

Repertoires of Slavery

Dutch Theater Between
Abolitionism and Colonial
Subjection, 1770-1810

Sarah J. Adams



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Introduction

“What do you say, Batavians! is there any play more appropriate for those, who support and defend human rights, and yet participate in the Slave Trade?—Or, are we only humans because we are white, not Black?”¹ Thus wrote Bernardus Bosch in his Patriot-minded weekly *Janus Janus-Zoon* of March 26, 1801. The play he is referring to is Dirk van Hogendorp’s *Kraspoekol, of de slaaverny* (Kraspoekol, or Slavery), which would have premiered in the Casuariestraat theater in The Hague one week earlier, had not a number of state officials and members of the Council of the American Colonies and Institutions started blowing cheap whistles as soon as the curtain rose.² *Kraspoekol*, set in what is now Jakarta, encompassed a vigorous attack on the Dutch institution of slavery and, as another witness relates, the protesters clearly hoped “to keep in darkness [what was] never intended for the light.”³ When the tumult got worse, star actor Ward Bingley, who directed the *Kraspoekol* production in The Hague, came onstage to ask that the show be allowed to continue in silence. Probing the mixed responses in the auditorium—curious spectators shouting “yes!” and demonstrators yelling “no!”—he decided to call the entire play off. The day after the riot,

1 Bosch, “Donderdag den 26 Maart,” 284–286. Original quote: “Wat dunkt u Bataven! kan er nuttiger stuk zyn voor zulken, die de rechten van den mensch voorstaan en verdedigen, en tevens nog in den Slaavenhandel deelen?—Of zyn wy alleen menschen om dat wy blank en niet zwart zyn?” Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own. “Batavians” were citizens of the “Batavian Republic,” as the Netherlands were called around 1800. The term referred to the Germanic Batavi tribe, who lived near the Dutch Rhine delta and courageously revolted against their Roman oppressor in 69 AD. The Dutch started using the name of the Batavi to represent the ancient Dutch struggle for liberty in their nationalistic lore. The colonial capital in Indonesia, today’s Jakarta, too, was named “Batavia” when it was conquered by Jan Pieterszoon Coen in 1619.

2 Bosch’s discussion of the riot mentions people such as Willem Frederik van Reede, whose family had holdings in the Cape Colony, J.A. de Marree and Pieter ’t Hoen from the Council of the American Colonies and Institutions, H. Wielheesen from the Dutch Marine office, and another Dutch colonist who regularly visited the Dutch Caribbean.

3 John Carleton cited in Bastin, “The Rivalry between Dirk van Hogendorp and S.C. Norderburgh,” 85. Carleton was a Briton residing in The Hague for translating duties in the British Embassy and worked as an instructor of English to wealthy Dutch families.

however, all copies of *Kraspoekol* were immediately sold out and booksellers claimed that they could have sold ten times more.

Having read the drama text in its entirety, Bosch applauded van Hogendorp for taking such a bold stand against the terror of slavery and Bingley for having *Kraspoekol* staged. He considered the play particularly appropriate, it seems, because it exposed to his compatriots how the institution of slavery violated their own hard-won fundamental principles. The Dutch, with French military aid, had only recently resisted the near-monarchical yoke of the Stadthoderate and successfully established the democratic Batavian Republic on January 1, 1795. With the Dutch Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen close to hand, the Batavian revolutionaries subsequently discussed the blueprints of the new body politic. However, the vehement debates about notions such as natural rights and humanity did not lead the new Batavian government to cement the prospect of abolition in its eventual constitution. This was much to the disapproval of radical representatives like Bosch himself, who wanted the emancipation of African and Asian captives to be enshrined in the new revolutionary matrix.

