Voltaire, Stedman and Suriname Slavery

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Et il versait des larmes en regardant son Nègre, & en pleurant
il entra dans Surinam ...

Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme*, 1759¹

... there is no conceivable way in which we can now be certain
that [slaves] were indeed better treated in one place than
another. ... Better to dispute the number of angels on a
pinhead than to argue that one country's slavery is superior to
another's.

Marvin Harris, 'The Myth of the Friendly Master', 1971²

Fesi ben dé bifo schilderei.

Proverb among Suriname slaves, recorded 1835³

As Voltaire's *Candide*, sometime in the mid-eighteenth century, walks
towards the town of Suriname, he stumbles upon a terribly maimed black
man. The unfortunate creature wears nothing but a pair of blue canvas
drawers and has both his left leg and right hand missing. A conversation
ensues which will help to credit this Dutch colony in the Guianas with the
fame of representing the worst of slavery in the Americas:

'What are you doing here, my friend?' he [Candide] asked. 'And
what a dreadful state you are in!'

'I am waiting for my master, Mr. Vanderdendur, who owns the
famous sugar-works,' replied the negro.

'Did Mr. Vanderdendur treat you like this?' asked Candide.

'Yes, Sir,' said the negro, it's custom. For clothing, we are given a

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pair of canvas drawers twice a year. Those of us who work in the factories and happen to catch a finger in the grindstone have a hand chopped off; if we try to escape, they cut off one leg. Both accidents happened to me. That's the price of your eating sugar in Europe.⁴

Candide had not been the first to witness the extreme cruelty of Suriname slavery. His fictional predecessor of the 1680s, Oroonoko, the Royal Slave, had experienced it far more dramatically.⁵ And if we step from the fictional into the real world, we find Oroonoko's contemporary Warren depicting a gloomy picture of the Suriname slaves, 'sold like *Dogs*, and not better esteem'd but for their Work sake, which they perform all the Week with the severest usages for the slightest fault'.⁶ This representation of Suriname slavery finds firm ground again with Captain Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796). Stedman had lived in the colony in the 1770s. By then, Suriname 'had earned a solid reputation even among such rivals as Jamaica and Saint Domingue, for its heights of planter opulence and depths of slave misery'.⁷ Small wonder, then, that twentieth-century scholarship has often denounced Suriname as the most disgusting variant of New World slavery. And for quite some time the explanation seemed obvious – *vide* Tannenbaum.⁸

However, other stories may be told. Let us start again with a closer reading of Voltaire's *Candide ou l'optimisme*. The chapter on Suriname is replete with errors of fact. Who ever walked, as did Candide and his companion Cacambo, for a hundred days, passing through a desert instead of a tropical rain forest, before arriving in the capital of Paramaribo, erroneously named 'Surinam' by Voltaire? Judging from his usage of the Dutch tongue, Candide was something of a polyglot; yet to converse with a Suriname slave, Sranan Tongo ('Negro-English') should have been the vehicle. The Christianized slave whom Candide and Cacambo meet denounces the hypocrisy of the Dutchmen; the latter tell the slaves on Sundays that both blacks and whites are Adam's children, but abuse them all the same.⁹ Real life was worse, if we would take Christianization as an asset: the Suriname planters at the time stubbornly refused to have their slaves exposed to missionaries. Finally, the recurring mention of ships of Spanish or French flag with destinations as diverse as Buenos Aires, Venice and Bordeaux is absolutely at odds with the type of mercantilism the Dutch imposed on an isolated Suriname.¹⁰

So what is the Suriname Voltaire alludes to? To start with, it is noteworthy that Voltaire added the lines on the slave at the last minute; in the penultimate manuscript, Suriname was nothing but a stage for Candide's irritating encounters with local swindlers.¹¹ Closer inspection

of the slave's mutilation – a gruesome thought – suggests that Voltaire drew on Père Labat's *Nouveau voyage* (1724) and the French *Code noir* rather than to any text on Suriname slavery.¹²

Why then Suriname as a stage to denounce American slavery? This seems to be the wrong question. In fact, Suriname was in the manuscript for reasons other than to decry slavery, let alone a Dutch Caribbean variant. Perhaps Voltaire's reading of a recent French translation of *Oroonoko* had suggested the connection between harsh slavery and Suriname; yet he drew equally upon readings on Jamaica and Saint Domingue.¹³ In fact, in the *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756) he mentions Suriname solely as the colony where the Dutch have brought 'their genius' by constructing canals. Below the inserted section on the slave, centre-stage is again reserved for Candide and the European frauds who successfully try to swindle him. Certainly, he wept as he looked at 'son Nègre' and as he entered the city.¹⁴ ('His' negro, apparently a becoming appropriation for having listened to the slave's bitter complaints.) But once in Paramaribo there is no more talk of slaves. The 'noire [!] melancholie' over men's meanness reflects Candide's unequal financial transactions with rogues. Only after that experience does Candide question optimism.

Suriname slavery, therefore, is not the issue. Neither is Suriname. The colony simply provided Voltaire with the stage to settle some outstanding debts with the Dutch publisher Van Duren. The latter had frustrated Voltaire in various publishing efforts. Voltaire thought of him and, by extension, most Dutch publishers as frauds; and here we find, in Suriname, a treacherous Dutch slaveowner and merchant with the garbled name of Vanderdendur who not only mutilates his slave but – worse – pulls Van Duren's old trick on Candide.¹⁵

Candide is a superb satire replete with taunts at many a creed, nationality and trade. The novella definitely does not provide firm ground for an assessment of slavery in Dutch Guiana. Neither does Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or, the History of the Royal Slave*. Whereas Voltaire never visited Suriname, there is quite some evidence that Behn did so. Some take her *Oroonoko* as based on real-life experiences, whereas others suggest fiction or 'verisimilitude'; the evidence is inconclusive.¹⁶ It is clear, however, that the colonial authorities at the time were already struggling with 'the insolencies of our negroes, killing our stock, breaking open houses, threatening our women, and some flying in the woods in rebellion.'¹⁷ And, it may be added, it is all too probable that planter society reacted with some of the sickening brutalities such as those that brought Oroonoko's life to a dreadful end. Yet much as this may speak of early colonization and slavery in the West Indies,

Oroonoko does not provide evidence on *Dutch* Caribbean slavery: the story (like Behn's possible visit to the colony) is situated in the mid-1660s, just *before* the Dutch ousted the British and made Suriname theirs.

George Warren did live in Suriname, and his *Description of Surinam* (1667) is no work of fiction. But just like Behn, Warren wrote of the early English period. A link between Warren's observations and Dutch colonialism is again anachronistic. Consequently, in this first listing of opinion makers Stedman, in his 1796 *Narrative*, is the only author advancing evidence that should be taken to reflect both Suriname slavery and Dutch colonialism. We will return to him in a while.

Not unlike present-day mass media, past opinion-makers were bent on focusing upon the spectacular. Much of the established representation of Suriname slavery may stem from this mechanism. New authoritative voices followed up on Voltaire and Stedman. From Johnston's *The Negro in the New World* (1910) through Tannenbaum's *Slave and Citizen* (1946) and Boxer's *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* (1965), appraisals of Suriname slavery echo Stedman's *Narrative*. Recent scholarship has an ambiguous record. On the one hand, some decades after the initial lively debates on the Tannenbaum and Elkins theses, scholars such as Schwartz and Scott now tend to dismiss the debate over an alleged continuum of slavery varieties as futile, even 'wrongheaded'. On the other hand, the contention that Suriname was known for its 'depths of slave misery' reflects a still authoritative appraisal.¹⁸

In this essay, I trace the pedigree of conventions and scholarly representations of Suriname slavery, establish the arguments forwarded, and assess these against the results of recent research. As a heuristic device, this focus serves to help chart specific characteristics of slavery in this Dutch colony. In an epilogue, I will reconsider the utility of the concept of American slavery as a continuum with variants ranging from harsh to mild.

Perhaps a brief introduction to Suriname is appropriate. A typical Caribbean plantation society, this Dutch colony in the Guianas produced primarily sugar and coffee, next cotton, cacao and hardwood. Primarily through the massive importation of African slaves, the total population gradually increased to over 60,000 by the early 1770s. Natural population decrease brought this figure down to some 56,000 in the next decade. Total population remained in the low 50,000s up to emancipation in 1863, when the figure was put at 53,000. For most of the period, the proportion of slaves to the total population was staggering even in comparative perspective, oscillating between 84 per cent and 96 per cent up to 1830; in the last decades of slavery this figure decreased rapidly, reaching a relatively low 69 per cent at emancipation.¹⁹

Up to the the late eighteenth century, the colony was governed not directly by the Dutch state but by a semi-public *Societeit van Suriname*. Only in 1816 did the Dutch state assume direct control. The later period was marked by increased state intervention in local affairs. Characteristically, in the previous period the colony had been ruled by local legislation and by public institutions mainly manned by the local elite. No consistent body of legislation regarding slavery was promulgated. Rather, a limited corpus of slave regulations first established in 1686 was enlarged time and again. Not before 1829 was the slave explicitly referred to as a human being, even if with the status of a minor under tutelage. Encompassing ameliorative legislation was enacted in 1851, barely a dozen years before full emancipation.²⁰

Few major slave revolts occurred in Suriname. Marronage, in contrast, was endemic, and a series of Maroon wars brought the colony at times near to collapse. Following the example set by the British in Jamaica, eventually the colony's government – much to the resentment of hard-line planters – opted for pacification through negotiation. The two major Maroon groups, the Ndjuka and the Saramaka, obtained peace and recognition in 1760 and 1762, respectively. Yet marronage continued and new hostilities reached a height with the first Boni Maroon War, lasting from 1765 to 1777. This war, documented by Stedman who fought on the colonial side, ended with the settlement of the Boni Maroons in French Guiana. Hostilities continued off and on.²² Yet the Boni War had been the last major defiance of colonial rule. Up to emancipation, individual marronage and slave resistance remained endemic, but there were no all-out Maroon wars or major slave revolts.

