



Dutch Caribbean Literature

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DUTCH CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

by Wim Rutgers

In 1934, Surinamese author and freedom fighter, Anton de Kom (1898-1945) published his rewriting of the history of his country, *Wij slaven van Suriname* [We Slaves of Suriname].

For thousands upon thousands of years, our mother Sranan has slumbered between coastline and mountains. . . . There are hardly any people to enjoy this beauty. In the lowlands live the Waraus, the Arawaks and the Caribs—Indians now dying out, the enfeebled descendants of the original population, driven out of the most fertile lands by the whites. In the uplands are the Trios, Oianas and Marrons. The wide plains of the savannahs, the forests, and high, granite mountains of Mother Sranan have slept undisturbed for millenia.

At the age of twenty-two, Anton de Kom left Suriname for the Netherlands where he became active in left-wing circles. In 1932, he returned to Paramaribo for family reasons. Very soon after arriving, he discovered how dehumanizing the situation had become in the Dutch colony with its disgraceful living and working conditions, poverty and even famine. The global depression had hit Suriname hard, the poor its biggest victims. From the moment he stepped ashore, the authorities followed De Kom's every move. Soon after he set up an informal consultancy, the colonial administration, in fact, arrested and deported him as an undesirable person, exiling him to the Netherlands. There De Kom decided to write the history of his country from the perspective of the colonized, the downtrodden who throw off their shackles, a history that had not yet been written:

Though unrecorded in the history books of the whites, the ill-treatment of our fathers is engraved in our own hearts. Never has the misery of slavery been brought home to me more insistently than through the eyes of my grandmother when she told us children stories of the old days in front of her hut in Paramaribo. (34-35)

He therefore dedicated the account of the enslaved woman to his grandmother.

Anton de Kom was the first Dutch Caribbean author of any significance to offer such forceful resistance to the colonial authorities. That resistance was expressed in a sharp protest against the physical exploitation of slave and laborer, but also against the spiritual brainwashing methods of the Euro-centric education system:

There is no better way of making a race feel inferior than giving its members lessons in which only the sons of another people are extolled. It took me a long time to rid myself of the feeling, that a black man must always yield pride of place to a white man. (49)

the Surinamer Albert Helman (1903-1996). Both of them grew up in relatively well-to-do families who could afford to send them to Europe for higher education. Both Cola Debrot and Albert Helman lived the greater part of their lives in various European and other foreign countries but, despite their cosmopolitan way of life, remained strongly concerned about the health and welfare of their native lands. Both would return to their countries of origin to hold high civil and political posts: Cola Debrot became governor of the Dutch Antilles; Albert Helman, Secretary of Education and Health and Auditor General. It is striking to see how much their childhood influenced their work. Cola Debrot's first poems, published in 1918 under the pseudonym Nouel, were titled *Heimwee* [Homesick]. Albert Helman's first work *Zuid-Zuid-West* [South by Southwest] (1926), penned while in Europe, is also based on childhood memories.

A second form of engagement Debrot and Helman share is their interest in the effects of colonial history on their personal life, an examination of their own complex position within the multi-racial populations in their respective countries of origin. In addition to personal memories of childhood, their work contains forceful criticism of colonialism, which was to become a distinguishing feature of Dutch Caribbean literature.

Cola Debrot

Cola Debrot's debut novel *Mijn zuster de negerin* [My Black Sister] (1935) tells the story of the homecoming of a young man to Curaçao after a long stay in Europe to settle an inheritance matter. On closer examination, the novella exposes the position of the white creole in relation to the black population of the island. Frits arrives at Miraflores, the rural estate he has inherited after the death of his father who was a powerful white plantation owner. Here Frits meets his childhood playmate Maria—the daughter of his father and a black servant. When darkness descends, the young master assumes he can follow in his father's footsteps, claiming sexual rights to the girl—his half-sister—who is unaware of their familial relationship. However, the black estate manager, Wantsjo, Maria's grandfather, stands up to warn the young Frits that colonial times have changed, that he will no longer tolerate what once was common practice. *My Black Sister* responds to the segmented lives that blacks and whites led on Curaçao in the 1930s; it reveals painfully that they are related, one family, brothers and sisters on the same plantation, the same island. In this way, Debrot speaks for the young generation, intent on breaking through the age-old separation of white and black. Contemporary reviewers did not accept this vision and completely ignored this masterpiece for decades, apparently because of the incest motif, in actuality because of its redefinition of racial relations.

