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Editorial

Republic at 50. A Surinamese Poetics of Enduring Relation

Fifty years ago, on 25 November 1975, Suriname gained its independence from the Netherlands, marking the end of a colonial relationship that, with the exception of two short periods of British rule, spanned over three hundred years. While the colonial legacy and the ties to the former coloniser endure—the largest Caribbean community in Europe are Dutch of Surinamese heritage living in the Netherlands—this represents only one part of the story; Suriname's distinct cultural fabric is woven from a multitude of traditions. In this special issue of *Dutch Crossing* we mark this fifty year milestone by reading the complex and dynamic history of Suriname as a network of cultural relations that extends beyond its ties with the Netherlands.

We've included contributions from academics, authors and translators to piece together a narrative of Suriname that resists easy categorisation. By presenting different voices and approaches we want to explore new ways of telling and connecting, reaching across national borders, languages, disciplines. The result is an invitation to look for ways of opening up academic practice to other traditions, languages, and networks to do justice to the story of Suriname in all its layeredness and richness. The contributions in this issue appear roughly in chronological order with history and the present always in some form of communication with each other.

Karin Amatmoekrim (Amsterdam) delves into an Amerindian focus, investigating the deep, pre-colonial history of the land through its ecology and oral traditions. Her autobiographically involved approach, a blend of scholarly rigour and creative expression, aims to capture a perspective largely lost to time, where the language of the people and the land itself are one.

Helen Wilcox (Bangor) turns her attention to the 17th-century English writer Aphra Behn and her Surinamese novel *Oroonoko*. Wilcox' analysis of Behn's work, often considered the 'first' literary account of slavery by a female author, explores the complex interplay of ethnicities, ecology, and slavery as depicted by Behn, scrutinising the reliability of her eyewitness account. *Oroonoko* is set during the transition from English colonial rule to Dutch, with pointed commentary about the difference. Wilcox focuses on the anti-slavery speeches of figures like Oroonoko, exposing the underlying cruelty and the insidious nature

of Western politics and colonial power, demonstrating how even a foundational text can be read against its grain.

Duco van Oostrum (Sheffield) expands the scope by focusing on archives and the crucial, yet often suppressed, African voices. He uses an international network to sift through archival material, focusing on autobiographical eyewitness accounts such as Joachim Nettelbeck's *Ein Mann*. The narrative accounts complement visual records from figures like John Gabriel Stedman, which feature prominently in his essays. Van Oostrum grapples with the unreliability of these eyewitness accounts, challenging the very notion of what is considered authentic and reliable. He seeks out counter-voices, arguing that a literary model of unreliability is essential to understanding the narratives of the enslaved, whose identity and culture did not begin with their enslavement. His contribution highlights the importance of the visual archive as a tool for agency, allowing a powerful 'looking back' at history.

The focus shifts to poetic resistance when Marrigje Paijmans (Amsterdam) explores Dutch plantation poetry and its relationship to African voices. Her research zooms in on the ecological aspects—the marshes, water, and unique landscape—that served as a backdrop for African adaptation and resistance. Paijmans reveals how poetry, even when written by Dutch colonialists, can contain embedded, subtle forms of resistance, a testament to the resilience and agency of the enslaved.

The final contribution brings us to the present day and brings many threads together, connecting the themes of archive, oral culture, resistance, and agency across generations, reminding us that the past is a continuous presence in the art of today. Henriette Louwerse (Sheffield) argues that the work of contemporary Surinamese-Dutch author Raoul de Jong challenges the way his work sits within a national literary canon and that Western cultural frameworks often fail to capture the complexity and 'layeredness' of work that rewrites colonial representations and relations. She draws on the work of Gyanan-British visual artist Hew Locke and his poetics of layering, abundance, even kitsch, as a lens to read De Jong's essay *Boto Banja*, emphasising the power of performance and ritual as a new framework for understanding our past and present.

Finally, we present two excerpts by prominent contemporary Surinamese authors in English translation. Much as we are attached to the Dutch language, we recognise that it can be a hindrance to an international conversation that needs to take place. Tessa Leuwsha (Paramaribo) and Raoul de Jong (Rotterdam/Marseille) use fiction as a form of autobiography, a powerful tool for self-discovery redrawing history. In *Boni*, Leuwsha blends fiction, autobiography, and archival research to 'find' the Surinamese freedom fighter Boni, a

Maroon hero who led a remarkable resistance against colonial cruelty in Suriname, becoming a symbol of defiance and survival. Her work was translated by Megan Strutt (Sheffield).

Raoul de Jong's extract from *Jaguarman* shows a literary and mystical quest to connect with his paternal culture. De Jong evokes the spirit of his ancestors, not as distant figures but as an active, living force. He emphasises the power of naming and depicting to restore agency: he included his own drawings of his heroes in his novel. *Jaguarman* was translated by John Eyck (New York) and will be published in January 2026 with HopeRoad Publishing.

The story of Suriname is “much bigger than the Netherlands or Suriname”, says Raoul de Jong. It is also so much bigger than what we can present in this issue. We are aware that many stories and voices of eye-witnesses, authors, scholars, are missing. We aimed to present the historical and cultural landscape of Suriname as a network with threads in many directions. We welcome your comments and suggestions. Please follow the movements of our UKRI Network Project *Beyond the National Narrative: Translating the Anglo-Dutch colonial legacy in restorative stories, the case of Suriname*.¹ We wish you a good read.

Dr Henriette Louwerse, University of Sheffield

Dr Duco van Oostrum, University of Sheffield

¹ Please check www.sheffield.ac.uk/quaco to learn more about our project.