The tumultuous performance of *Kraspoekol* in The Hague serves as an excellent gauge of the Dutch abolition debate around 1800. While magistrates and colonial shareholders still obviously ran the show, a growing number of authors and activists inveighed against the slavery system. Moreover, Bosch's published discussion of the riot in The Hague suggests that abolitionist ideologies tied in with the conceptual contours of the new nation and the revolutionary and charitable principles on which it had been built. Bosch concluded his review of *Kraspoekol* by alerting his compatriots to the fact that the abrogation of the institution of slavery had become a moral imperative and finally stated that "no Batavian citizen, finding his own fortune in liberty, may participate any longer in human trafficking, which should be condemned by god and all sensitive humans."⁴

Through the lens of a hitherto unstudied repertoire of ameliorist and abolitionist plays such as *Kraspoekol*, this book will explore how dramatic visions of antislavery provided a site to (re)mediate a white metropolitan—and at times a specifically Dutch—identity.⁵ Probing a set of critical plays that were created and consumed between 1770 and 1810, my aim is to

4 Bosch, "Den Donderdag 26 Maart," 286. Original quote: "geen Bataafsch burger, die zyn geluk in de vryheid stelt, [mag] meer de hand [...] leenen in dien handel met menschen, die van god en alle menschen, welke gevoel van hunne waarde hebben, moet gedoemd worden."

5 To be sure, I treat terms the "white(ness)" and "Black(ness)" not as distinct biological categories, but as concepts shaped by social, political, and cultural processes.

prize open the conflicting ideological functions of abolitionist discourse in and outside the walls of the theater and to think about the ways in which people like van Hogendorp and Bosch wielded the strife-ridden question of slavery to negotiate the meanings of human rights, subjecthood, and subjection. Abolitionist theater, I will argue, both criticized and reinforced the white imperial hegemony as it impugned the status quo and propagated (gradual) reform while ultimately facilitating symbolic forms of violence and endorsing colonialist politics and aesthetics.

The title of my book, *Repertoires of Slavery*, has a threefold meaning. First of all, it refers to the collection of ameliorist or abolitionist dramas that were produced in the Netherlands between 1770 and 1810. This provisional list, presented in Appendix 1, consists of sixteen original and translated plays that express critical visions of slavery. Although I will not, of course, treat translations as originally Dutch works, I do believe that translations generally accumulate different meanings and workings in the varying geopolitical contexts in which they appear. For clarity, and in order to facilitate future (transnational) research, Appendix 1 also contains brief plot descriptions of each play. My own analyses run to a smaller selection out of this list in order to allow for close readings that capture the complexities of these scripts more fully: *Monzongo, of de koningklyke slaaf* (Monzongo, or the royal slave, 1774), *Selico* (1794), *De verlossing der slaaven door de Franschen* (The liberation of the enslaved by the French, 1794), *De negers* (The Blacks, 1796), *Paulus en Virginia* (1797), *De blanke en de zwarte* (The white and the Black, 1798), *Kraspoekol, of de slaavernij* (1800), *Pantalon, Oost-Indisch planter, of Arlequin uit slavernij verlost door toverkunst* (Pantaloen, East Indian planter, or Harlequin magically liberated, 1803), and with passing references to still other dramas. As will become evident, these plays differ widely in scope. While some of them, most notably *Paulus en Virginia* and *Monzongo*, enjoyed several decades' worth of popularity, others, including *Selico* and *De blanke en de zwarte*, experienced a transient popularity on local stages and were consumed primarily as reading texts. Appendix 2 contains an overview of locations where the plays under scrutiny were staged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—this list is not exhaustive, however, and merely serves as a first indication of where and how many times these plays may have been put on stage.⁶

6 This study focuses solely on theater in the Dutch metropole and does not look at plays and productions created and consumed in the overseas colonies. Adrienne Zuiderweg is currently studying the repertoire of Dutch theaters in Batavia and Michiel van Kempen has gathered information on the productions staged in Suriname around 1800. His list, which he so generously

Second, my title points to a set or repertoire of recurring dramatic templates and scenarios about slavery and non-white captives which these plays (re)produced and reinforced. Racialized characters, often rendered by white actors donning black or brown masks and makeup, rarely appeared as heroic or sophisticated and their stories were tethered to narrative and performative strains that reduced and ridiculed non-white subjectivities while bolstering white ones instead. My chapters, as I will expound below, are structured around three of these templates: the pathetic and passive victim waiting to be saved, the happy-go-lucky fool resigning him/herself to his/her servile position, and the disloyal rebel avenging his/her subjection. As Stuart Hall and Edward W. Said have so compellingly shown, imperialism relied on excessive colonial violence as much as it capitalized on the circulation of cultural representations and discourses that envisioned and secured racial hierarchies and formations of inequality—often under the guise of humanitarianism and progress. Representation, not “truth,” constituted the narratives and images of African and Asian captives’ displacements and, as consequence, had the enormous power of shaping the metropolitan reception of those events.⁷ In the plays and performances discussed here, a radical rhetoric of universal human rights converged with blackface techniques and transparent white supremacist conceptions, resulting in a wavering depiction of slavery that perhaps intensified the balance of power it criticized and helped regulate non-white people’s scope of liberty. It is not my ambition to merely catalog homogenized types of “the stage slave” but to investigate the complex ways in which s/he was coded and construed on stage and how these representations were invested with power.

