





YEARBOOK OF WOMEN'S HISTORY /  
JAARBOEK VOOR VROUWENGESCHIEDENIS 39

# GENDERED EMPIRE

Intersectional perspectives on Dutch  
post/colonial narratives



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# Contents

Editorial Board	7
<i>Introduction</i>	
NANCY JOUWE 'A Gendered Empire'	9
<i>The silent archive</i>	
SUZE ZIJLSTRA Free and Enslaved Asian Women in European and Eurasian Households in Eighteenth-Century Makassar	25
MERVE TOSUN Women at Home and Men Outdoors? Locating Enslaved People in Eighteenth-Century Batavia	41
NANCY JOUWE Beyond the <i>Dapur</i> Listening to Papuan Women	57
STEPHANIE WELVAART Cultural Violence in the Making Representations of Indonesian Women in Dutch Testimonies on the Indonesian War of Independence	73
<i>Biographies of 'the other'</i>	
EMMA VAN MEYEREN <i>Whiskey in a Crate</i> An Interview with Glenda Martinus and her Son Quinsy Gario about the 30 May 1969 Uprising on Curaçao	87
SIDRA SHAHID Violent Benevolence Dutch Colonialism and the Burqa Ban	97

CARLA TJON	113
In Godforsaken Places Shenzhen – Hong Kong – Paramaribo – The Hague – Rotterdam A Legacy of Overseas Expansion	
LARA NUBERG	121
‘Then I Guess You Must Love Cooking?’	
GLORIA WEKKER	127
How Families Navigate Empire	
<i>The hidden museum</i>	
CAROLINE DRIËNHUIZEN	133
Of Beauties and Brides Tracing the Representation of Colonized Women through two Museum Objects, 1930-Present	
EVELIEN WALHOUT & JACQUES DANE	157
Picturing the East A Visual Analysis of Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Educational Tools from the Collection of the Dutch National Museum of Education	
EVELINE BUCHHEIM & MARLEEN REICHGELT	189
Hidden in Plain Sight Critical reflections on <i>Een verborgen geschiedenis: anders kijken naar Nederlands-Indië</i> by THOM HOFFMAN	
MARLEEN REICHGELT & LARISSA SCHULTE NORDHOLT	203
Colonial Heritage and Restitution A Round Table Discussion among Museum Professionals, with: WIM MANUHUTU, HENRIETTA LIDCHI & JOS VAN BEURDEN AND REACTIONS BY: PRIYA SWAMY & SADIAH BOONSTRA	
About the Authors and Contributors	227

# Editorial

## *A Gendered Empire: an intersectional perspective on Dutch post/colonial narratives*

*The Yearbook of Women's History* featured the Dutch colonial past twice before. In 1986 under the title 'Women in the Dutch colonies' and in 2007 under the title 'Mixed Feelings: gender, ethnicity, (post)colonialism'. From a contemporary perspective, it is painful and regrettable that on both occasions the articles were written by all-white authors and edited by an all-white editorial board. Likewise, it is now difficult to imagine that the urgency to narrate stories of empire, and to have these stories told from different perspectives, has not been felt more often by the Yearbook. With this issue, we hope to start making up for that shortcoming.

Over the years the focus of the Yearbook has moved from women's history to gender history and has increasingly considered the various intersections between gender and race, as well as sexuality, ability, class and age. But there is more work to be done. For one thing, the entire editorial board currently consists of heterosexual, cisgender, white women. We recognize that our work is a privilege as well as a responsibility: not everyone has the option to spend time editing a yearbook next to other (academic) responsibilities as well as personal and/or physical realities. Although we all have our own ideas and approach when it comes to writing history, and although we are mindful also of our own positions and historical trajectories, there are bound to be blind spots. This issue's contributors have poignantly and acutely captured the exclusion inadvertently caused by a white perspective. They have strengthened our conviction to strive harder for a more diverse editorial board.