Albert Helman

Albert Helman's first novel *Zuid-Zuid-West* [South by Southwest] (1926) nostalgically depicts the beauty of Suriname and its inhabitants in chapters entitled "The City," "Vacation," "The Family," "The Interior," "Ship Ahoy!" and "Epilogue," and, at the same time, exposes the terrible plight of the original inhabitants of Suriname's interior regions. The author reproaches colonial authorities for the deplorable situation of the country, accusing them of being more interested in dividends than in the lives of the people:

Without your love, without the love that is your duty—for all colonial possession means voluntarily accepting a duty—salvation will never be possible. For centuries you have been thieves; they say legal thieves. But, at least, be loving thieves and not scoundrels. If you only knew how beautiful this country is, how ardent life is there. But oh. . . . my poor, poor country. (112)

Albert Helman does not go as far as Anton de Kom would go, because in his debut in 1926 Helman still ascribes to the colonial view. He merely asks the colonial to be more loving. However, this final passage of the book quoted above was shocking enough to prevent him from getting a university post in the Netherlands. Albert Helman went on to produce an enormous body of work, including numerous novels, collections of poetry and studies on various subjects. One of his last works, *Hoofden van de Oayapok!* [Chieftains of the Oayapok!] (1984), depicts a young member of the Oayapok who, after his education in Holland, returns full of hope and ready to contribute to the survival of his people deep in the interior of Suriname, only to leave after one year, disillusioned and with empty hands, knowing that he will forever grieve for his beloved home.

Debrot and Helman produced important *oeuvres*, but they remained single forerunners who scarcely met with response or critical praise in their own countries. Through their analyses of Caribbean people within complex, multi-racial societies, through their fictive use of their own personal histories, and through their narratives of forced migrations, Debrot and Helman frame the three dominant themes for the succeeding generation of authors and artists.³

Dutch Caribbean literature grew exponentially in the generations that followed. So many new names have come to the fore that it would be impossible to mention them all here. However, the best would undoubtedly include Rudy van Lier (1914-1987), Hugo Pos (1913), René de Rooy (1917-1974), Oda Blinder (1918-1969), Boeli van Leeuwen (1922), Jules de Palm (1922), Tip Marugg (1923), E. Bruma (1925), Shrinivási (1926), Charles Corsen (1927-1994), Bernardo Ashetu (1929-1982), Hans A. Faverey (1933-1990), R. Dobru (1935-1983), Bea Vianen (1935), Frank Martinus Arion (1936), Cynthia McLeod (1936), Thea C. Doelwijt (1938), L.H. Ferrier (1940), Trudi M. Guda (1940), Diana Lebacs (1947), Denis Henriquez (1945), Astrid H. Roemer (1947), Ellen Ombre (1948), Edgar Cairo (1948), and Joanna Werners (1953).

Language

Invariably, the Dutch Caribbean author has to confront the problem of language, in that the Caribbean reader reacts not to the fact that an author writes at all but to the language the author has chosen to use. For the writer of fiction, the response is always a question: why are you writing in Dutch? Why did you not choose the vernacular, Sranan Tongo, Sarnami, Papiamentu—languages felt to be more “our own”? Up to the end of the 19th century, the colonial government was rather indifferent to the use of Dutch in the Dutch colonies. However, at the turn of the 20th century the Dutch government changed and introduced a “Dutchifying” process in its colonies, a process which thoroughly affected the educational system. In Suriname, with the 1876 implementation of the compulsory education law, the Dutch government strongly propagated the Dutch language, actively suppressing the use of the vernacular languages in favor of Dutch, which was (and still is) disseminated as the only language of instruction in schools. This Dutchifying had such success in multilingual Suriname—where

more than twenty languages are spoken and where significant portions of the population speak Sranan Tongo, Sarnami and Javanese—that large parts of public life are still conducted in Dutch. Dutch has managed to survive even after more than twenty years of independence, although the Surinamese-Dutch variant has developed into an independent Surinamese language. In the Antilles, the language situation differs in that both Papiamentu and English have always offered clear-cut alternatives, languages which people, both high and low, have used since colonial times. Even though Dutch is the official language, it has never become the national language of the Antilles and continues to remain a foreign language.⁴