Importantly, the stories and pictures of the blackface characters and their relation to their white on- and offstage counterparts were not unique to the Dutch stage. Rather, they were part of an outflowing discourse of racialized subjection that was developed and cultivated across national and generic boundaries. Scholars such as Jan Nederveen Pieterse, Allison Blakely, Susan

shared with me, contains titles of plays that were written and staged in the Dutch metropole and then traveled to Suriname as well as unique titles such as *Het Surinaamsche Leeven* (ca. 1771), *Suriname verheugd, bij de aankomst der Nederlandsche vloot* (ca. 1783), and *De tovery der Indianen* (1806). Enslaved people, like children and Jews, were generally not permitted to enter theater buildings—they could enter only to reserve seats for their masters. For more about the institution of theater in Paramaribo, see also van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur* I, 95–101. I have recently written a chapter on the staging of Dutch harlequinades in Paramaribo, which will appear in Julia Prest’s edited volume *Colonial-Era Caribbean Theatre: Challenges in Research, Writing and Methodology* (Liverpool University Press, forthcoming).

⁷ See especially Hall, “The Spectacle of the Other,” 257–269; Said, *Orientalism*; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.



Legêne, and Dienke Hondius have charted some of the dominant representational modes of Africans, Asians, and their descendants in European metropolitan culture, albeit with a focus on the Netherlands.⁸ Each grappling with different societal domains—ranging from paintings, architecture, religious imagery, “scientific” and political reports, and literature—they conclude that the recurring tropes, images, and views featuring in those works of art created and sustained symbolic forms of racialized violence and asserted that white superiority over non-white people was, as Hondius puts it in very Gramscian terms, “common sense knowledge” by the early nineteenth century.⁹

Repertoires of Slavery will be the first in-depth study of such representations in Dutch theater. Research on other-language theater has revealed that dramatic texts and productions of the decades around 1800 were feasible vessels for conflicting views on slavery and race. Heather S. Nathans, for one, has explored the central role of sentimental drama in the debate over Black participation in early American society while also warning about the ways in which these excessively sentimental and stereotyped pictures ultimately failed to envision Afro-diasporic people outside the frame of servitude.¹⁰ Jenna M. Gibbs’s important *Performing the Temple of Liberty* (2014) relates a transatlantic account of how entertainers in Philadelphia and London helped create “a lexicon of recognizable meanings and symbols” that combined notions of natural rights and neoclassical motifs with racial burlesque.¹¹ As Gibbs explains in the course of her book, blackface comedy and reformist sentiment had become inseparable threads by the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, Noémie Ndiaye’s study argues that a vivid “stage idiom of Blackness” was developed by white performers in early modern France, Spain, and England and led spectators to believe that Afro-diasporic people belonged at the bottom of racialized hierarchies.¹² Nathans, Gibbs, and Ndiaye, among others, have shown that theater responded to the social realities and changing perceptions of race and slavery but also helped reify colonial power relations.

The existence of such international techniques, ideas, scenarios, and lexemes suggests that the genealogy of these representations is in many ways a transnational one. As noted, several plays on the list here are translations

8 Nederveen Pieterse, *Wit over zwart*; Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World*; Legêne, *De bagage van Blomhoffen Van Breugel*; Hondius, *Blackness in Western Europe*.

9 Hondius, *Blackness in Western Europe*, Chap. 4.

10 Nathans, *Slavery and Sentiment on the American Stage*, 247.

11 Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty*, 5.