What representation of Suriname slavery emerges from the literature, both contemporary and recent? First of all, it should be noted that the various authors disclose information on many aspects of Suriname slavery, yet narrow their comments regarding 'harshness' mainly to one sphere. Perhaps at this stage a methodological intermezzo is useful. Over two decades ago, Genovese rightfully argued that discussions on variants of slavery in the Americas were often confused if not altogether useless because of an absence of clearly defined criteria. An ensuing confusion of tongues had discredited the effort to compare colonial variants of slavery. In an attempt to overcome the 'unfortunate insistence that we cannot make a judgement on the relative severity of the slave systems,' Genovese argued for a differentiation between three basic meanings of 'treatment':

1. *Day-to-day living conditions*: Under this rubric fall such essentially measurable items as quantity and quality of food, clothing,

housing, length of the working day, and the general conditions of labor.

2. *Conditions of life*: This category includes family security, opportunities for an independent social and religious life, and those cultural developments which, as Elkins has shown, can have a profound effect on the personality of the slave.

3. *Access to freedom and citizenship*: This is the meaning for 'treatment' that is implied in the work of Frank Tannenbaum and those who follow him closely. It ought to be immediately clear that there is no organic connection between this and the first category and only an indirect connection between this and the second.²³

This attempt at a methodological solution to the previous Babylonian confusions has not become the standard frame of reference in subsequent literature on the subject; much less has it solved the puzzle. Even so, it provides a useful perspective for studying the literature on Suriname slavery. A cursory review reveals that the various authors disclose information on the different levels as categorized by Genovese. Yet the yardstick by which Suriname slavery was measured stemmed primarily from criteria of the first category. In this context, accusations and negations of cruelty and excessive violence on the part of the slaveowners dominated the literature from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. In addition, it may be noted that a serious debate on the justification of slavery as such was conspicuous by its absence well into the early nineteenth century.

As Warren, in his *Description of Surinam*, depicted the colony in the last days of British rule, he documented the agonies of slave life in the earliest frontier days: poorly-fed, naked, toiling endlessly under severe repression. Small wonder, '[t]hese wretched miseries not seldome drive [the slaves] to desperate attempts for the Recovery of their Liberty'; those caught either commit suicide or 'they'l manifest their fortitude, or rather obstinacy in suffering the most exquisite tortures [. . .] inflicted upon them, for a terrour and example to others.' Yet other slaves simply wait for death, which will inaugurate a new life in their own homesteads, 'not otherwise hoping to be freed from that indeed un-equal'd slavery'.²⁴

Herlein's *Beschryvinge van Zurinamen* (1718), the first substantial Dutch work on the colony, is less emphatic and in many ways set the tone for subsequent writing. African slavery is perfectly compatible with the Bible; blacks have a low character and are no fitting subject for Christianization. At the same time, Herlein could not conclude his treatise on this 'all too disgusting' subject without emphasizing the maxim that slaves

had to be treated 'neither too cruelly nor too mildly'; actually, he claimed that high mortality rates were often the consequence of insufficient nutrition or harsh treatment. Herlein concluded the description of a series of sickening punishments with the formulation of a planters' axiom, which in all sorts of variations would be repeated in subsequent literature: '[Even if] this is a people impossible to rule without beatings and corrections, nonetheless one should be extremely prudent in inflicting such.' Not unlike Warren, Herlein suggested that 'these nations do not care much about dying'; only whereas Warren located the slaves' beliefs in reincarnation in Africa, Herlein intimated a conviction of rebirth as whites, in the metropolis.²⁵

As Herlein published his book, marronage increasingly posed a threat to the burgeoning colony. All through the eighteenth century, marronage and several Maroon wars were to be a dominant concern in colonial discourse. Real life may have witnessed a vicious circle of abuse, ensuing marronage, and aggravating abuse. Contemporary authors emphasized either the abuse leading to marronage, or, conversely, the need for rigidity in order to combat slave resistance and the Maroons. Not surprisingly, criticism of planters' harshness originated mostly outside their circles. Mid-century governor Mauricius, whose enduring conflicts with the local plantocracy eventually caused his resignation from office, explicitly traced the problems of marronage and slave resistance to 'brutish rule' and 'debaucheries' with female slaves. Of such, he could provide 'unbelievable illustrations' – 'one only wishes that everything was accomplished here as zealously as the execution of slaves'.²⁶ Similar accusations had been uttered by a Reverend Kals, the one Dutch protestant minister serving in Suriname who had accused his flock of low morals, mistreating their slaves and abusing the women. Not surprisingly, Kals too was forced to leave the colony prematurely.²⁷

From the 1770s onwards, such indictments entered the literature more frequently. Hartsinck's *Beschryving van Guiana* (1770) unintentionally provided an abundance of evidence against slavery in the Dutch Guianas.²⁸ Again – even if only from hearsay – Hartsinck contrasted 'just' rule with extremely harsh control and punishment. He also introduced the figure of rebellious slaves and Maroon spokesmen denouncing abuse as the catalyst of slave resistance. The *Beschryving*, the first study with elaborate chapters on history, included an array of extremely severe punishments actually inflicted on rebel slaves, which would be repeated over and again by future authors. Hartsinck also introduced the concept of absenteeism as a condition conducive to maltreatment, and the singling out of Jewish planters as the harshest slaveowners; both unsubstantiated claims would linger in the literature until today.²⁹

In his *Histoire philosophique et politique* (1774), Raynal not only suggested a vicious circle of extreme harshness, slave resistance and marronage; he also advanced the first explicit classification of Suriname slavery as infinitely worse than in the Caribbean islands.³⁰ Several subsequent pamphlets likewise indicted the endemic abuse of the Suriname slaves, even if refraining from comparisons.³¹ By the early 1780s, the authoritative Dutch multi-volume study *Hollands rijkdom* almost off-handedly blamed planters' abuse for the continuing Maroon problem which threatened the very existence of Suriname.³² At the closing of the century, Stedman was to bring this line of argument to an unprecedented level of detail and empathy.

Meanwhile, such indictments had not remained undisputed. In his 1763 planters' manual, Pistorius could still opt for the routine of rehearsing the axiom of 'wise', 'good', 'just', in short, neither-too-harsh-nor-too-mild rule. With Fermin (1770), however, apologetics became a major theme. Like all contemporary authors, Fermin advocated just rule. But in addition he explicitly sided against those 'who denounce [Suriname slavery] with foolhardy ardor'. In a rather elusive comparison with slavery in other colonies, he either put Suriname in the same category as its competitors, or actually in a milder one. In his later *Tableau*, he explicitly denounced British West Indian slavery as harsh.³³

Likewise, both editions of the most authoritative eighteenth-century planters' manual reiterated prescriptions for just rule, warning against overworking and abusing the slaves, and portraying the ideal planter in an almost paternalistic fashion: 'To rule [the slaves] well, one sometimes needed *Salomon's* wisdom, *Samson's* strength, and *Job's* patience.' Only one direct rebuttal of negative representations of Suriname slavery was included, in response to the unfortunate circumstance that 'for a few years, otherwise extremely educated authors have interpreted cruelty as the norm [in Suriname]'. The reasoning is predictable, and concluded with an argument never before exposed as clearly: 'even if one were devoid of any feelings of virtue and human compassion, for sheer self-interest one has to treat his negroes well, and to keep clear of all cruelty'.³⁴

The *Essai historique* (1788), a history of the colony by prominent representatives of the substantial Jewish community, did add one new perspective. Its authors aimed mainly at a revindication of the Jewish contribution to the colony's development. Like Hartsinck, they used the figure of a Maroon spokesman, but in this case, to rebut the former's accusations regarding the alleged cruel nature of Jewish slaveowners.³⁵

Apparently, by the 1780s both sides of the spectrum agreed that abuse was a prime cause of slave resistance; the debate centred on the frequency of such maltreatment. Implicitly, both sides conformed as well to the

maxim that just rule, that is, observance of the colonial laws and the unwritten codes of behaviour forged between masters and slaves, would keep the slaves from rebelling. Hartsinck's arguments on absenteeism as an additional factor aggravating the slaves' condition had not yet entered the mainstream.

As Stedman arrived in the colony to help repress the Maroon guerrilla (1773), he may have gone through the literature up to Hartsinck.³⁶ As he finished his own manuscript, he might have done some more reading. But for all we know, Stedman relied much more on his own experiences than on what others had written. References to published sources are few, and relate mostly to Hartsinck, Fermin and Raynal; Stedman apparently did not study the planter's manuals.

