelbeck spells his name Jan Wortman (most likely as it was originally in Germany); in Groningen, however, and in most texts, he is referred to as Jan Woortman. For more information about the Woortman family, see Everts, N., Vrij, J. J., & Doortmont, M. R. "Tussen de Goudkust, Nederland en Suriname," 177, 170-212, 310-344, 490-577. Jan Harmel communicated quite frequently with Woortman and their children appeared to be friends (Rotterdam Archive, letters).

[17] The latest iteration: Leewsha, *Boni* (2025).

[18] https://www.theblackarchives.nl/geen-heling-zonder-herstel-tentoonstellingscatalogus.html

[19] *500*. Included are: Kwasi, Joanna's grandfather, Man on the Gallows, William, and Quaco.

[20] van Oostrum. "Enslaved Boy."

[21] Lentz and Lindner, "Deconstructing a National Hero," 39-74. 60.

[22] Wiki Commons: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berlin-wedding-nettelbeckplatz2.jpg; On March 7, 2025, the Platz was renamed Martha-Ndumbe-Platz. https://www1.wdr.de/mediathek/audio/cosmo/daily-good-news/audio-berliner-platz-bekommt-neuen-namen-100.html. The name honours the life of a German black woman who died in a Nazi concentration camp rather than the slaver Nettelbeck.

[23] Wiki Commons: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plik:Kolberg_-_Nettelbeck-Gneisenau-Denkmal_%28AK_1910er%29.jpg

[24] den Heijer, "Het slavenschip."

[25] Also see Carl Haarnack, Joachim Nettelbeck, BUKU: Bibliotheca Surinamica. Haarnack aligns some of the places mentioned to the archive.

[26] Lenz and Linder, 42.

[27] The role of the church is being researched, but the Lutheran church is hardly mentioned as an important network. See, for example, de Leede en Stoutjesdijk (eds.), *Kerk, Kolonialisme, en Slavernij*. Michel Doortmont researches 'family business' networks which lead to different

entanglements than national narratives, similar to church networks. Michel Doortmont, "The Dutch Atlantic Slave Trade as Family Business," 92-137.

[28] Het kerkgebouw der Lutherse Gemeente te Paramaribo. (Gravure J.A. Voigt). Bestand:Tropenmuseum Royal Tropical Institute Objectnumber 3581-33q.

[29] According to van Stipriaan, Nettelbeck's autobiography is the only eyewitness account of a journey from C&R. *Rotterdam in Slavernij*,157; den Heijer asserts the same, 3.

[30] Merkwaardig genoeg is Joachim Nettelbeck de enige zeeman die zijn belevenissen aan boord van een Nederlands slavenschip heeft gepubliceerd. Waarom hebben niet meer kapiteins, stuurlieden of gewone bemanningsleden hun herinneringen met het publiek gedeeld? Vonden zij het leven aan boord van slavenschepen zo normaal dat het niet in hen opkwam om daarover te publiceren?

[31] Staal. "Uit den Slaventijd," 168-173.

[32] "auch habe ich meinesteils nie dazu geraten oder geholfen"

[33] „von den Holländer betrieben würde"

[34] Lentz and Linder, 43.

[35] Lentz and Linder, 66.

[36] See Everts, N., Vrij, J. J., & Doortmont, M. R.

[37]"wollte mich totstechen, totschiessen"

[38] "Affen und Narren"

[39] „Er war naemlich mit einer alten, zerrisenen, linnenen Pumphose und einer weissen Kattunweste ohne Aermel bekleidet, sein noch groeseren Schmuch aber bestand in einer roten und weissen Schminke, womit er sich Gescicht under Haende scheusslich bemalt hatte. Mit diesem Narren nun end seinen Untertanen wurden Preises fuer das Wasserfuellen einig und hielten uns auch des naechten Tages wacker zu underer Arbeit"

[40]'womit sie die Affen ausputzen'

[41] welches sie überall unterm Arm mit sich umherschleppen. Wie man sich indes leicht denken kann, besteht dieser ganze Reichtum in nichts als allerlei Lappalien, die sie zufällig auf dem Verdecke gefunden und aufgehoben haben – abgebrochenen Pfeifenstengeln, beschriebenen und bedruckten Papierschnitzeln, bunten Zeugflecken, Stückchen Besenreis und dergleichen Schnurrpfeifereien. Hierzu erbitten sie sich nun von den Schiffsleuten den Zipfel eines Hemdes oder sonst eines abgetragenen Kleidungsstückes, um ihren Schatz hineinzubündeln.

[42] Aber nur zu oft begnügt sich ihre Begehrlichkeit nicht an dem, was ihnen das Glück auf diesem Wege zuwirft, sondern sie bestehlen sich untereinander und da entsteht denn Klage über Klage, als wären ihnen alle Kleinodien der Welt abhanden gekommen. Der wachhabende Steuermann verwaltet sodann das strenge Richteramt, veranstaltet Untersuchungen, wobei jeder sein Bündel vorweisen und auskramen muß und wobei es seiner Gravität oft schwer genug wird, sich des Lachens zu enthalten, und verfügt endlich über den ertappten Dieb einige gelinde Peitschenhiebe. So geht es heute, so morgen und so alle übrigen Tage während der Dauer der Reise; nicht anders, als ob man mit lauter Affen und Narren zu tun hätte.

[43] "als ob man mit lauter Affen und Narren zu tun haette"

[44] For a summary of the findings and potential for research, see Fogleman, "African Voices. An important finding in *500* is that rebellions and plots happened for more frequently than reported in the official documents. 9

[45] Coffey: "John Newton, Anthony Benezet, and the Confession of a Liverpool Slave Trader," 181-201.

[46] Slavevoyages.org. Journeys in 1751, 1753, 1754. All three voyages had 'slave insurrections' according to the data.

[47] Newton, "Thoughts upon the African slave trade", 21.

[48] Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative*.

[49] See for example the most famous slave narrative from Frederick Douglass, *Narrative* (1845) and the extended list of white signees to testify that these were indeed the poems of Phillis Wheatley, *Poems* (1771).

[50] Coleridge, "On the Slave Trade," 131-140. 139.

[51] Entry Nr. 131 *Molly*, *500*.

[52] Entry Nr. 147 Unnamed nursing woman, *500.*

[53] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 157.

[54] For more on Du Bois' family, ancestors, and life, see the Pulitzer Prize winning, Lewis, *W. Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, 13-15.

[55] Wall, "Resounding Souls," 225.

[56] Stedman, *Narrative* (1796). John Carter Library. Full digitized record: https://archive.org/details/narrativeoffivey01sted_0/page/n7/mode/2up

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