12 Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness*.



or adaptations, and the performative and narrative templates used in Dutch antislavery theater were deeply premised on a cross-genre and cross-language humanist discourse. However, *Repertoires of Slavery* will also attend to dramatic praxes, imaginations, and national appeals that were specifically Dutch. For instance, the presence of Asian settings and characters in plays such as *Kraspoekol* and *Pantalon, Oost-Indisch planter* is unique to the Dutch antislavery repertoire. Although we will see that the common threads among different abolitionist plays outweigh the differences, these plays do reflect the centrality of Indonesia in the Netherlands' colonial economy and testify to the favorable position of this eastern orbit in the Dutch empire.

The specific Dutch theme of some plays also brings me to the third signification of my book title. *Repertoires of Slavery* alludes to what Gloria Wekker, in her pivotal *White Innocence* (2016), has termed “the Dutch cultural archive.” Like most ex-colonizing nations, Wekker argues, the Netherlands retains an immense “reservoir” of memories, knowledge, figures, affects, and beliefs concerning race that piled up throughout centuries-long imperial rule and have been crucial to the production and preservation of white hegemony in modern Dutch society.¹³ This archive has shaped the ways in which the Netherlands tends to present itself—as a moral, tolerant, and color-blind nation without any ties to the history or present state of racialized violence—and, paradoxically, contributed to the fact that Dutch society has partly functioned according to a “racial grammar” since the earliest stages of colonialism.¹⁴ In her book, Wekker builds on the concept of the “cultural archive” as articulated by Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). For Said, the metropolitan cultural archive was the space wherein artistic and intellectual investments in imperialism and white European hegemony were made for centuries.¹⁵ While Said's work centers on the domain of imperial culture, and British and French novels in particular, Wekker exposes how the Dutch cultural archive can be traced in modern-day policies, organizational phenomena, folklore, and in what have become common sense feelings and thoughts. Therefore, it was never her predominant concern to map the specific historical genesis and dynamics of the cultural archive of the Netherlands. *Repertoires of Slavery* seeks to gain insight into the late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century theatrical modes, tropes,

13 Wekker, *White Innocence*, 3, 19–20.

14 Wekker, *White Innocence*, 2, 20–21.

15 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxvi. In a less pronounced way, Wekker also built on the work of Ann Laura Stoler, who, in *Along the Archival Grain*, explored new ways of thinking about archives as something in between a physical and cultural space that contains written documents as well as memories. Wekker, *White Innocence*, 19.



and scenarios of racialized subjection and to consider them as materials of this Dutch “reservoir”—or repertoire, perhaps—of sentiments, knowledge, fantasies, and beliefs about race and slavery that have shaped the dominant sense of the Dutch self until today. In this sense, the title of my book also invokes Diana Taylor’s notion of the “repertoire” as enacted and embodied knowledge, allowing ephemeral performances from the past to continue shaping identities and realities in the present.¹⁶

When I refer to the “repertoire of (anti)slavery” in the following sections and chapters, I am thus primarily driving at the collection of plays under scrutiny but with the above-described layers of meaning in mind. Exploring the conflicting ideological functions of abolitionism produced in and mediated through this repertoire, then, my method is less grafted onto a complete theoretical framework than it is informed by the provocative and interrelated concepts, concerns, and programs of post/decolonial critics who have sought to break through the ideological surfaces of dominant, white-penned cultural, societal, and historical productions. I have been particularly inspired by the nonconformist reading strategies of scholars such as Saidiya V. Hartman and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. The latter, in *Silencing the Past* (1995), prodigiously analyzed the ways in which hegemony and power operate in the making and documenting of history and knowledge. The (re)production of the past, Trouillot contends, is a matter of ideologically driven “mentions” and “silences”—a point which he skillfully illustrates by revealing how the Haitian Revolution, the most successful slave-led revolt in history, has been misinterpreted and minimalized by contemporaries as much as by historians.¹⁷ In *Lose Your Mother* (2007), Saidiya V. Hartman offers an impressive example of how to speak to such “silences” by tracing the transatlantic route back to Ghana and charting the disruptions of those lives that have gone unrecorded. My readings here, however, are more affected by Hartman’s earlier work, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), which excavates different “scenes”—ranging from on- and offstage performances to plantation diaries, newspapers, and legal cases—to confront imbalances of power. Hartman seeks to “brush history against the grain” and uncover how discourses of reform transmitted profound physical and socioeconomic terror to Afro-diasporic people in nineteenth-century America.¹⁸ What interests me most in Hartman’s work is that it centers around the fields of consent, protection, and humanitarianism more than around blunt, violent

¹⁶ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*.