We are delighted that Nancy Jouwe agreed to be our guest-editor for this issue of the *Yearbook of Women's History*. Jouwe is a cultural historian who has ample experience working in academia and in the cultural sector. She often challenges people in both fields to rethink their stance towards our shared colonial past and be mindful of its implications in the present. Jouwe has played an important role in questioning the politics of knowledge production in the Netherlands from an intersectional perspective. This shows throughout the publications she has authored and edited, specifically in *Caleidoscopische Visies. De zwarte, migranten, vluchtelingen vrouwenbeweging in Nederland* (2001) and the various Slavery Heritage Guides that have appeared over the past couple of years. In this issue, Jouwe has asked a variety of contributors to reflect upon the ways in which gender, race and colonialism intersected and continue to do so. Some of these contributions deal with the narratives that colonialism produced and produces in the everyday lives of many. The contributors, like Jouwe herself, challenge the politics of knowledge production in the Netherlands.

Over the past year, it has become increasingly apparent that the colonial past of the Dutch empire has not, in fact, passed. This issue of the *Yearbook of Women's History* pays tribute to the voices and analyses that showcase this entanglement. We offer a series of academic articles as well as literary analyses of the way in which the Dutch empire was gendered and how different intersections of identity impacted its history. As this Yearbook appears on the wake of an ongoing series of global protests, we hope to contribute to a continuing conversation that makes sense of the historical context of those protests. Yet, at the same time, we are mindful of academia's tendency to intellectualize and thereby distance itself from the everyday struggles and lived realities that are a result of colonialism. Here again, the politics of knowledge production come into play. Those who are most comfortably positioned are not always those who can speak from a postcolonial perspective, nor are they necessarily the ones who have lived through the afterlives of Empire. Who can criticize the way we write history about our colonial past? This Yearbook aims to connect academic perspectives on colonial history with narratives that offer knowledge beyond academia, and that bridge 'public' and 'academic' debates. We hope that the diversity of contributions will offer food for thought for both our academic peers and new generations of students as well as a broader public.

We would like to express special thanks to our contributors, as well as Saskia Bultman for her English editing and Jane Hedley-Prole for her thoughtful translations.

*Eveline Buchheim, Ernestine Hoegen, Marleen Reichgelt,  
Larissa Schulte Nordholt, Nena Vandeweerd, Evelien Walhout, Heleen Wyffels*



# A Gendered Empire

NANCY JOUWE

When I am at work or during my time of leisure, I often step into a museum, an archive or a bookstore. Being a curious person, I enter these places with anticipation: will a beautiful artwork await me, can I unearth a history stored in paper, which new book titles wink at me? I have versed myself in searching and finding those displays, documents and stories that reflect, contextualize and celebrate my humanity as a woman of colour, a daughter of the postcolonial diaspora. There are times when I'm overcome with feelings of exasperation because I can't find them, but I do it anyway, for this is as an act of survival and maybe even more so, an act of defiance. Women of colour and Black women have been conspicuously absent, both in mainstream history and the dominant history of enslavement and abolition, and way back to the canonical history of the portrait since the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup>

But things are shifting. In fact, 2020 has proven to be a historic year. Which is an odd statement to make since we are only midway as I am writing this. Nonetheless, several public opinionmakers, including in the Netherlands have noted this year as a turning point, a global wake-up call that *Black Lives Matter*.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, an unprecedented number of around 50,000 Dutch people gathered during the month of June in seventeen different cities and towns all over the Netherlands to show their stance against racism. Not just to show solidarity and support in the wake of George Floyd's murder by American police officers in May, but to speak out against the systemic character of racism, which impacts the American justice system as much as it has its local expressions around European countries like the Netherlands.

Statues fell in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the Netherlands, the hashtag #Coenmustfall surfaced on social media, definitions were asked of what institutional racism meant, people of colour were sought out to speak on livecasts and demonstrations were organized, in a disciplined, non-violent, extremely fast and well-organized manner. Starting in the first week of June journalists, programme makers and even random individuals, contacted people of colour, including myself, almost daily to talk about it (or to rant and troll), hoping for some input from us (or a simple response). For many Dutch folks, talking about racism was something new and yet for those of us who had traveled this road for a longer time, it was an old story that only now had come to the surface with a bang. With it, the link between racism and colonialism was now made very clear, by activists, by scholars, by opinionmakers and the media. This was unprecedented for Dutch standards.

The past decade has shown that things had been brewing for a while. There was a growing interest in critical reflections of our Dutch colonial heritage, especially within archives, museums and their collections. Not only did collections and the way they were formed come under scrutiny<sup>3</sup> but also what they conveyed to us. What stories were told, how were they narrated and whose biographies were deemed important or, moreover, central to our collective identity as a nation? These questions were important because they unearthed the Eurocentric, white and often male perspective of museum displays, their collections and archives.