The *Narrative* may be read as a litany of repugnant brutalities, an insight into a day-to-day life characterized by unparalleled arbitrariness, sexual abuse and cruelty. And indeed, as such the *Narrative* has usually been read, and as such it has marked all subsequent writing on Suriname slavery. For present purposes, this reading indeed is the most relevant, as is the original 1796 edition and the various translations published within a few years. These editions, more than anything else, came to shape the image of Suriname slavery. The recently published unbowdlerized edition presents the more accurate version, but by definition did not have an additional impact until the last few years.³⁷

As Price and Price argue, Stedman demonstrated a typical ambivalence regarding slavery and blacks. On the one hand, he emphasized that slaves too were human beings. Reflecting on brutalities inflicted upon the slaves, Stedman confessed that these 'almost induced me to decide between the Europeans and the Africans in this colony, that the first were the greater barbarians of the two – a name which tarnishes Christianity'.³⁸ On the other hand, Stedman hardly stepped out of the racist mainstream of his days. He did not favour abolition, and even explicitly defended 'just' slavery. As a military man, he actively contributed to the relentless subjugation of the rebel Maroons. Yet precisely this middle-of-the-road position makes it impossible simply to dismiss Stedman's indictments of Suriname slavery as abolitionist exaggeration.

Stedman indeed represented the colony as a theatre of planters' opulence and slaves' misery. Maltreatment, he maintained, had provoked a long history of slave resistance and marronage; the renewed Maroon war of the 1770s as he witnessed it triggered a new episode of nauseating violence. Even more disturbing, Stedman detailed a day-to-day life full of arbitrariness, violence and abuse. In the *Narrative*, maltreatment no longer is the exception, but the rule. The average slaveowner now seems immoral and prone to the worst. Particular

responsibility is reserved for the Jewish planters and for female slave-owners; the first accusation, introduced by Hartsinck, now gained further momentum. So did the devastating comment, 'I have seen brutalities exercised so commonly in Surinam, which I never heard of in the British islands.' British Caribbean slavery was more acceptable, as it tended 'to reduce an unlimited infliction of punishment, which indeed our [British] planters have by their own laws most humanely restrained'.³⁹ Following Stedman, subsequent readers, well attuned to the logic of putting the British on the harsh pole of a continuum leading to the alleged mild Iberian variant of slavery, would simply put Suriname slavery – or Dutch Caribbean slavery *tout court* – at the extreme end of this continuum. Yet the comparison of British and Dutch slavery in the 1796 edition was not based on Stedman's 1790 manuscript, but written into the 1796 *Narrative* by an editor with a different agenda.⁴⁰

Within a few years, the *Narrative* was published in German, French, Dutch and Swedish. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the *Narrative* must have been the most widely read book on Suriname. Hence, the brutality of Suriname slavery became the central *topos* of the literature on the colonial period. A historiographical short-cut may lead straight to the present. Apparently on the basis of Stedman alone, Johnston in *The Negro in the New World* (1910) rated the 'atrocious' and 'outrageous' slavery in the 'hell' of Suriname as the worst variant in the Americas.⁴¹ And next, only on the basis of Johnston, Tannenbaum, in *Slave and Citizen* (1946), confirmed this ranking:

There were, briefly speaking, three slave systems in the Western Hemisphere. The British, American, Dutch, and Danish were at one extreme, and the Spanish and Portuguese at the other. In between these two fell the French. [...] If one were forced to arrange these systems of slavery in order of severity, the Dutch would seem to stand as the harshest, the Portuguese as the mildest, and the French, in between, as having elements of both.⁴²

A review of the subsequent, mainly Dutch-written literature, however, reveals that Stedman's Suriname was not taken for granted by most other authors. Up to the belated emancipation of 1863, two themes dominated the written works: the harshness of Suriname slavery and the character of the Suriname slave. Regarding the latter – which is not our main concern here – the essential humanity of the slave was virtually acknowledged by the nineteenth-century author. Slavery was now justified by reference to the alleged childish, as yet primitive and uneducated character of the subjugated peoples. As emancipation became inevitable, the educative

impact of slavery was brought to the fore. In this context Christianization, which had been thought of as useless, as 'pearls before swine' since the early days of colonization, came to be seen as an essential mechanism for imbuing the slave with 'civilization' and discipline. Of course, nothing of this is unfamiliar in a Caribbean context.

The debate on the harshness of Suriname slavery – if we may so label a slack sequence of publications up to the 1850s and a modest boom in the next decade – rallied around two themes.⁴³ First, the nature of eighteenth-century slavery and particularly the credibility of Stedman's portrayal were questioned. Next, the accomplishments of nineteenth-century slavery were contrasted with the earlier period. Whereas the first theme was narrowed to a discussion on the actual frequency of brutalities, the second allowed for a more comprehensive approach.

Direct refutations of Stedman's or similar representations mainly denied that such imagery as the *Narrative* had been representative.⁴⁴ Yet staunch abolitionists continued to cite Stedman, in addition to Hartsinck, to underscore the harshness of the colony's slave system. More interestingly however, as the nineteenth century progressed both sides of the spectrum tended to converge on the view that such atrocities had become anomalies in their age. Suriname in the previous century gradually became 'another country', even if ardent abolitionists such as Wolbers warned that excesses would only be eradicated with full freedom:

Even if we accept that vexations and abuses inflicted upon [the slaves] are now exceptional, still today things occur that pervade the heart with melancholy [...].⁴⁵

So how did contemporaries depict slavery at the beginning of the nineteenth century? First, in less spectacular terms, and almost invariably in the Dutch language. These are down-to-earth clues why none of the nineteenth-century authors – particularly in an international context – ever got out of Stedman's shadows.⁴⁶

Second, with an increasing eye on daily plantation life. Such a perspective was informed not so much by an interest in disclosing exotic life to a Dutch audience – one may argue that such naiveté, if ever present, had long since past – as by a keener concern for the 'civilization' of the slave. Such civilization was inscribed in the paradigms of amelioration and, subsequently, the supervised transformation of slaves to free plantation laborers.

This 'instrumental' interest focused – as it did elsewhere – on kinship and social relations, on work ethic and leisure, and on religion. The information provided on these subjects offers at once a fascinating

picture of daily slave life and insight into new controversies among the nineteenth-century authors. For as emancipation came to dominate the discourse – first ‘whether’, next ‘when’ – the malleability of the slave became the yardstick by which to measure any new proposal regarding ameliorating and abolishing slavery. Positions became rather clearly defined. Pro-slavery authors defended extremely pessimistic attitudes regarding this malleability; hence a long-lasting refusal to implement significant changes in the extant system of slavery. Finally, as full emancipation became inevitable, they switched to a plea for gradual transition and, ironically, for prior preparation through education, even if traditionally they had scoffed at any attempt at education. Abolitionists, in contrast, advocated their case by reference to the essential malleability of the slave. The system of slavery, not any inherent characteristic of blacks, had impeded their development. Careful education and Christianization would transform them into responsible citizens, if not overnight, at least within a relatively short time. Prognoses for the ‘success’ of emancipation therefore became inextricably linked to convictions regarding the slaves’ malleability, or more crudely, to the slaves’ capacity and willingness to internalize European values and to live modest, ‘civilized’ plantation lives.⁴⁷

The third and for present purposes most relevant topic is how contemporaries substantiated and explained the alleged improvement of the slaves’ conditions with regard to the previous century. At the beginning of the century, Stedman’s rendering of Suriname in the 1770s was the most forceful and certainly internationally the best-known representation of Suriname slavery, even though other authors had come to less dramatic conclusions. Actually, the French official Malouet, who had visited the colony precisely at the end of the guerrilla warfare of the 1770s which inspired Stedman’s writing, came to more nuanced conclusions, again juxtaposing British and Dutch West Indian slavery.⁴⁸

As the mainstream of nineteenth-century authors nuanced or refuted Stedman’s representation of the previous period, all did acknowledge that the whip and other disciplinary devices by necessity remained part and parcel of the system. There was no denial of incidents of brutality – particularly, and conveniently, situated in time past – but the thrust of the argument was that these had been exceptional and now were rare indeed.⁴⁹ From the 1820s onwards, comparisons with quality of life among the European proletariat were included in this reasoning, emphasizing the social security provided by plantation slavery.⁵⁰ By the 1840s, references to the alleged failure of emancipation in the British and French West Indies provided additional arguments to underpin the relative ease of slave life in Suriname.⁵¹ In the 1850s, as the Dutch at last began

preparing legislation for full emancipation, anti-slavery authors produced attacks on Suriname slavery echoing Stedman; their arguments, however, were derived mostly from secondary sources.⁵²

The methodological problem with this 'substantiation' of the gradual improvement of slave conditions, of course, is that it rests primarily on a lumping together of subjective opinions which can hardly be verified. That these opinions tended to converge irrespective of the ideological positions of the authors with regard to slavery is a case in point, but cannot be interpreted as corroboration. The evidence forwarded by contemporaries is to a large degree circumstantial, and centred around the power relations on the plantations and the frequency of abuse. Specifically interesting arguments testify to a stronger bargaining position of the slaves and more state control over the planters, both tending to curtail the planters absolute powers⁵³. On specific topics other than this, opinions differed.⁵⁴ Perhaps the one hard fact, mentioned by a few authors only, was the significant improvement of demographic performance of the slave population. As late as the 1780s, Blom still reckoned with an average demographic decrease of 50 per thousand; by the late 1820s, this figure was said to be reduced to 25–30, and by 1850 to 10.⁵⁵