¹⁷ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 48.

¹⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 11.



domination and force to explore the inconvenient but insistent marriage of pleasure and terror. In *Repertoires of Slavery*, too, I hope to illuminate “the encroachments of power that take place through notions of reform.”¹⁹ While race was in many cases the central axis of difference, my analyses will also attend as much as possible to the ways in which representations of power related to aspects of gender, class, and sexuality.

In his exploration of the British and French cultural archives, Said offers an interesting conceptual opening for reading through the philanthropic coating of the antislavery repertoire. Attempting to grasp dormant ideologies of empire in canonical literary works, Said suggests reading them “contrapuntally” instead of “univocally.” The term “counterpoint,” borrowed from Western classical music, refers to a nexus in which different tones and narratives—reactionary and progressive, metropolitan and “native”—play off one another.²⁰ Reading cultural productions of the imperial era “contrapuntally,” or against the proposed ideology, allows for critics to open texts up to views that have been (un)knowingly cloaked or excluded.²¹ One of Said’s most famous contrapuntal readings includes the literary analysis of Joseph Conrad’s 1899 *Heart of Darkness*. In it, he appreciates the novel as a perfect product of Conrad’s literary talent and repeatedly points to how *Heart of Darkness*, through the observations made by its protagonist, Marlow, laid bare for British readers the yawning gap between the brutal realities in the Congo region and the alleged ambition of King Leopold II of Belgium to bring civilization, progress, and maturation. However, Said explains, despite Marlow’s incisive criticism and sympathetic feelings for the colonized subjects, the novel engages in a discourse that “assumes the primacy and even the complete centrality of the West,” thus restoring Africa to white hegemony through narration.²²

Reading the repertoire of slavery contrapuntally or “against the grain,” as Hartman puts it, enables me to appreciate plays such as *Kraspoekol* as crucial attempts for negotiating enslaved people’s liberty while at the same time challenging the dominant discourse and reading of those texts. Dutch metropolitan abolitionism has been primarily studied in terms of its chronology, the arguments used, and the (lack of) organizational structures. Bert Paasman, for one, in his groundbreaking study of 1984, unearthed an enormous number of eighteenth-century antislavery publications,

19 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 5.

20 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 63.

21 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 52, 83–84.

22 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 25–26, 164.



illustrating that literate metropolitans must have been well aware of the Dutch slavery system's hazards.²³ Maartje Janse has detailed the concrete ways in which Dutch abolitionist activists started organizing themselves in the 1840s, while other scholars, including Angelie Sens, have sought to explain this relatively late development of structural protest against slavery.²⁴ Here, I am less interested to know when, how, and by whom Dutch abolitionism was articulated than to comprehend the ontology and conflicting assumptions of antislavery ideologies and the ways in which they connected to white senses of self and subjecthood in the Netherlands. This is in line with more recent scholarship, conducted by scholars such as René Koekkoek, Remco Raben, and Susan Legêne, among others, that seeks to explore the nexus of colonial affairs, metropolitan culture, and Dutch citizenship and politics.²⁵

To be sure, the point here is not to disregard individual authors' efforts to act against the wrongs of the Dutch institution of slavery or to devalue their works of art altogether. This would not yield much, and I agree with Said and Trouillot that authors are undeniably shaped by the social and historical realities in which they function.²⁶ It should not come as a surprise, then, that some of the dramatists in the antislavery repertoire actively contributed to the slavery-based system—as merchants of colonial goods or even, like the author of *Kraspoekol*, as slave owners—while simultaneously, as we will see in Chapter 2, putting their reputation and safety at risk by formulating such “uncompromising” views on Dutch overseas conduct and the institutions of slavery and the slave trade. With regard to *Heart of Darkness*, Said asserted that Conrad's aesthetics and politics were so imperialist partly because the European hegemony had made non-imperialist alternatives unacceptable and even “unthinkable”—a term which Trouillot would later adopt as he analyzed metropolitans' silencing and incapability to understand the Haitian Revolution.²⁷