In this process, 2011 proved to be a seminal year. In September, activists and members of Parliament together tackled the Golden Carriage (one side panel, called 'hulde der koloniën' – tribute to the colonies – depicted colonial scenes, included enslaved people) as a colonial remnant that should be banned from public space, as it was used as an annual ritual by the Dutch king and queen to travel to and from opening the political year in September. In the same month, the Dutch state was held accountable in court for atrocities committed in Java in 1947 during the colonial war between the Dutch and Indonesian independence fighters (in both cases, Jeffry Pondaag played a key role). Again, in September, the Dutch TV series called *De Slavernij* (Slavery) ran their first episode, produced by the Dutch leading public broadcasting company. This coincided with a boost in talking and thinking about race and racism in a Dutch context, instigated by artistic and activist interventions against the stereotypical figure Black Pete that became national news in November 2011. Thus, two important yet underrepresented topics: race/racism on the one hand and colonialism and slavery on the other, slowly became the centre of public debate. But in 2011 these topics were still handled separately in the mainstream and rarely thought out together. Due to a continued agenda setting by postcolonial, decolonial and intersectional activists and artists, mostly people of colour, they became entangled again in ways we had not seen since the 1980s. Thus, scholars Philomena Essed and Gloria Wekker spoke of a second wave of anti-racist awareness in the Netherlands.<sup>4</sup>

### *A gendered empire*

This volume, entitled *A Gendered Empire. An Intersectional Perspective on Dutch Post/Colonial Narratives* looks at the current growing Dutch interest in its own colonial legacy from a critical and self-reflexive stance. The authors, several of whom are part of different diaspora communities, bring together historical and current examples in the Dutch metropole and its (former) colonies. Collectively they 1) speak of and counter archival silences, 2) offer biographical counternarratives and 3) reflect on a museum world grappling with its own colonial legacy, all the while wondering: what has gender got to do with it? These three points of departure are used to structure this volume. The authors themselves are scholars, writers, artists and activists who work and move both outside, within and in between academic and arts and heritage institutions. By inviting them we contend that knowledge production takes place in different places and is not the solely the prerogative of academia.

*A Gendered Empire* combines four overarching points, part predilection part ambition: it considers the Dutch colonial empire as one analytical entity, despite the dominant discourse in Dutch colonial historiography that mostly focuses either on the *voc* and the Indian ocean and Indonesian archipelago or on the *wic* including a focus on the Atlantic. In this volume, Carla Tjon for instance shares the story of her kin, the journey of Chinese Hakka men to nineteenth-century Surinam.

Secondly, the contributions put together in this volume collectively show that there's a continuum when we speak of the Dutch colonial project and its afterlives. Sidra Shahid's essay speaks to this as she traces back the lineage of the burqa-ban from present-day debates to Dutch colonialism.

Furthermore, we want to show a connection between colonial history and current race relations as being deeply entangled aspects as for instance the interview with artists Quinsy Gario and Glenda Martinus by Emma van Meyeren as well as my own piece on Papuan women show in this *Yearbook*. This is a topic which is under-researched in the Netherlands up to now.

And lastly, we hope it shows that the concept of intersectionality is helpful for historic research because connections between categories of difference: class, sexuality, gender race and ability, can give us more layered and intricate insights and analyses of the workings of the colonial.

In the last twenty years or so I have lobbied, often quite unsuccessfully, for a more intersectional approach in the arts and (later on) in history. My Dutch peers were ready nor interested. I remember vividly a conversation I had around 2011 with a fellow artistic director who did not want to engage in intersectionality because the art scene simply wasn't talking about it. I was stunned by her argument yet not surprised: intersectionality was seen as a Black feminist thing and therefore too niche, too unknown and too uninteresting for the mainstream. The question remains: has intersectionality moved from margin to centre? I contend that colonial history is per definition an important field of research where an intersectional lens can deepen the analysis which we are in need of in the Netherlands.

Through our collective work, intersectionality comes into play in this volume, although often implicitly. I will address this first and then turn to the colonial and its echo's in the museum world, followed by some developments relating to the archive.