In short, the Dutch-language educational system has made a language migrant out of every inhabitant of Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, and Aruba. Dutch is often a second language to which one is first exposed at school. How fundamental language is to one's own culture, one's sense of nation, is expressed in the words of Albert Helman:

A people without a language (the highest, profoundest, most intensive means of communication) does not exist. When a people is without a national language and is divided into small groups that speak various minority languages, such a people remains divided against itself and can never form a nation.⁵

Writers from Suriname, from the Netherlands Antilles, and from Aruba are multilingual not only in their daily lives but also in their literary work. Almost without exception, authors avail themselves of more than one language. Poetry, for instance, may be written in the mother tongue—in Papiamentu, in Sranan Tongo, in Sarnami. But a narrative is written in Dutch. For writers from Suriname, the Netherlands Antilles, and Aruba, writing and publishing in Dutch is not a matter of course but a conscious choice. Towards the end of his great historical survey of his native land *De foltering van Eldorado* [The Torture of El Dorado] (1983), Albert Helman uses Caliban's address to his master Prospero to express the ambivalence that characterizes the use of the colonizer's language: "You taught me language; and my profit on it is I know how to curse: the red plague rid you, for learning me your language" (467).

In his own literary work, the author Helman never ceased to use the Dutch language as a protest against the Netherlands. In *Het eind van de kaart* [Where the Map Ends] he meets fellow countrymen, his own distant ancestors, in the interior of Suriname with whom he has trouble communicating and, full of irritation, fumes against his own fluency in Dutch, against his rich linguistic European education:

Stupid of me, not knowing more than five or six casually picked up Oayana words. Here I sit with all my years wasted on Ulfila's Gothic and Panini's Sanskrit, and with my belly full of Ruusbroeck's Middle Dutch. It's enough to make me want to puke. (87)

In Suriname, the language imposed by the colonizers has developed into a native variant of Dutch, called Surinamese-Dutch, which exhibits its own distinctive characteristics at phonetic, lexical and syntactical levels. The pronunciation is different; there are a large number of words that "North Sea Dutch" does not contain, and there are words that have developed different meanings; in addition, the grammar has undergone influences from the other languages.

No one has explored the possibilities and impossibilities of Surinamese-Dutch better than Edgar Cairo, the Surinamese author living in the Netherlands. In his collection of essays *Ik ga dood om jullie hoofd*, Cairo has argued that

As far as the so-called “real” Surinamese-Dutch is concerned, it is certain that at least ninety-five percent of it consists of purely literal translations from Sranan! That is wholly in keeping with the natural process of interference (that is, mutual influence of languages): a Sranan speaker will want to give his Dutch sentences a Sranan character. He speaks one language with the grammar of the other!

Rejecting Cairo’s creative solutions and suggestions of his fiction and poetry, his fellow countrymen coined the denigrating term “Cairoian” to describe what they felt to be an artificial, literary language far removed from the daily use of the Surinamese language. To Cairo, Surinamese-Dutch symbolizes one’s identity, expressing one’s own specific culture. Moreover, he considers his creolized Dutch to be an excellent means of integration, both between the various population groups in Suriname itself as between the Surinamese and the Dutch in Europe.

Leo Henri Ferrier

In his debut novel, *Âtman* (1968), the first psychological novel from Suriname, Leo Henri Ferrier emphasizes the multicultural composition of the Surinamese population. Lonnio, the mixed blood main character, sees in a vision how the unity of the Surinamese people must be achieved. The unity stems from the individual who views social unity as almost originating in his own body:

Everything, in no particular order, East Indians, African, Javanese, had to attract my attention. That I, no matter how, wanted to think in terms of a totality, one totality that is after all formed by everyone in Suriname, a totality that exists as one and not as not-one. (165-66)

His apotheosis continues:

Act in accordance with your conscience. Know your *Âtman*. Only then will you truly be able to participate in the lovely harmony of life in Suriname where everyone is one, truly one. . . . Become one with all that is within yourself and you will be able to see an even higher peace. . . . Search for love in all human beings. You will certainly find this because all human beings are and belong to that great Oneness that is. Be conscious of the mortality of your body that is sometimes black and then again white, of your hair that can be kinky and also smooth. (171-72)

In *Âtman*, Ferrier narrates his protagonist’s discovery that he is descendant of the indigenous Indian, but also of the African, the Asian, the European. In the diversity of the modern Suriname individual, he discovers his strength. He does not long for an “elsewhere” that he nostalgically glorifies but is home in the region where he now lives. There lies his destiny, his future.

Ferrier is not alone in this realization. The nationalistic poet R. Dobru expresses the same sentiment in his 1965 poem, “Wan bon”[One Tree]:

Wan Sranan
 someni wiwiri
 someni skin
 someni tongo

 wan pipel

One Suriname
 so many hair types
 so many skin colors
 so many tongues

 one people

(Translated by the author)

The Surinamese poet, Shrinivási, often called the exponent of reconciliation, has written numerous pleas for racial integration. The poem "Lokroep" [The Call] from his 1968 collection *Pratiksha* (1968) ends with:

Zie, ik heb uw lokroep
 In de droom
 En ook daarbuiten
 Helder en begrijpelijk vernomen
 En in een heldergroen visioen
 De Negers en de Hindostanen
 De Indianen en de Javaan
 De Blanke en de Libanees
 De Syriaan en de Chinees
 En al de andere continenten
 Geboekt zien staan
 Op de monsterrol van het leven
 Onder een naam. (25-26)

Behold,
 both in the dream
 and beyond I have seen
 your call, clear and comprehensive
 and in a lucid green vision
 the Africans and the Hindustanis
 the Indians and the Javanese
 the Whites and the Lebanese
 the Syrians and the Chinese
 and all the other continents
 inscribed
 in the gigantic scroll of life
 under a single name.

This optimistic faith in a unity within diversity was rudely disturbed after large scale strikes in 1969 and 1973 that included racially motivated actions. The young Bea Vianen protests against the racial divisions in her novels *Strafhok* [Penal Box] (1971) and *Ik eet, ik eet, tot ik niet meer kan* [I Eat, I Eat, Until I'm Fit to Bust] (1972).

Tip Marugg

Tip Marugg (*1923) and Boeli van Leeuwen (*1922) depict the relations between the various island population groups in the Netherlands Antilles from the point of view of white protagonists. In Tip Marugg's *De morgen loeit weer aan* [Again the Roar of Dawn] (1988) the main character sits on his porch every night from one-thirty to three a.m. in the company of his four dogs. He drinks beer and whiskey and, woozy with drink, ponders his own life, the history of his island and the continent. The main character's affection for his island (even for an entire continent) is intimate. Booze is the great healer. The protagonist chooses for nocturnal isolation; he is an old man. Fertility and potency are central motifs. Life would have no more meaning if one was unable to copulate. Climbing the Grote Berg⁶ he reflects on the past five hundred years of colonization and the age of slavery and, in reverie, identifies himself wholly with his country and his continent.

Boeli van Leeuwen

Boeli van Leeuwen's literary activities are divided into two periods. In his novels *De rots der struikeling* [The Rock of Offence] (1959), *Een vreemdeling op aarde* [A Stranger on Earth] (1962)

and *De eerste Adam* [The First Adam] (1966) he depicts the social and metaphysical problems of the white inhabitants of Curaçao in their attempt to relate to the black citizens on the island. The characters are sent to Europe for their education, but Europe proves to be an obstacle to them, a place where they do not belong. A restless searching springs from their attempts to define their own position on the island with regard to the non-white majority. In doing so they isolate themselves, confronting the feelings of superiority of their parents, rejecting the actions of their parents toward the black citizens.