Repertoires of Slavery follows the footsteps of the excellent work done by Paasman, Blakely, Hondius, and Koekkoek, among others, but I want to tap new sources of study by turning to Dutch theater. Not only was drama by far the most important literary medium of the eighteenth-century Netherlands,

23 Paasman, *Reinhart*, 211.

24 Janse, *De afschaffers*; Sens, “Dutch Antislavery Attitudes.”

25 Koekkoek, *The Citizenship Experiment*; a number of essays in Koekkoek, Richard, and Weststeijn, eds., *The Dutch Empire Between Ideas and Practice*; Raben, “A New Dutch Imperial History?,” 23; Legêne, *De bagage van Blomhoffen Van Breugel*; Legêne, *Spiegelreflex*.

26 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 65–66; see also Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 82.

27 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 27–28.



numerically speaking—between 1700 and 1800, no fewer than three thousand plays were published.²⁸ Unlike other cultural forms, performance was accessible to the literate and illiterate alike, and the Dutch stage had been reflecting and inflecting politics since its early institutionalization in 1638. Moreover, the visible nature of the theater made it a privileged space for Dutch metropolitans to imagine, perhaps for the first time, overseas territories and peoples who were enslaved or otherwise subjected. Although theatrical culture—including offstage performances such as funfair exhibitions and court celebrations—offers a unique canvas on which we can study how the Dutch metropole conceptualized ethnicity, subjugation, and empire, it has been largely overlooked by scholars of Dutch colonial culture and history.²⁹ An important exception is Manjusha Kuruppath, who, in her monograph *Staging Asia* (2016), zoomed in on the ways in which the Amsterdam Theater represented Asian-Dutch encounters from 1650 until 1780.³⁰ The antislavery dramas under discussion in *Repertoires of Slavery* have rarely been studied. Originally Dutch plays such as *Kraspoekol* and *Monzongo* have received sporadic attention by literary historians, but never before have they been examined in relation to other abolitionist plays and productions, nor have they been addressed as *theatrical pieces*.³¹

In this study, I refuse to see the drama text as the sole instrument of signification and thus I factor in other representational strategies, such as bodily expression, costuming, makeup, and stage properties, as transmitters of meaning. The antislavery repertoire was indeed consumed on multiple levels. Plays were sold as reading texts in bookshops, staged in private circles, or produced in minor and major playhouses across the Netherlands—all of which involved different degrees of understanding and interpreting. While reading drama texts is a quite solitary experience—unless, of course, when discussed collectively in coffeehouses or learned

28 Leemans and Johannes, *Worm en donder*, 294–296.

29 No structural research has been conducted on imperial themes in Dutch theater. My own preliminary findings suggest that, between 1770 and 1820, more than eighty such plays were written, translated, and adapted for the Dutch stage. Examples include Marten Corver's comedy *De jonge Africaansche dogter of juffer* ("The Young African Daughter or Damsel"), translated from Nicolas-Sébastien Roch de Chamfort in 1770; Bautin's pantomimic ballet *Almaïde, of de Amerikaansche heldin* ("Almaïde, or the American Heroine") of 1798; and the moral drama *De westindie-vaarder, of die wel doet, wel ontmoet* ("The West Indian Mariner, or Do as You Would Be Done by"), translated anonymously from Caspar Friedrich Lossius in 1802.

30 Kuruppath, *Staging Asia*. Another study which makes a brief excursion into theater is de Hond, *Verlangen naar het Oosten*, 180–196.

31 See, for instance, Paasman, *Reinhart*, 135; Leemans and Johannes, *Worm en donder*, 561, 575–578; de Vries, "In traanen wegsmelten bij *Monzongo*."



societies—live performance instigates shared and active imaginative experiences among the spectators as well as between the thespians and the audience. In line with theater specialist Erika Fischer-Lichte, I believe that theater should be understood as an event achieved by the actors and spectators, whose “bodily co-presence” in the same physical space evokes interactions that shape the performance in crucial ways.³² The tumultuous debut of *Kraspoekol* illustrates this point perfectly. Because of the loud shouts coming from the auditorium, the talented actor Gabriël Valkenier, playing van Hogendorp’s white Dutch protagonist, repeatedly forgot himself on stage and even ended up in a heated discussion with Pieter ’t Hoen, a clerk of the Council of the American Colonies and Institutions. Two actresses had to take Valkenier off the stage and eventually the play’s director entered the podium to call the performance off, much to the disappointment of those who were curious to see the rest of the show. Thus, the dynamic between actors and spectators—both part of a theater space where the dividing lines between podium and auditorium were significantly blurred—fundamentally determined the ways in which the representation developed and was experienced.