### *Intersectionality and the other question: what about gender?*

The *Yearbook* editorial team wanted to tap into the above-mentioned public debate and invited me to join for this issue. With colonial history on the radar anew and more attention for racialization and race,<sup>5</sup> it became important from an intersectional standpoint to pose the other question, as Mari Matsuda (1990) taught us, which in this case meant: what about gender? What interested us, when thinking about colonialism and race (and class, albeit often implicit), is how gender plays a role: in what way was the empire gendered? This is not a new question, but the relationship between the Dutch

colonial past and gender is not very often engaged, and mostly written by women like Dutch scholars Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, Sita Bemmelen, Pamela Pattynama, Esther Captain, Geertje Mak, Alicia Schrikker, Ena Jansen, Liesbeth Jacobson, Yvette Kopijn, the late Frances Gouda, Kirsten Kamphuis, Gloria Wekker and internationally Ann Stoler and Jean Gelman Taylor (this is not a complete listing of course). In this issue, with special attention to museum collections, archives, narratives and biographies, we wanted to know what we see and hear and feel when we look at our collective Dutch colonial legacies from a gender perspective. What are some of the herstories, were there unknown biographies to unravel? And can we imagine knowledge being offered to us in different ways, for instance through creative writing? Catherine Hall, emerita professor of history in the United Kingdom, recently noted: 'Can you think of anybody that has written a better history than George Elliot's *Middlemarch*, it's just the best history there is of mid-nineteenth century provincial life, there isn't a history book that can compare with it. So, we have to think about different kinds of writing and what they open up to us.'<sup>6</sup>

When we do this work, how does gender conflate with race, this central category of difference when we address the colonial and its afterlife? As I've explained elsewhere, Intersectionality refers to categories of difference that can be embodied simultaneously (race, class, gender, sexuality, level of abledness) and how these categories interact with each other on an individual, institutional, and symbolic level. Using an intersectional lens, means being aware of how social categories of difference are interdependent and interrelated: they interact, like an intersection or crossroads. The outcomes of these interactions create different power positions, which means we all inhabit different levels of privilege and discrimination. Thus, intersectionality lays bare the hierarchies and power structures that exist between social categories (which does not mean that these are fixed: they work in context).<sup>7</sup>

Intersectional thinking and doing has slowly become more popular in this millennium. Introduced in the Netherlands by Gloria Wekker, Maayke Botman and myself in 2001, with the publication of *Caleidoscopische Visies*, we dreamt up a book that did not exist yet in the Netherlands and has been to date, the only book that centralizes feminist activism, organizing and knowledge production by Dutch Black women and women of colour in the twentieth century. Engaging with archival research to make visible the histories that had been marginalised in dominant historical narratives – now very much in fashion – is exactly what Maayke Botman and I did in 1998, building the basis for our publication. We dug into the women's archive for six months, taking weekly trips to Amsterdam East, in search of stories we knew existed, but were not told, portrayed or known in the public sphere, mainstream media, but were absent from white feminist spaces as well. The grey materials were our focus, those typical leaflets, newsletters and the like which were mostly read by their own niche or constituencies.

When looking at colonialism from an intersectional lens as an epistemological endeavour, there are some points to consider that have become important at different moments in time. Firstly, when diving into our colonial past and its afterlives,

we historians should take into account its transnational character.<sup>8</sup> This is, secondly, joined by the realization that both Dutch colonies and the metropole are spaces where both the colonial and colonial afterlives reside. Moreover, we now have taken the step to look at the colony and the metropole in conjunction. Thirdly, feminist historians have done continuous and important work showing the gender bias of national historiography as history grew into a scientific discipline in the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> But unfortunately, this was often done from a white, Eurocentric perspective in the twentieth century, partly because they lacked an intersectional lens. Simultaneously, many people who work on colonialism, don't use a gender lens while those historians who work on gender, might find it easier to look at class but often do not take race into account. As a result, an important part of an intersectional lens is missing. And lastly, until this last decade there wasn't a firm body of work on Dutch historiography from a critical race and decolonial perspective<sup>10</sup> (and we can debate if there is one now). Taken together, now seems the right moment to engage more deeply with our collective colonial past and afterlives using decolonial and intersectional lenses in order to centralize and produce a more layered and intricate post/colonial historiography in the Netherlands, moving from women historians and feminist historians, to feminist decolonial historians.