The main arguments put forward to at once underpin and explain the change for the better in the slaves' condition related to increasing state intervention and the qualitative improvement of white society at large. State intervention leading to the abolition of the slave trade (1807); the redefinition of the slave from chattel to human being, if only of minor age, to be kept under tutelage (1829); the state-sponsored Christianization efforts (1850s); and finally the introduction of new, ameliorative slave legislation (1850s), all were forwarded as evidence that the slave system had indeed entered a new phase. Even if perhaps some slave-owners sometimes tended to act irresponsibly, and in rare cases outright cruelly, such abuse had become ever more unlikely, and would certainly meet with prompt state sanctions. In addition, the educational and moral level of the white population was said to have greatly improved over the previous century. By the nineteenth century, so the argument ran, newcomers seeking employment on the plantations were usually decent, hard-working Dutchmen. Previously, plantation staff had partly been recruited among (often foreign) soldiers and sailors, resulting in the employment of 'a multitude of cruel, bad-mannered bears'.⁵⁶ The earlier low level of the white population was linked to the high degree of absenteeism, which many authors, echoing Hartsinck, argued to be a major factor leading to maltreatment.⁵⁷

As nineteenth-century authors debated the severity of the Suriname

slave system, both in their day and earlier, they continued to draw their arguments mainly from observations regarding Genovese's category of day-to-day living conditions, leaving the second and particularly the third category barely exposed. At this stage, we may well conclude the overview of contemporary literature and summarize the reconstruction of Suriname slavery in subsequent scholarship.

As indicated in the opening pages of this article, the imagery of the harshest variant has remained influential, if not dominant. The pedigree included arguably poorly-informed authors such as Johnston and Tannenbaum, but continues with the serious scholarship of Van Lier, Boxer, Price, and Price and Price. Particularly Van Lier, in his classic *Samenleving in een grensgebied*, shaded his interpretation, indicating that one should not think of the eighteenth century as a sequence of brutalities only, and moreover emphasizing the consistent improvement in time. But even so, for the eighteenth century he suggested 'a solid basis of truth for the bad reputation' of Suriname slavery.⁵⁸

The arguments for this thesis are manifold. In tune with the main argument of *Slave and Citizen*, one may surmise that Tannenbaum in ranking 'Dutch' slavery as the harshest variant linked this interpretation to the non-existence in the Netherlands of a tradition of slavery, and to the absence in the colonies of the mitigating influences of the Catholic church and authoritarian state supervision over its subjects' behaviour. Van Lier emphasized the 'fear for the slave mass' resulting from the extremely uneven black-white ratios in the colony, and even invoked Freudian concepts of psychopathology to explain why planters all too easily lapsed into sheer brutality. In addition, he reintroduced the factor of absenteeism as a major inducement to maltreatment.⁵⁹ Neither Boxer nor Goslinga presented new evidence or explanations for what they advanced as the harshness of Suriname slavery.⁶⁰

The current representation of Suriname slavery is eloquently canonized by Price and Price. In his introduction to *The Guiana Maroons*, Richard Price pointed to the extremely negative demographic figures, the highly uneven black-white ratio, endemic abuse, and the severity of both planters and the colonial state. He concluded that 'the Suriname planters' reputation for unusual brutality, sometimes merely attributed to the eloquence of Stedman's widely read work (1796), seems to me to have solid ground in fact'.⁶¹ In their introduction to the publication of the uncovered 'real' *Narrative*, Price and Price uphold this view with pretty much the same arguments. The famous passage from the *Candide* serves as an introduction to Suriname as a colony where slavery was brought to its extremes; 'Stedman's "Narrative" makes clear on almost every page that Voltaire's choice of mid-eighteenth-century

Suriname was chillingly on target.' Yet as indicated above, they also disclose that Stedman's famous comparison to British West Indian slavery, which indicted Suriname for being far worse, was actually not in the original manuscript, but only added later by Stedman's editor.⁶² This remarkable new information does not tempt the Prices to review their own assessment on Suriname slavery. For good reasons, the issue as such may be irrelevant for them. Yet the academic question remains open.

One approach – which to me seems the less constructive – is to have another look at the contemporary authors who actually shaped the still lingering imagery of Suriname slavery. We would then find that of the four probably most influential critics, Hartsinck, Stedman, Van Hoëvell and Wolbers, only Stedman had visited the colony.⁶³ In contrast, virtually all of the authors depicting a more subtle representation of Suriname slavery had lived in Suriname for some time. Obviously this is not a convincing argument *per se*. Authors living in the colony mostly had interests at stake. Outsiders such as the historians Hartsinck and Wolbers had not. But those writing 'from within' had a far better grasp of power relations on the slave plantation. On reading Van Hoëvell or Wolbers, one is given the impression that the slaves' fate was totally dependent upon the whims of the slaveowner. Yet on consulting even the works of a staunch abolitionist such as Teenstra, one gets a picture with far more nuance – and one returns to the truisms of 'just' rule, the planters' axiom which upholds a causal relationship between abuse, slave resistance and hence loss of production and benefits.

By the late eighteenth century, the very institution of slavery had – finally, even if not altogether as predictably as once surmised⁶⁴ – come under attack. The Dutch, both at home and in their colonies, were among the last to participate in this debate. Their record is appalling. The abolition of the slave trade was enforced by Britain.⁶⁵ The abolition of slavery itself was endlessly postponed; and when it finally came, in 1863, it included a ten-year period of state supervision over the freed population. If we look at the representations of Suriname slavery from this point of view, we find that it was only from the late-eighteenth century onwards that authors started to write intentionally to influence the debate regarding abolition. The result was several books painting a probably far too rosy picture of slavery – the books we now all casually dismiss as prejudiced. It may be worthwhile considering more seriously, however, that those attacking Suriname slavery also had a political agenda. No sane lobbyist would argue for abolition while at the same time strongly emphasizing that slavery over time had been improving considerably; and yet Teenstra, Van Hoëvell and Wolbers, all leading figures in Dutch abolitionism, did claim improvements.

The few, mostly devastating comparisons to slavery elsewhere, in particular in the British West Indies, should also be read with some suspicion. The two indictments carrying this message were both published in Britain. The most authoritative seemed to be Stedman's, yet he did not know British West Indian slavery and, moreover, the famous comparison was actually written in by a British editor who at the same time published pro-slavery tracts against abolition in the British colonies. So we are left with the *Reflections* of Cust, who thought very poorly of the 'condition of the colonies of the German [*sic*] Protestants' – but as this public servant was writing his report to the Colonial Office, the British had already abolished slavery in their domain, and were pressing their competitors finally to do the same.⁶⁶ Again, one senses politics here.

One chorus of voices has remained to denounce Suriname slavery up to the present day. These are the voices of the Suriname Maroons, whose oral tradition on the days of slavery is documented in the seminal work of Richard Price.⁶⁷ On reading this oral tradition, and as one is drawn into these rare insights from 'the other side', one is hard-pressed to feel that nothing could possibly have been as bad as slavery in Suriname. From this perspective, re-readings of Hartsinck, Stedman and all the others immediately serve to expose and confirm the brutality of this system of slavery. But even so, the questions remain valid. These are gruesome stories, but were they exceptional in that particular context, where the past seems another, dramatically different world? And would Maroons in Brazil or Jamaica, or the slaves who successfully revolted in Saint Domingue, have presented another image of their slavery conditions?

A more useful approach seems to be to confront the major recurring arguments with the evidence we have today, and to broaden the traditional perspective with its one-sided focus on abuse and violence. The categorization proposed by Genovese provides a useful reference here. Finally, the consistency of the explanations for the alleged brutality of Suriname slavery will be put to test.

Perhaps the most basic argument about the nature of Suriname slavery is demographic. It was long thought that some 300,000 to 350,000 slaves were brought to Suriname; at emancipation, the total Afro-Suriname population numbered less than 50,000. This dramatic contrast has been interpreted as evidence for the brutality of Suriname slavery. Yet detailed research by Postma suggests that the actual number of slaves imported into Suriname should be lowered to 215,000.⁶⁸ This still leaves a grisly rate of natural decrease, but much more in tune with figures recorded for other Caribbean colonies. Moreover, data derived from plantation records show a consistent improvement over time, linked both to creolization, hence demographic normalization and better adaptation

to the Guiana disease environment, and to amelioration.⁶⁹ It is also plausible that death rates for the white population were not much better.⁷⁰ Again, all this does not point to major divergences from the regional pattern.

There is no clear evidence that Suriname slaves were better or worse off than their contemporaries in terms of clothing, housing, medical care, etc. Actually, in the extreme climate and disease environment of the Guianas, being on the average in these respects may well have resulted in a comparative disadvantage. On the other hand, in terms of food the slaves' situation might have been better than on some of the islands. To a large degree, the plantations were self-sufficient. Numerous colonial decrees obliged the planters to dedicate part of the plantation surface and of plantation labour to the growing of foodstuffs which were seen, in the words of the 1759 regulations, 'as being the soul of the plantation'. Perhaps more importantly, the slaves had their own provision grounds which served to enrich the diet provided by the plantation food crops and the occasional distribution of imported goods. Their own production included not only a variety of crops, but also livestock. As early as 1718, Herlein mentioned the marketing by plantation slaves of such produce in Paramaribo.⁷¹ Slaves had Sundays off, and according to some observers also part of the Saturdays and the late afternoons. Evidently, allowing for 'time off' was a means of ensuring the reproduction of the slave population through its own efforts; but even so, it was a right which the slaves themselves reinforced time and again. Nutrition was certainly deficient by modern standards, but there is no evidence of frequent famine among the plantation slaves; this was actually one of the favourite themes for those claiming that the condition of the Suriname slaves did not compare badly to the situation of the European proletariat. The all-too-long postponement of full emancipation had the ironic side-effect that new slave regulations in the 1850s effectively forced plantation managers to buy extra provisions even if this forced them to plunge deep into the red.