The *Kraspoekol* riot epitomizes how Fischer-Lichte sees the encounter between thespians and audience not as a merely aesthetic but as a deeply political moment.³³ But it also illustrates how much of our knowledge about historical performances depends on the sources and documents left behind by the productions’ participants.³⁴ Drama texts, playbills, costume designs, masks, posters, newspaper advertisements, and reviews or journal discussions, for example, can provide an idea of the performance that supposedly happened—although, however detailed such sources are, we can never truly grasp how plays were staged and how audiences responded. Nonetheless, where possible, my analyses of the antislavery repertoire will turn to aspects of performance such as actors’ bodily expression mediated through novel acting conventions, costuming and stage properties responding to the increasingly urgent demand for “naturalness” on stage, and the donning of blackface in relation to those same demands and changing views on race and “Blackness.” In doing so, I hope in this book to contribute to a Dutch literary history that is less focused on literature as synonymous with printed texts and to the understanding of (anti)slavery representations outside the strict boundaries of printed media.

32 Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 43.

33 Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 51.

34 Fischer-Lichte, *The Routledge Introduction to Theatre and Performance Studies*, 71.



Repertoires of Slavery is structured as follows. Chapter 1 sets out to clarify some of the specific contexts in which this repertoire was produced and perceived. Indeed, the decades around 1800 were marked by significant political and philosophical change, growing slavery-based consumption, and the consolidation of the institution of theater as a central forum of bourgeois cultural life. Against this contextual framework, then, my analyses will pivot around three important dramatic templates that came to the fore as I read the abolitionist repertoire contrapuntally. Chapter 2, “Suffering Victims: Slavery, Sympathy, and White Self-Glorification,” examines the constellation of enslaved characters as objects of pity for their white counterparts on and off the stage. I turn to *Selico*, *De negers*, and *Kraspoekol*—three plays I will classify as “bourgeois dramas”—to identify a set of generic strategies employed to inspire Dutch audiences with an antislavery spirit. Dramatists, often displaying their ambitions in elaborate and highly sentimental prefaces, confronted audiences with the wrongs of slavery through moving “slave testimonies” and onstage manifestations of violence that revealed the harsh realities of the transatlantic and Asian slavery systems. One of the most important dramatic conventions was the presence of a white bourgeois hero who alleviated the plight of these passive victims and whose passionate antislavery speeches drew directly from the debates held outside the walls of the theater. The composition of this philanthropic figure, I will show, was as central to the abolitionist appeal as he was to the reification of white male dominance.

Chapter 3, “Contented Fools: Ridiculing and Re-Commercializing Slavery,” studies the convergence of pain and pleasure in Dutch onstage representations of slavery. I revisit *De negers* and analyze *Pantalon*, *Oost planter* and *Paulus en Virginia*, two popular musical productions, to expose how antislavery sentiment generated visions of Afro-diasporic people’s alleged congenital simplicity, happy-go-lucky-attitude, and servility in order to promote good mastership and simultaneously fortify racial and social boundaries pending legal measures against slavery. Besides distinct narrative tropes and performative techniques such as distorted language and “exotic” scenes of amusement, a key aspect in this template was the complexion of the enslaved characters. My readings here are therefore preceded by a tentative outline of the changing praxes and politics of Blackness in the Dutch theater of 1800. This chapter ultimately proposes to extend the history of blackface brutalities in the Netherlands, which has been predominantly understood through mid-nineteenth-century minstrelsy and its manifest legacies in the Black Pete figure.