In his second creative period, Boeli van Leeuwen published the novels *Schilden van Leem* [Shields of Clay] (1985) and *Het teken van Jona* [The Sign of Jonah] (1988) and an anthology of Op-Ed columns about politics and economics on Curaçao entitled *Geniale anarchie* [Ingenious Anarchy] (1990). In this new work, the former seeker of God engages in a dialogue with his fellow countrymen and becomes the conscience of the island society. This work covers a broad spectrum of subjects that range from Curaçao in general, personal experiences, island, national and international perils, to economic phenomena such as off-shore businesses, to the (non) functioning of the civil service, the separate status of Aruba, the widening gap between rich and poor, his ideas on the Bible and Christian faith, and his own life and writing:

Each person is a universe, a great secret, because each person is created in the image of God. There are no ugly people. It is the way we look at them that is humiliating. Their beauty is restored by seeing. Why does this ability to see come so late in life? (138-39.)

Frank Martinus Arion

Africa is the subject and theme in the work of Frank Martinus Arion, who as far back as 1957 defended the black continent against Europe in his collection of poetry *Stemmen uit Afrika* [Voices from Africa]. In his first novel, *Dubbelspel* [Double Play] (1973), he defends the inheritance that Africa has bequeathed to the Caribbean region. This novel challenges the reader on no less than three different levels. The first is literary. The novel does not have one main character, but six—four men and two women, all of whom unite around a game of dominoes. After an extensive description in the opening section of the preparations each of the players makes, the domino game takes on the form of a classic drama, with its trinity of time, place and action—five “acts,” from early to late morning, via the afternoon and dusk to nightfall and the aftermath. Of the six protagonists, some meet a sticky end, others disappear without a sound, and still others bring hope. Dedicated “to women with courage,” the novel offers a female protagonist, Solema, who becomes the bearer of a positive end by bringing, together with her lover Janchi Pau, “new hope” in the end. Love propels them to build their own future.

Finally, the novel presents a political challenge. The domino game offers a pretext for an extensive examination of the political and social situations on Curaçao. The characters articulate fierce criticism of foreigners, who dominate the island’s economy in general, and of the Dutch colonizers in particular. The novel reflects the spirit of the general strike and violence of May 30, 1969, and stresses the importance of one’s own, indigenous culture. In other words, the novel argues that we need to love that which is ours.

In his second novel, *Afscheid van de koningin* [Leaving the Queen] (1975) Arion not only distances himself from the Netherlands, the former colonizer, but from Africa as well. Protagonist Sesa Lopes surprises himself, for he had always assumed that “if I ever get to Africa I’ll

have reached home at last. Everyone there is black like me; so I will never stick out like a sore thumb ever again." Yet when he is in Africa, he discovers "I do stick out here despite my color!" (77). Even though the Antillean is black, he is not African and modern Africa is no longer a real home to the Antillean. Yet, the novel implies, he should be able to feel solidarity with this continent from which his ancestors came.

Arion's 1979 novel *Nobele wilden* [Nobel Savages] offers a Caribbean rewriting of the western theme of the Noble Savage and revises the migrant novel that dominated Caribbean literature in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. A young Caribbean man actively participates in the turbulent protests at the end of the 1960s in Europe. In a reversal of the age-old missionary tradition, the colonial from the periphery, instead of being the grateful receiver, is now the generous donor, sharing his creative imagination with the metropole. *Nobele wilden* demonstrates a reversal of foreign aid, aid not received but offered by a self-aware, young black man to a Europe that has run aground. The old world lacks imagination and vitality, attributes which the Caribbean protagonist of the new world does possess.

With his 1995 novel *De laatste vrijheid* [The Final Freedom], Arion returns to the theme of Caribbean multiculturalism. People of different origins live together on a fictional Caribbean island. The "real" inhabitants turn out to be those who know the creole of the island and who feel solidarity with the community in which they live. It no longer matters from where one originates—Africa, Europe, Asia. What matters is whether one will participate in building a promising future. Caribbean diversity is the key, a celebration of variety. The Surinamese poet R. Dobru's Caribbean community as "one tree, so many branches" is revised into

Endless variations of individualities, themes, projects; dissonants, each with its own history and origin. Their unity could only exist in their own opposites! United by one minimal thing: the entire Caribbean region. (304)