As to the length of the working day, contemporary accounts vary a good deal, and subsequent findings are inconclusive. There may be solid ground for suggesting exceptionally harsh conditions here. The typical Suriname plantation was a *polder*, an ingenuous ensemble of one, and in the case of a sugar plantation even two canal systems. On the sugar plantation, one system served for irrigation and drainage systems, another at once for the transport of the sugar cane to the sugar mill and as propelling power for this mill. Both the laying out of the *polder* and its subsequent maintenance was extremely demanding work; even today descendants of the eighteenth-century Maroons recall the arduous work of digging the canals was a prime motivation for their forebears to escape

to the interior.⁷² Moreover, as the sugar mill worked from tidal energy, the two weeks a month which provided the lowest ebbs and highest tides were periods in which the planters strived to have the sugar mill working continuously.⁷³ Finally, much in contrast to island sugar production, the Suriname sugar plantation did not have one harvest period, but milled all year round. In short, the 'hydraulic economy' indeed imposed extreme conditions. And perhaps, as the *polders* indeed produced extraordinary yields, jealous outsiders could think of no other explanation for this economic success than that the Suriname planters exploited their slaves to the extreme.

Contemporaries also contrasted the particularly demanding situation on sugar plantations with the one prevailing on other types of plantations. On the former, so the word went, labour was 'infinitely more arduous than on coffee estates [hence] the slaves there are finished off more promptly.'⁷⁴ At the time, attempts to transfer slaves from non-sugar to sugar plantations frequently met with stubborn resistance; a loathing of the particular work conditions on the sugar plantations may well have been an important factor here. Subsequent demographic research has indeed substantiated that the sugar plantation caused a higher demographic toll than its chief competitor, the coffee plantation.⁷⁵ But again, such conclusions should not be taken too far. The eighteenth-century rise of the coffee plantation coincided with extremely negative demographic figures, its nineteenth-century demise with a marked overall improvement, suggesting factors other than the type of plantation were of more importance.

As a last item in the category of day-to-day living conditions, Genovese mentions 'general conditions of labour.' This concept seems at once rather vague and too narrowly defined. Perhaps it is more useful to define this as a transitional category between the categories of 'day-to-day living conditions' and 'conditions of life.' We are dealing here with direct power relations, the instruments at the planters' and the state's disposition to rule the slaves, both in work and in further living conditions. This transitional – or perhaps overpowering – category is the one which has bequeathed Suriname its bad reputation. It is here that all the horrifying executions as recounted by Stedman and many others should be classified. At this point it is very difficult to come to any conclusion. Judging from some of the contemporary literature, it is difficult not to see the planters and even those in charge of the colonial state as a bunch of rowdy pigs; but then, were their counterparts in plantation America really that much better? Is not arbitrary abuse the very essence of slavery, in all times and places?⁷⁶ The purpose or conclusion of this article is certainly not to dismiss the abundant evidence of abuse. It is indeed difficult to

conceive of slavery anywhere reaching even higher heights of cruelty. Yet one may still question the frequency of such atrocities. One should also ask whether evidence primarily collected during the heat of the guerrilla warfare with the Maroons may be read as representative. Moreover, it does not seem all that evident that the failing colonial all-out war against the Maroons by necessity implied a deterioration of planter-slave relations.

Perhaps most relevant, an excessive emphasis on the brutality of slavery in this particular colony downgrades the real and probably increasing power of the slaves. As the nineteenth century progressed, news of the Haitian revolution and then of the British and French West Indian emancipations certainly spread among the Suriname slaves. Still, there is no evidence of increased slave rebelliousness; on the contrary, the nineteenth century was remarkably uneventful up to emancipation. One could read 'Sambo' here, to quote Elkins' slave type. But it may be better to conceive of the slaves not as docile but rather as calculating human beings. The evidence points at a slow but consistent improvement of standards of living and treatment. More serious state supervision over the planters and new slave regulations were real, and increasingly the slaves managed to negotiate their terms. The Creole slave of the mid-nineteenth century was in a better position than his or her African forebears of the previous century, and as such had definitely more to lose by outright rebellion and more to win by quiet bargaining.

This does, of course, pose the question of how powerless the eighteenth-century slave was. Less so, it seems, than is commonly implied. Evidently, up to emancipation the slave could be exposed to flagrant abuse. Yet the axiom of 'just' rule existed not merely in the planters' mind; it implied a day-to-day negotiating leverage for the slaves as well. We have come to conceptualize eighteenth-century Suriname as a theatre of dreadful misery. Yet we may also think of this period as one of consistent improvement. There is nothing mechanistic or logical about that. Actually, for all of its mild reputation, its Catholicism and its Spanish authoritarianism, Cuba was just starting to demonstrate that under slavery there was no such thing as a uniform chronological sequence in modes of degradation and abuse.⁷⁷ What improvements were made in eighteenth-century Suriname may hardly be attributed to increased state intervention, which was mainly a thing of the next century. The slaves' gains reflected a slow shift in the balance of power. By mid-century, slave strikes were becoming an irrepressible negotiating instrument of the slaves – symbolically, *slavenmacht* ('slave force') was the term the Suriname planter deployed to allude to the plantation population. The relationship remained asymmetrical, but the parameters continued

to shift, in the case of Suriname consistently in favour of the slaves. In attempting to understand why, with a white-black ratio as unequal as in Suriname and with the news of atrocities no doubt quickly spreading to even the most isolated plantations, the slaves did not rebel as one and join forces with the Maroons, one could point to state and private terror. Clearly, this factor was essential; neither may we rule out the factor of psychology or ideology. Yet the factor of real slave gains should be rated more seriously than is usually accepted. Creolization and the real achievements of the eighteenth-century slaves – even of Stedman's contemporaries – may go a long way to explain the 'uneventfulness' of the next century. Paradoxically, this relative calm was to enable the Dutch to be as sluggish as they were in finally abolishing the 'peculiar institution'.

The second and third categories of Genovese's framework have been much neglected in analyses of Suriname slavery. Again, there is need for some reassessment here. With regard to the latter, 'access to freedom and citizenship,' it is evident that for most of its history Suriname had extremely low manumission rates. Between 1760 and the late 1820s, the yearly manumission rate was well under 1 per cent. This low figure, however, is not exceptional; the British West Indies recorded similar rates. The total number of free coloureds and blacks was low by all measures until the 1780s; by then, they numbered only 650 in a total free population of some 4,000. The subsequent period, however, saw a significant increase in manumission rates and the volume of the free population. In 1830 their number was over 5,000 as against only 3,500 whites. In the last decade before emancipation, manumission rates soared, adding to the overall growth of the free population.⁷⁸

Evidently these figures do not testify to widespread miscegenation. On the other hand, there are indications that access to citizenship for the free coloureds and blacks improved considerably from the later eighteenth century onwards, and may well have been superior to the situation elsewhere. By the 1770s Stedman described a splendid 'mulatto ball' in Paramaribo which he thought 'might serve as a model for decorum and etiquette'. In the subsequent period the free coloured population slowly achieved upwards social mobility, both in the plantation business and in government. However, not the harshness or mildness of Suriname slavery should serve as an explanatory factor here, but primarily the numerical weakness of the white population and its willingness to allow the free population of colour to become a buffer against an overwhelming slave majority.⁷⁹

But perhaps the major perspective which should lead to a reinterpretation of Suriname slavery derives from the cultural sphere, Genovese's second category. The disruption of family life through separate sale of

parents and children, spouses, brothers and sisters was a traumatic perspective in many parts of plantation America, particularly so in the US Deep South. In Suriname, slaves were tied to the plantation, not to its owner. Consequently, changes in the ownership of a plantation generally did not imply that its slave population would be relocated and torn apart. If a plantation was bought with the explicit intention to vacate that estate and to transfer the slaves to other plantations, official approval was needed. In the nineteenth century, remarkably, the slaves' consent was sought as well. It is unlikely that under such circumstances slave families would be torn asunder.⁸⁰

The life-span of most plantations was many generations, extending up to two centuries. This implied that Creole slaves were living in places where most of their kin had lived and died, and were buried. No doubt, this goes a long way in explaining why slave populations were reputedly attached to their particular plantation and why rather than joining the Maroons they often fought them. Moreover, the definition of home territory must have expanded over time as increasingly relationships and sexual partners were found on neighbouring plantations. This practice was endorsed by the average planter, who fairly early acknowledged that it was impossible and risky to impede the slaves' free movement for such purposes.⁸¹

In plantation America, opportunities for creating an independent social and cultural life were primarily a function of the proportion of slaves to whites and metropolitan efforts to shape the slaves' life other than for the purpose of labour. In Suriname, both factors were conducive to a relatively high degree of slave autonomy. The white population was too small even to consider deeply influencing the slaves' life other than in terms of discipline in the area of labour. Otherwise, no concerted attempts were made until well into the nineteenth century. One could make an exaggerated claim that the Dutch were the least successful colonial power in the region: they did not even manage to impose their language on the peoples they introduced there. In Suriname, the vernacular developed during the early British colonization – Sranan Tongo or 'Negro-English' – maintained its position ever after.⁸² Without a knowledge of this language, no planter could hope to communicate with his slaves. In other cultural spheres, even an attempt at interchange was long dismissed as useless or worse. Christianization became accepted policy only in the mid-nineteenth century.