Two earlier issues of the *Yearbook* already looked at colonialism and colonial afterlives. In 1986, women in Dutch colonies, both colonizers and colonized, were put centre stage. In the introduction, the editors noted that the *Yearbook* itself had received criticism for being too Eurocentric, for lack of attention for histories beyond Europe and the West and for using white women as the norm and they confirmed that the critique was justified. This self-critical stance is educational in light of the fact that current younger generations of feminists in the Netherlands have taken on-board a more self-evident stance toward the importance of intersectionality and race. The 2007 issue was entitled *Gemengde gevoelens. Gender, etniciteit en (post)kolonialisme* (Mixed feelings. Gender, ethnicity and (post)colonialism) and focused on identifying, classifying, deconstructing and narrating gender and ethnic components hidden in historically evolved constructions of social and cultural realities.<sup>11</sup>

In some respects, we are doing the same in this issue because we still need to work on deconstructing colonial history from a gender perspective. But we live in a historically very different time compared to 2007 and in this issue, a more firm positioning in decolonial and intersectional thinking is taken on board. Another difference with 2007 is that whiteness, thanks to the work of Gloria Wekker, Lida van den Broek, and Anousha Nzume, has now been put on the agenda.<sup>12</sup> Revisiting the 2007 issue, we meet Aletta Jacobs, the revered Dutch suffragette, who is often used as a prime example of early Dutch feminism. Yet, when using an intersectional and decolonial lens, this reminder of Ena Jansen on Jacobs is significant:

After [Aletta] Jacobs had spoken out in glowing words about racially pure black people and 'half-casts' in South Africa, there could be no misunderstanding about her standpoint on racial purity and miscegenation. The superiority of

Europeans had to be maintained by approaching mix-raced people in a negative way. After all, they threatened the colonial idea of two separate worlds – one for the Europeans and one for the indigenous people (author's translation).<sup>13</sup>

To me, this quote means that we have to deal with colonial echoes in much more uncompromising ways. We have to be brave and learn to be uncomfortable. This includes prioritizing the notion of whiteness in a Dutch context which stresses again the importance of the politics of location and positioning oneself, important notions coming from the anti-racist feminist 1980s.

### *Colonial echoes in twentyfirst-century museums*

Until the twentyfirst century, there has been a disinterest in our colonial history by mainstream heritage institutions. Even the ethnographic museums in the Netherlands, now merged in one National Museum of World Cultures (NMWC), rarely seemed to purposely and critically engage in the Dutch colonial past. This is odd considering the NMWC 1) has an immense colonial collection including the largest (or second largest) collection of Papuan artefacts in the world, 2) holds human remains of Papuans, taken during colonial times and 3) has a branch, the Tropenmuseum, which started out as the Colonial Museum in 1864. The name Tropenmuseum came into use in 1950 and developed into a museum of 'world cultures' while excluding Europe from that equation.<sup>14</sup>

The 1989 exhibition *White on Black* in the Tropenmuseum was an important yet rare exception, curated by an external party, freelance curator Felix de Rooy. *White on Black* showed stereotypical depictions of Black people in Europe, including the Dutch Black Pete tradition which angered then-minister of Culture – feminist icon Hedy d'Ancona – who came to the opening.<sup>15</sup> The minister could not understand how Black Pete could be considered racist, a sentiment similarly felt by a majority of Dutch people. Scholar Jan Nederveen Pieterse published an accompanying publication in 1990, now an undervalued classic, that discussed several stereotypical examples in popular culture and showed that racial stereotypes have colonial roots.

In 2001 the first exhibit on slavery and the Dutch took place in the Amsterdam Scheepvaartmuseum, entitled *Slaven en Schepen* (Slaves and Ships). Then, a year after the 2002 installation of the National Monument for Slavery in the Oosterpark, the permanent exhibit *Eastbound* of the Tropenmuseum was installed which tried to connect more critically to its own colonial collection. At the time it was considered quite innovative but as critical insights on the colonial past have been accelerating, a new permanent installation is needed and planned for 2021. In 2008, The Tropenmuseum organized a two-day symposium to tackle how to be a postcolonial museum in the twentyfirst century and their report now reads almost like an existential crisis:

The term ethnographic museum, with its nineteenth-century origins and connotations, is no longer preferred in practice, but neither is it an art museum.