Ellen Ombre

Ellen Ombre (Paramaribo 1948) left in the early 1960s with her family for the Netherlands, where in 1992 she made her literary debut with a collection of stories entitled *Maalstroom* [Maelstrom], followed in 1994 by *Vrouwvreemd* [Woman Shy]. The title story "Maelstrom" tells of a Surinamese mother, Petronella Maarschalk otherwise known as Miss Nel, who has saved all her money so her son could go to university in the Netherlands. Her son Ewald becomes "a master of science in a foreign land" and forgets his mother. He only returns to Suriname with his Dutch wife after his mother has died. In her third book, *Wie goed bedoelt* [Those With Good Intentions], Ombre goes back to Africa, not with the intention of looking for her Surinamese roots like so many writers before her, but to see how modern foreign aid operates. She travels by cargo ship to complete the triangle of her family's Middle Passage. From Ombre's point of view, foreign aid has turned into a disaster because it has grown into a powerful bureaucratic apparatus. She does not feel like "one of us," a notion that fills her with disgust; she remains a loner among the Afro-Americans, black Brazilians, Haitians and Afro-Europeans who are on a voodoo pilgrimage or visiting the country as "roots" tourists.

History

In 1980 the military seized power in Suriname—a military dictatorship that lasted until 1986 and was followed by a civil war. In 1987 the country returned to a more or less democratic government. Various Surinamese authors use these historic events as subjects for their novels.

Thea Doelwijt's short story "Ere wie ere toekomt" [Honor To Whom Honor Is Due] exposes life under this military regime, as do Astrid H. Roemer's novels *Gewaagd leven* [The Master's Bedroom] (1996) and *Lijken op liefde* [Looks Like Love] (1997). In 1982 Ruud Mungroo published his historical novella *Tata Colin* about a slave revolt in the 1830s and its charismatic leader; in 1983 J.E. Hokstam writes a long novel *Boni* about the maroon leader Boni. Attempting to connect their fiction to the historical events, these authors construct national heroes, indispensable to a nation at war with itself.

Edgar Cairo

In *Dat vuur der grote drama's* [That Fire of Great Dramas] (1982) Edgar Cairo describes how the burdens of the past affect the lives of contemporary Caribbean people. In the 17th-century parts of present day Guyana were in the hands of the Republic of Seven United Netherlands. Parts of the long novel take place in a missionary post of the Herrnhutter Mission Settlement of Pilgerhuth in 17th-century Guyana; other sections describe the lives of a number of Surinamese emigrants in the present day Netherlands. In this way historical oppression and persecution are interwoven with modern discrimination. The novel implies that we cannot escape the memory of a colonial life of slavery; its painful burden intrudes upon the life of each contemporary Caribbean person who has left the colony and settled in the "mother" country. Edgar Cairo narrates, with his numerous lyrical digressions, in a style greatly resembling the oral tradition.

Bea Vianen

Bea Vianen's 1969 novel *Sarnami, hai* [Hello, Suriname] narrates the coming of age story of S, her experience of horrific racial and gender confinement within Paramaribo. S is the teenage daughter of a black father and a Hindustani mother who died when S was a child. At the end of the novel, S—now Sita—breaks out of the imprisonment of the colonial society by emigrating. Just like her grandfather who once came to Suriname, started a family there but nevertheless returned to his native India by himself, Sita too leaves at the end to pursue her future in Holland, leaving behind her baby son. The book protests the way young women in Suriname are held back: those who really wish to fulfill their potential must flee the country, leaving family, even children, behind. In her second novel *Ik eet, ik eet, tot ik niet meer kan* [I Eat, I Eat Till I'm Fit to Bust] (1972) and the story "Van nonnen en straffen" [Of Nuns and Punishments] Bea Vianen uses her own experiences in a strict girls' boarding school which she as a vulnerable child experienced as a prison—creating a terrifying metaphor for the colonial life in the Suriname of her childhood.