The absence of Christianizing efforts has often been interpreted as a complete lack of interest and even a denial of the essential humanity of the slaves. This analysis no doubt is true, but it is a partial truth only. White society initially ignored the 'rudimentary' religious life of the

slaves; soon, however, it had to accept both the apparent centrality to the slaves of religious practices and the essential impossibility of eradicating them. The extremely unequal ratio of white management to the slave population, usually – if not convincingly – referred to as a factor conducive to slave abuse, had opposite consequences in this sense. The relatively large slave plantations averaged over one hundred slaves and only a few white staff members.⁸³ As the latter could not even hope to go much beyond concentrating on production and work discipline, the slaves were virtually autonomous in a cultural sense. Actually, the staff often bargained over work loads by offering subsequent time-off for cultural ceremonies which they knew to be crucial to the slaves.⁸⁴ At the same time, inter-plantation contacts were surprisingly frequent, primarily at the individual level, but to some extent involving larger numbers too.⁸⁵ Cultural innovation must therefore have spread relatively easily.

Slave religion and culture became vital signifiers in the slaves' life to which white society had no access. From this perspective, the colonizers' lack of interest in the slaves' spiritual salvation may best be interpreted as an unintended boost to the development of an independent slave culture which produced anything but Elkins' Sambo-type slave. The belated, 'progressive' switch to Christianizing efforts in contrast may be inscribed in a wider civilizing effort which essentially aimed at eradicating the Afro-Suriname culture developed over the previous centuries. Christianization was part of a larger policy which included disciplining kinship and mating patterns, installing another work ethic, and so on.⁸⁶ Paradoxically therefore, whereas the nineteenth-century slaves were probably better off than their forebears in terms of material conditions of life and bargaining power, they were at the same time undergoing an unprecedented offensive against their culture, writ large. The apparent initial failures of such civilizing efforts served to confirm the truths of pro-slavery ideologues and to embarrass the 'progressives'. They also testified to the resilience of a slave culture evolved under conditions of autonomy exceptional in other plantation societies of the Americas.⁸⁷

The traditional representation of Suriname slavery seems to have arisen to a large extent from a narrow focus on circumstantial evidence of physical abuse only and was mostly uninformed about slavery elsewhere in the Americas. Even so, it may be worthwhile to review briefly the major factors put forward to explain the alleged unusual cruelty of Suriname slavery. These factors all reflect either the failure or the reluctance of the Dutch to transform Suriname into a settler colony and to apply 'Western' or 'Christian' notions of humanity to the colony's population. Contemporaries emphasized the extremely uneven ratio of whites to the slave population, the low morality of the white population, and

absenteeism as explanatory factors. Subsequent research added the factors of Dutch culture and the particular role of the state.

Ratios of whites to blacks, until the late eighteenth century roughly coinciding with ratios of the free to the slave population, were indeed exceptional even in a comparative context. Around 1740, whites accounted for only four per cent of the population, and this figure did not significantly rise until the last decades. At the hinterland plantations, slaves outnumbered the management by at least 50 to 1. These exceptionally uneven ratios caused a permanent fear of uprisings, particularly as Maroons could easily act as catalysts. Therefore, the argument runs, white society resorted to heights of cruelty in punishing even the slightest infractions of their established order, thus trying to discourage potential rebels. Moreover, and less calculating, frustrated and chronically insecure planters often acted out their alleged power monopoly by pointless rage and abuse – Van Lier later labelled this behaviour ‘psychopathological’. The latter argument may well have some explanatory validity, even if to explain exceptional abuse only. The former, however, may just as well be interpreted the other way around: in view of the overwhelming majority of slaves, was ‘just’ rule not the only feasible strategy of management?

The low morality of the white population was notorious. The recruitment of the plantation staff among the lowest European classes was a case in point, as was the fact that Suriname with its high mortality figures was no popular destination. Moreover, the colonial elites had the reputation of being rough-mannered and poorly educated. But again, Suriname was no exception to a more general feature of Caribbean societies.⁸⁸ Some validity may, however, be attached to the contemporary claim that the morality of the white population improved somewhat in the nineteenth century. New recruits came from a European culture which was gradually beginning to accept the humanity of blacks and moreover was changing its own disciplinary strategies.⁸⁹ Also, the gradual shift in power relations and the pacification of the Maroons had resulted in a lessening of the tensions which had defined the coarse ‘frontier’ mentality of previous colonists.

Both contemporary authors and subsequent scholars have attached particular value to the factor of absenteeism, yet this seems to be a rather unconvincing argument. Even by Caribbean standards, Suriname rates of absentee ownership were indeed staggering. But whereas this phenomenon may go some way to explain the demise of the Suriname plantation economy, it is not at all evident that absenteeism affected the slaves negatively. The implicit equation of resident ownership with more paternalistic rule is dubious at best and is contradicted by nineteenth-

century Cuban slavery, to cite but one example. Moreover, if we interpret power relations on the plantation as a complicated negotiating process, it is hard to see why hired plantation staff would risk their lives by excessively abusing the slaves working for an absentee owner. And finally, this argument runs into serious trouble as its proponents also claim that the slaves' condition improved with time: at the same time, absenteeism increased.⁹⁰

The initial debates over the seminal studies by Tannenbaum and Elkins have long died down. Even so, the question whether metropolitan culture and attitudes towards black slaves mattered for slaves and free coloureds and blacks has remained intriguing. This is certainly the case for Suriname. One may suspect that Tannenbaum's ranking of Dutch slavery as the harshest variant in the Americas, even though not substantiated in *Slave and Citizen*, was implicitly linked to his views regarding the crass materialism and inhumanity of protestant capitalists. Early on, Hoetink falsified this reasoning by comparing the mild variety of slavery in Curaçao with the harsh variant in Suriname. He rightly suggested that, as both were Dutch colonies, factors other than metropolitan culture were decisive in determining the variant of slavery and subsequent race relations. In designating Suriname slavery as harsh, Hoetink was for all purposes drawing a valid comparison with Curaçao, not implying that the former variant was necessarily harsher than in other slave societies.⁹¹ We may take this one step further by emphasizing that, whatever the *relative* harshness of Suriname slavery, the 'Dutch' culture of the Suriname elite is an invalid explanatory factor. For several reasons – which had absolutely nothing to do with moral objections – up to the early nineteenth century few Dutchmen settled in the colony. Jews formed by far the largest segment in white society: according to the few available counts, one-third in 1787, two-thirds in 1811, and half in 1830.⁹² The rest of the white population was made up of a motley crew of Dutch, French Huguenot, German and British origins. From this perspective, it does not seem particularly useful to trace whatever variant one should wish to attribute to Suriname slavery to the Dutch character of its white citizens. Ironically, the single most important group of white settlers were Sephardic Jews who, as Hoetink pointed out, were culturally as close to the supposedly mild Iberian tradition as one could get.⁹³ A step further in this respect will not be to argue that the improvement of slave conditions in the nineteenth century owed much to what contemporaries saw as a 'return' of ambitious Dutchmen. Situational factors were decisive, particularly the changes brought about – externally imposed – by abolition and amelioration policies on the one hand, creolization and increased bargaining power of the slaves on the other.

It may be argued, though, that the particular form of Dutch colonialism did make a difference – well into the nineteenth century for the worse. The argument here goes some way in underpinning Tannenbaum's thesis. As was the case in the British colonies, metropolitan governments did allow for a large measure of autonomy for their overseas elites. In the case of Suriname, it is clear that the transient Dutch governors often found themselves overruled in practice by the local planter class. In addition, it seems evident that outside interference with local matters was marginal up to the 1820s. Of all Caribbean colonies, only the Dutch possessions had nothing but locally produced slave laws.⁹⁴ Admittedly, as the cases of nineteenth-century Cuba and Puerto Rico demonstrate, the effectiveness of authoritarian colonial rule in mitigating the slaves' conditions was not as crucial as Tannenbaum suggested. Still, it may well be surmised that a firmer metropolitan grip on the functioning of planter-dominated local rule would have had some positive effect. As the Dutch government in the nineteenth century finally heightened its profile, this certainly produced some beneficial results. The successive new slave regulations each raised the standards in favour of the slaves, and archival records show that indeed by the 1850s, the colonial state made sure that the planters stuck to these regulations. But by then, of course, slavery in the British and French Caribbean had long come to an end altogether.