While the plays and productions discussed in Chapter 2 and 3 simulated Asians’ and Africans’ easy inclination to submit themselves to white



mastery—thus, in the words of Hartman, transforming “relations of violence and domination into those of affinity”—Chapter 4, “Black Rebels: Slavery, Human Rights, and the Legitimacy of Resistance,” considers those blackface characters who sought to challenge their subjection.³⁵ The onstage representation of slave-led resistance directly responded to the growing number of rebellions in the Atlantic orbit and to the metropolitan discussions and anxieties about the constant threat of retributive violence. As I detail the constellations of the blackface rebels in *Monzongo*, *De blanke en de zwarte*, and *De verlossing der slaaven* and the ideological assertions fixed onto their characters, it will become evident that the orchestrated revolts against slavery and the violation of human rights are portrayed as brutal and ineffective—if they are staged and considered at all. Following Trouillot’s observations about how the Haitian Revolution was “unthinkable” for white European contemporaries, this chapter will argue that dramatists, thespians, and audiences trivialized and erased non-white forms of redress by recasting these characters’ revolts into a mold that made sense to the white-dominant order and by utilizing Afro-diasporic people’s struggle for emancipation for imagining their own fight for (political) liberty.

Although these chapters hardly exhaust the topic, they assemble some important stories about slavery and race that were (re)created and consumed in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Dutch metropole. The templates that emerged, to be sure, were not entirely new. Typing and stereotyping were not unique to enslaved stage characters, and metropolitan spectators had been confronted with distressed victims in need of redemption, foolish clowns, and rebellious figures for centuries. What is specific to the figures in the antislavery repertoire is that the plots, roles, gestures, costumes, makeup, and language through which they were designed were deeply racialized and helped shape, fix, and proliferate the unsettling ways in which non-white people were and are perceived in a white-dominated society. Moreover, actors’ impersonations of enslaved characters and audiences’ sentiments about these performances very much depended on what Hartman refers to as “the fungibility of the captive body,” or the possibility to appropriate Black bodies for various purposes.³⁶ Black people were dislocated, sold, humiliated, and whipped by white slavers and masters who asserted their dominance over them. Yet the bodies of African and Asian captives were also available to abolitionists, whose well-intended pamphlets, novels, and plays easily restaged these people’s suffering and encouraged

35 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 88.

36 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.



audiences to sympathize through wedding their own subjectivities to that of the enslaved, thus allowing them to imaginatively slip into the captive's body and project their own feelings, fantasies, and anxieties into it. As such, the stage slave—appearing as a victim, fool, rebel, or otherwise—easily became a means for sentimental recourse as well as for pleasure and white self-exploration.³⁷

That said, I want to close this introduction with a brief note on my location. Attempting to consider the Dutch antislavery repertoire against the grain and to perforate structures of power, my readings still necessarily start from my position as a white scholar who has a particular idea of what society should look like but has no personal experience with the pervasive effects of the harmful discourses I study or with the institutional forms of racism they have helped sustain. Departing from this privileged subjectivity—which is, naturally, constructed around many more axes than around the fact that I am being interpellated as white—my understandings of the repertoire are undoubtedly incomplete. In fact, my own writings may well be read contrapuntally to point out themes and variations that have escaped my observations. In addition, I want to note that, since it is my aim to lay bare the symbolic violence in humanitarian texts and while I have tried to make informed translational choices, I cannot avoid reproducing some of the thoughts, images, and assumptions which most of us find disturbing and problematic today.³⁸ I can only hope to have provided a critical context in which they can be used and perceived for purposes contrary to those for which they were initially fabricated. The various forms of today's racialized violence were prefigured by the artistic, intellectual, and political investments co-mediated through colonial culture. Studying these investments as part and parcel of the (Dutch) cultural archive may provide new historical perspectives to help comprehend past and present traumas and for different agents in public debates to chalk out possible future pathways.

37 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 62.

38 Translating passages and phrases replete with (un)concealed racialized violence, I struggled to find a balance between taking into account the historical contexts in which these texts were cultivated and not actively reproducing words that helped shape the harmful ways in which people of color continue to experience discrimination. I have decided to translate the Dutch word “neger” as “Black” or “enslaved” depending on the specific context in which it occurs. Original citations are always inserted in footnotes and titles of historical texts will, of course, be preserved. This is not a matter of “censoring” history—in fact, translating is *always* a matter of making informed choices. Historical texts may be timeless, but the ways in which we speak about them, fortunately, change.

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