Astrid Roemer

Astrid H. Roemer developed from her social-political protest poetry in her first collection *Sasa* in 1970 to a feminist form of "song verse" in *En wat dan nog* [And Now What] (1984) and *Noordzee Blues* [North Sea Blues] (1985). Her prose too shows development from an initial social realism in *Waarom zou je huilen mijn lieve lieve* [Why Should You Cry My Darling Darling] (1976), via the migrant novels *Neem mij terug Suriname* [Take Me Back Suriname] (1974) and *Nergens ergens* [Nowhere Somewhere] (1983) to a powerful voice in defense of minorities in the

Netherlands. A feminist, she has stood in the front lines of social protest and politics. Her novels *Over de gekte van een vrouw* [On the Madness of a Woman] (1979) and especially *Levenslang gedicht* [Lifelong Poem] (1982) attest to this. The novel *Levenslang gedicht* (reissued in 1990 under the new title of *Een naam voor liefde* [A Name for Love] is in four parts, each containing three chapters that together systematically symbolize the seasons and twelve months of the year. Spring and fall are situated in Holland and the wet and dry seasons in Suriname. Themes of growth and harvest, drought and rain run parallel with the past and present, childhood and adulthood. All totaled, they symbolize the span of a human lifetime, situated against the background of a piece of Surinamese history: the time before independence in 1975 and another period ten years later, including the "revolution" by Desi Bouterse and his soldiers.

At first Astrid Roemer followed the route taken by many Surinamese authors in the Netherlands, that is, of gradually eschewing the use and development of Surinamese themes. Recently, however, Astrid Roemer has emerged as an important critic of the military regime that ruled in the 1980s in her books *The Master's Bedroom* [Gewaagd leven] (1996) and *Looks Like Love* [Lijken op liefde] (1997). Astrid Roemer is one of those writers who, though having left the country, continues to feel deeply concerned:

I have a love-hate relationship with Suriname. Hate because history shows how I ended up here. My ancestors were dragged here by force and emigrated under false pretences. They suffered and never bequeathed Suriname as their native country to their offspring. (. . .) Yet I love Suriname because I was born there. (. . .) Holland's material wealth was gained partly at the expense of my native land. After five generations of legitimate oppression I have the right to choose to which country I belong. I have chosen Holland, even though Holland has not chosen me. (*Nergens ergens* 176-77)

A number of themes and forms characteristic of Astrid Roemer's work are expressed in a poem in her 1985 collection, *Noordzee Blues* [North Sea Blues]. There are the language games: several languages alternately follow the Christian-European then black American traditions. There are no punctuation marks and a game is played with capital letters. Markedly physical, her poem alludes to the memory of Africa.

Zij zien ons vergaan als mislukte oogst
schudden de christelijke hoofden
wij zwijgen als velden
jammeren niet
gij hebt het gedaan
zien verbaasd elkaar in de ogen
hijgen in de smog van verval
laten Wij Liefhebben
laten Wij Liefhebben . . .

be black and be proud
brult de panter in afrika
uhuru, jankt mijn ziel
white christmas lord a wonderful
white world
rinkelt santa claus in het westen
uhuru, jankt mijn ziel

They see us decay as a failed harvest
shake the christian heads
we are as silent as fields
do not whine
you did it
look each other in the eyes, surprised
panting in the smog of rot
let Us Love
let Us Love . . .

be black and proud
roars the panther in africa
uhuru, howls my soul
white christmas lord a wonderful
white world
jingles santa claus in the west
uhuru, howls my soul

Astrid Roemer searches to unify opposites in her poetry as well as in her prose. Until now her work has explored numerous themes: her native country, black consciousness, feminism, heterosexual and lesbian love relationships, and the role her country's history has played in her personal life. She expresses these themes by means of linguistic experiments, by using specific forms of layout, by deviating from normal use of idiom and especially by using strong, metaphoric images, often derived from the physical body.

Hugo Pos

The Surinamer Hugo Pos (*Paramaribo 1913) only began publishing creative literary work after he retired as a judge and legal councilor. His first works included a trilogy of short stories entitled *Het doosje van Toeti* [Toeti's Box] (1985), *De ziekte van Ana Printemps* [Ana Printemps's Illness] (1987) and *Het mausoleum van de innerlijke vrede* [The Mausoleum of Inner Peace] (1989). He published poetry in the form of quatrains in the collections *Een uitroep zonder uitroepteken* [An Exclamation Without Exclamation Mark] (1987) and *Voordat ik afreis* [Before I Take Leave] (1993). He also published stories and memoirs in *Reizen en stilstaan* [Traveling and Standing Still] (1988) and *Van het een* [One Thing Leads To] (1992).