How then should we assess Suriname slavery? Voltaire's Suriname may easily be dismissed, but not so the evidence forwarded by so many authoritative but contradicting voices. *Fesi ben dé bifo schilderei*, the face was there before the painting, something must be true of all this imagery ... Yet at the same time it is evident that the various voices are as partial as one would suspect. Still, there are ways to dispute variants of slave systems – as long as we do not, as Harris suggests one does, debate in unqualified terms such as 'better', much less 'superior'.⁹⁵

First, 'Suriname slavery' as such is a futile abstraction. Arguably the only feasible way to compare slave systems in the Americas is to think of these on various levels, as suggested by Genovese, and on a time scale which relates to the dominance of plantation development, as was suggested by various critics of Tannenbaum and Elkins. Where would this type of analysis leave Suriname? In terms of sheer violence and brutalities, it is hard to think of anything worse; in this perspective, eighteenth-century Suriname may indeed well have ranked among the most atrocious variants of slavery. Here, we may come close to Stedman's Suriname. But for the nineteenth century we would be justified in scaling Suriname as considerably less harsh, whereas Cuba would have to be moved the other way. If we were thinking in terms of material conditions of life, again there would be various measures and hallmarks. The

hydraulic economy and an unfavourable disease environment taken together probably made Suriname slavery particularly demanding. In demographic terms, we would have to allow for considerable improvement over time, but at the same time Suriname would continue to compare unfavourably with other territories, particularly the US South. Most other material conditions would probably not make for anything but an average ranking.

Judged by the possibilities of legal escape through manumission, the record of Suriname would be rated on a harsh pole of the matrix, even if the last decades of slavery showed a remarkable improvement. On the other hand, opportunities for freed slaves and coloureds to find a niche in society were relatively good. In terms of chances to entertain stable kinship and other personal relationships, the Suriname slave population in all times was better off than, particularly, the US slave. Finally, the Suriname slaves' autonomy in cultural life, in the broadest sense, was a remarkable if unintended consequence of the deep dichotomy in the colony's structure. Again paradoxically, as material conditions improved, as the slaves bargaining power was increasingly accepted and as emancipation neared, precisely this autonomy was challenged, not by harsh slaveowners but by the civilizing forces spearheaded by missionaries.

This alternative ranking is nothing but exploratory. Even so, it should be clear that extending Stedman's representation to all aspects and periods of Suriname slavery will not help us understand either this particular variant of slavery in the Americas, or the so-called 'peculiar institution' as such.

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NOTES

1. Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme* [André Morize, ed.] (Paris, [1759], 1957), p. 130, ll. 59–61. All references to lines refer to the 1957 edition of *Candide*. The original indeed has 'Nègre', not 'Nègre'.

2. Marvin Harris, 'The Myth of the Friendly Master', in Ann J. Lane (ed.), *The Debate over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and his Critics* (Urbana, 1971), pp. 200, 204.
3. M.D. Teenstra, *De landbouw in de kolonie Suriname voorafgegaan door eene geschiedenis natuurkundige beschouwing dier kolonie* (Groningen, 1835), Vol. 2, p. 226.
4. Voltaire, *Candide ou l'optimisme* [André Magnan, ed.] (Paris, [1759; 1913] 1982), pp. 85–6.
5. Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko, or, the History of the Royal Slave*, in Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko and Other Stories* [Maureen Duffy, ed.] (London, [1688] 1986), pp. 27–99. Likewise, the author of *Wahrhafte Erzählung* (probably fictional, as its title suggests) maintained that Suriname slaves were treated worse than cattle. [H.D. Benjamins], 'Twee oude boekjes over Suriname', *West-Indische Gids*, 4 (1922–23), p. 169.
6. George Warren, *An Impartial Description of Surinam upon the Continent of Guiana in America*, (London, 1667), p. 17. Within two years, Warren's account was available in Dutch as well. *Een onpartijdige beschrijvinge van Surinam, gelegen op het vaste landt van Guiana in America [...] overgeset uyt het Engels* (Amsterdam, 1669).
7. Richard Price and Sally Price, 'Introduction', in John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* [Richard Price and Sally Price, eds.] (Baltimore, 1988), pp. xiii.
8. Frank Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen* (New York, 1946). See below.
9. Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 129, ll. 48–54.
10. Ibid., p. 132–3, ll. 63–5, 84, 94, 142–3.
11. Voltaire, *Candide* (1982), p. 116, n. 9.
12. Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux îles de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1724). Voltaire, *Candide*, pp. 128, n. 1–3, 129, n. 1. As Morize rightly remarks, Voltaire deliberately blurred the difference between punishment (amputating a leg – more likely, cutting the Achilles tendon) and the consequences of an accident (amputating a hand entangled in machinery in order to prevent a slave being completely crushed).
13. Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 127, n. 2, pp. 129–30, n. 4. Voltaire, *Candide* (1982), p. 119. On the wide acclaim of *Oroonoko* in France, see Gordon K. Lewis, *Main Currents in Caribbean Thought: The Historical Evolution of Caribbean Society in its Ideological Aspects, 1492–1900* (Baltimore, 1983), p. 209.
14. J. Vercruysse, *Voltaire et la Hollande* (Genève, 1966), pp. 137–8. Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 133, l. 139–41.
15. Voltaire, *Candide*, p. 127–8, ll. 31–3, n. 3, pp. 132–3, l. 97–125, pp. 134–5, ll. 171–4, n. 1. Ibid., [1982], p. 117, n. 11, p. 122, n. 3. See particularly ll. 124–5 ('un tour digne de l'ancien Monde'). On Voltaire's visits to Holland and his dealings with Van Duren, see Jean Orieux, *Voltaire ou la royauté de l'esprit* (Paris, 1966), pp. 77–86, 222–6, 254–60, 440, and Vercruysse, *Voltaire*, pp. 52–3, 137 and *passim*. Contemporary authors on Suriname apparently did not take Voltaire's Suriname seriously. I found but one elusive mention of the book: David de Is. C. Nassy et al., *Essai historique sur la Colonie de Surinam [...] par les Régents et Représentants de ladite Nation Juive Portugaise* (Paramaribo, 1788), Vol. 1, p. 156.
16. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), pp. 472–8. Maureen Duffy, *The Passionate Shepherdess: Aphra Behn 1640–89* (London, [1977] 1989), pp. 40–8, 275. Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York, 1980), pp. 42–66. Herman Wekker, 'Aphra Behn and the Royal Slave Oroonoko', in *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids/New West Indian Guide* 56 (1982), pp. 157–65.
17. The British Deputy Governor to Suriname, Byam, cited in Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra*, p. 65.
18. Harry H. Johnston, *The Negro in the New World* (London, 1910). Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*. C.R. Boxer, *The Dutch Seaborne Empire 1600–1800* (London, 1965). Sidney W. Mintz, [Review of Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Intellectual and Institutional Life*, in *American Ethnologist*, 63 (1961), pp. 579–87. Ann J. Lane (ed.), *The Debate over Slavery: Stanley Elkins and his Critics* (Urbana, 1971). Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia,*

- 1550–1835 (Cambridge, 1985), p. xv. Rebecca J. Scott, *Slave Emancipation in Cuba: The Transition to Free Labor, 1860–1899* (Princeton, 1985), p. 14. Price and Price, 'Introduction', p. xiii. Gert Oostindie, *Roosenburg en Mon Bijou: Twee Surinaamse plantages, 1720–1870* (Dordrecht, 1989), pp. 411–3.
19. Calculated from Johannes Menne Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade 1600–1815* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 185 and Alex van Stipriaan, 'Surinaams contrast: Roofbouw en overleven in een Caraïbische plantage-economie, 1750–1863' (Ph. D. dissertation, Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, 1991), pp. 327–9.
 20. On legislation, see E.V. Goveia, *The West Indian Slave Laws of the 18th Century* (Jamaica, [1960] 1976), pp. 50–3. A.J.A. Quintus Bosz, 'De ontwikkeling van de rechtspositie van de vroegere plantageslaven in Suriname', in *Emancipatie 1863–1963: Biografieën* (Paramaribo, 1964), pp. 5–22. Alan Watson, *Slave Law in the Americas* (Athens, 1989), pp. 102–14. J.A. Schiltkamp and J.Th. de Smidt (eds.), *West Indisch Plakaatboek. I. Suriname. Plakaten, ordonnantiën en andere wetten, uitgevaardigd in Suriname 1667–1816* (Amsterdam, 1973). The initial slave regulation of 1686 was significantly enlarged in 1759 and 1784.
 21. On slave resistance, see M. Müller, 'Ten Years of Guerrilla Warfare and Slave Rebellions 1750–1759', *The Low Countries History Yearbook*, 8 (1975), pp. 85–102. Sandew Hira, *Van Priary tot en met De Kom: De geschiedenis van het verzet in Suriname 1630–1940* (Rotterdam, 1983). Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, pp. 176–88, 270–4. Van Stipriaan, 'Surinaams contrast', pp. 390–420.
 22. Wim S.M. Hoogbergen, *The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname* (Leiden, 1990).
 23. Eugene D. Genovese, 'The Treatment of Slaves in Different Countries: Problems in the Applications of the Comparative Method', in L. Foner and E.G. Genovese (eds.), *Slavery in the New World* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), p. 203. In his allusion to this 'unfortunate insistence', Genovese comments directly on Davis' *Slavery in Western Culture* (pp. 54–61). It is evident, however, that his article confronts the wider issue. The reference to Stanley M. Elkins, of course, refers to *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959).
 24. Warren, *Description of Surinam*, pp. 19–20.
 25. J.D. H[erlein], *Beschryvinge van de volk-plantinge Zuriname* (Leeuwarden, 1718), pp. 123, 86, 113, and 116, respectively. All translations in this paper are mine. The resumé is based on pp. 84–116. Herlein mentions the cutting of the Achilles tendon and, in case of repetition, of the right leg as punishment for marronage (p. 113). This abuse – not unfamiliar elsewhere in the region – is highlighted in Voltaire's *Candide*.
 26. *Recueil van egte stukken en bewyzen door Salamon du Plessis en door andere: Tegens Mr. Jan Jacob Mauricius* (s.l., 1752), Vol. 4, p. 229; see also pp. 132–3. Likewise in Mauricius' poetry, written on his way back to Holland; see C.A. van Sijpesteijn, *Mr. Jan Jacob Mauricius: Gouverneur-Generaal van Suriname, van 1742 tot 1751* ('s-Gravenhage, 1858), p. 168.
 27. Kals published three pamphlets against the Suriname plantocracy, one in 1733 shortly after his return to Holland, two more in 1756. Joannes Guiljelmus Kals, *Klagte over de bedorvene Zeden der Voorgangeren zoo in 't Kerk- als Burgerbestuur In eene Zeer vrugtbare ende eerst opluikende Colonie* (Amsterdam, 1733); *Neerlands Hooft- en Wortel-Sonde, het Verzuym van de Bekinghe der Heydenen* (Leeuwarden, 1756); *Nuttige en Noodige Bekeeringe der Heidenen in Suriname en Berbices* (Leeuwarden, 1756). See J.M. van der Linde, *Jan Willem Kals: Leraar der Hervormden: Advocaat van Indiaan en Neger* (Kampen, 1987).
 28. Ironically, Hartsinck claimed that in the neighbouring Dutch colonies of Berbice and Essequibo, slaves were generally better treated than elsewhere in the region. Still, he provided a good deal of information suggesting that the 1763 Berbice slave revolt was a direct consequence of maltreatment. Jan Jacob Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana, of de Wilde Kust, in Zuid-America* (Amsterdam, 1770), Vol. 1, pp. 271, 368, 381, 399.
 29. Hartsinck, *Beschryving*, Vol. 2, pp. 778–9, 793, 799, 907–9, 916–8. On Jewish planters, Vol. 2, pp. 756, 836. Subsequently in John Gabriel Stedman, *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition, against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of*