In triplo [In Triplicate] (1995) and *Voorbij Confucius* [Beyond Confucius] (1996) are his most recent attempts at giving shape to his memories. The central interest of Hugo Pos's work is the reaction of a present day conscience to memories of a difficult past. A man looks back at how things were, at his own life and the special historical circumstances that are related in a blend of fantasy and reality: "I have combined small indisputable facts and events, which in themselves are not so significant, with a series of memories from another time in another country." Pos, reviewing himself in his memoirs *In triplo* [In Triplicate], tells us of his way of working:

The narrative I, the writer, converses with I, the direct object, and the latter reveals to the former what has occupied him in this life.

At the same time he fully realizes:

That is how memories work, you are never really sure about them because the palest ink is stronger than the strongest memory. (. . .) At the same time I realize that I am doing nothing else but playing a kind of solitaire with my memory. I bring one forward, I slip another one back, I turn one over, save one for later. (13)

To exorcise his tormenting demons, Pos puts them into stories. History is never over. It continues to have an effect on one's personal life but also on a country in general. Good and bad demons keep digging into the lives of humankind. For example, in his story, "Juditha Triumphans" Hugo Pos reacts to the most recent history of Suriname. He tells of the "December 8th murders," when fifteen prominent Surinamese intellectuals were murdered by the Bouterse regime. The young woman Connie, the story's heroine, is the widow of one of those killed. She remarries a good friend of the army commander responsible for her first husband's death. The commander, consequently, visits them often. When he forces her to go to bed with him, she castrates him and flees the country after the act of "love." From now on the country still has its leader, but now without his testicles.

Conclusion

According to conventional wisdom, the Dutch Caribbean author is in the uncomfortable, yet challenging position of being a migrant. The author can unify the best of two worlds. The essayist Anil Ramdas shows how to turn the disadvantage of being a migrant into an advantage in his recently published books *De papagaai, de stier en de klimmende bougainvillea* [The Parrot, the Bull and the Climbing Bougainvillea] (1992) and in *De beroepsherinneraar en andere verhalen* [The Professional Rememberer and Other Stories] (1996). Anil Ramdas examines various subjects from a different and, often, striking angle which he attributes precisely to his status as a migrant, a position in which he constantly connects experiences of the culture from which he originates to those of the acquired culture in which he resides. As a migrant he avails himself of a "double cultural experience."

Translated by Scott Rollins

NOTES

1. *Bastiaans*, a common Dutch first name, echoes the Dutch word *baas*, meaning boss or master. Here, in Suriname-Dutch, *bastiaans* refers to the black overseers who did their masters' bidding on former Surinamese plantations.
2. The very first examples of Dutch Caribbean literature—that is literature written by Caribbean authors in the Dutch language—stem from the end of the 18th century in Suriname and Saint Eustatius and at the beginning of the 19th century in Curaçao where a number of writers gave literary expression to their views on country and people. It continued in the second half of the 19th century, and experienced a heyday around the turn of the century. In the second half of this century an unbroken stream of literary work has issued from both Suriname as well as the six islands of the Netherlands Antilles. All together this body of work forms an integral part of Caribbean literature as a whole. Because the first two phases of Dutch Caribbean literature were completely part of the European colonial tradition, they are not included in this review.
3. The following can be named here in this connection: M. Th. Hijlaard (1890-1979), H.E. Lampe (1884-1953), and W.F.M. Lampe (1896-1973). They all wrote their memoirs, criticizing the social developments during the colonial era.
4. For more information on the language situation see Charry, Eersel, Essed-Fruin, *Nederlands in de wereld*, and Zutphen. Anton de Kom's *We Slaves of Surinam* has been translated by Arnold Pomerans; Tip Marugg's novel *Again the Roar of Dawn* by E.M. Beekman; Albert Helman's *Chieftains of the Oayapok!* by Scott Rollins; and Hugo Pos's *Moving Stories* by Scott Rollins. These unpublished translations are available from the Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature.
5. *Vrij Nederland*, Nov. 30, 1974.
6. Big Mountain, on Curaçao (transl.)

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