- South America; from the Year 1772, to 1777* (London, 1796), Vol. 1, p. v. J.D. Kunitz, *Surinam und seine Bewohner* (Erfurt, 1805), p. 146. Albert von Sack, *Reize naar Surinamen, verblijf aldaar, en terugtocht over Noord-Amerika naar Europa* (Haarlem, 1821), Vol. 1, p. 46. Teenstra, *Landbouw*, Vol. 2, p. 170. M.D. Teenstra, *De negerslaven in de kolonie Suriname en de uitbreiding van het christendom onder de heidensche bevolking* (Dordrecht, 1842), pp. 132, 340. J. van der Smissen, *Beschouwingen over de Kolonie Suriname, in verband met een ontwerp tot emancipatie der slaven* (Amsterdam, 1849), Vol. 2, p. 128. *Eerste rapport der Staatscommissie, benoemd bij Koninklijk besluit van 29 november 1853, no. 86, tot het voorstellen van maatregelen ten aanzien van de slaven in de Nederlandsche koloniën: Suriname* ('s-Gravenhage, 1853), p. 293. W.R. van Hoëvell, *Slaven en vrijen onder de Nederlandsche wet* (Zaltbommel, 1854), p. 85. J. Wolbers, *Geschiedenis van Suriname* (Amsterdam, 1861), pp. 289–90. And again in F.H.R. Oedayrajsingh Varma, *Suriname, een Apartheidsexperiment met de allergruwelijkste vormen van Indianen- en negerslavernij* (Paramaribo, [1984]), p. 183. Hartsinck's description of the gruesome execution of the slave Joosje (1730), e.g., became a commonplace in subsequent literature: Hartsinck, *Beschryving*, Vol. 2, pp. 764–5. Stedman, *Narrative* 1796, Vol. 1, pp. 54, 110 (1988, pp. 67, 105), Teenstra, *Negerslaven*, p. 146, Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, p. 134, A[nton] de Kom, *Wij slaven van Suriname* (Amsterdam, 1934), p. 46; Hugo A.M. Essed, *De binnenlandse oorlog in Suriname 1613–1793* (Paramaribo, 1985), p. 32, Oedayrajsingh Varma, *Suriname*, p. 161, a.o. On absenteeism, see below.
30. G.F. Raynal, *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes*, (Amsterdam, 1774), Vol. 4, pp. 350, 364, and *Suppléments à l'histoire philosophique et politique des Etablissement et du Commerce des Européens dans les deux Indes* ('s-Gravenhage, 1781), Vol. 3, pp. 84–5.
 31. *Remarques critiques sur la Tableau historique et Politique de la Colonie de Surinam: Ou lettre d'un inconnu à Monsieur Philippe Fermin* (London, 1779), pp. 10, 16, 49, 63. *Lettre sur le Gouvernement de Surinam: Sur l'inhumanité des blancs envers les negres*, (London, 1779), p. 110–23. *De post van den Neder-Rhyn* XI (1786), no. 525, pp. 541–3.
 32. On abuse: 'It is almost unbelievable, what complaints one hears on this matter.' Elias Luzac, *Hollands rijkdom, behelzende den Oorsprong van den Koop handel, en van dezen Staat* (Leyden, 1780–83), Vol. 4, p. 467; also Vol. 2, pp. 207–8, Vol. 4, p. 471.
 33. Thomas Pistorius, *Korte en zakelijke beschryvinge van de Colonie van Suriname* (Amsterdam, 1763), pp. 89–90. Philippe Fermin, *Nieuwe algemeene beschryving van de Colonie van Suriname*, (Harlingen, 1770), Vol. 1, pp. 103, 147. Philippe Fermin, *Tableau historique et actuel de la Colonie de Surinam, et des causes de sa décadence* (Maastricht, 1778), p. 139.
 34. Anthony Blom, *Verhandeling van den landbouw in de Colonie Suriname* (Amsterdam, 1787), p. 353; for a sarcastic rebuttal, see Teenstra, *Negerslaven*, p. 33. Anthony Blom and Floris Visscher Heshuysen, *Verhandeling over den landbouw, in de Colonie Suriname* (Haarlem, 1786), pp. xviii, xxi. Probably these 'educated authors' were, among others, Hartsinck, Raynal, and Luzac, none of whom ever visited Suriname.
 35. Nassy, *Essai historique*, pp. 97–9, 144–7. The *Essai* was promptly published in Dutch as well: *Geschiedenis der Kolonie van Suriname [...] door een gezelschap van geleerde Joodsche mannen aldaar* (Amsterdam, 1791). An English translation has recently been issued as *Historical Essay on the Colony of Surinam 1788* (Cincinnati, 1974).
 36. Actually, Stedman mentioned reading literature and even archival materials in Paramaribo, in preparation of a study on the history of Suriname (Stedman, *Narrative* [1988], pp. 49–50). He mastered Dutch as he was largely raised in the Netherlands. His father was a Scott, his mother Dutch.
 37. Stedman, *Narrative* 1988, and Price and Price, 'Introduction'. See also Gert Oostindie, 'On Stedman's *Narrative*, Suriname Slavery, and Editing', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 147 (1991), pp. 140–5.
 38. Price and Price, 'Introduction', pp. xv, lxi–lxv. Stedman, *Narrative* (1796), Vol. 1, p. 108. Stedman's original manuscript had 'almost' underlined (1988, p. 103).
 39. Stedman, *Narrative* (1796), Vol. 2, p. 289.

40. Price and Price, 'Introduction', p. lxiv.
41. Johnston, *The Negro*, pp. vi, ix, 47, 89, 113–20. Johnston uses 'Surinam' and 'Dutch' interchangeably.
42. Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*, p. 65, n. 153. 'Dutch' should apparently be read as 'Suriname' here, as Tannenbaum's sources did not deal with the Dutch Caribbean islands.
43. On Dutch slave emancipation, see Johanna Maria van Winter, 'De openbare mening in Nederland over de afschaffing der slavernij', *West-Indische Gids*, 34 (1953), pp. 61–90. M. Kuitenbrouwer, 'De Nederlandse afschaffing van de slavernij in vergelijkend perspectief', *Bijdragen en Mededelingen betreffende de Geschiedenis der Nederlanden* 93 (1978), pp. 69–99. J.P. Siwipersad, *De Nederlandse regering en de afschaffing van de Surinaamse slavernij (1833–1863)* (Groningen, 1979). P.C. Emmer, 'Anti-Slavery and the Dutch: Abolition without Reform', in Christine Bolt and Seymour Drescher (eds.), *Anti-slavery, Religion and Reform* (Folkestone, 1980), pp. 80–98. Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: the Dutch Slave Trade and Colonial Slavery* (unpublished paper, Leiden University, 1992). Gert Oostindie, 'The Economics of Suriname Slavery', *Economic and Social History in the Netherlands*, 5 (1993). On literary discourse regarding slavery, A.N. Paasman, *Reinhart: Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (Leiden, 1984).
44. V.P. Malouet, *Collection de mémoires et correspondances officielles sur l'administration des Colonies, et notamment sur la Guiana française et hollandaise* (Paris, (1802), Vol. 3, pp. 115–7. A.F. Lammens, 'Schrijvers welke over de Kolonie Suriname geschreven hebben', *Surinaamsche Almanak* (1820), pp. 29–46, (1821), pp. 43–60. A.F. Lammens, *Bijdragen tot de kennis van de Kolonie Suriname tijdvak 1816 tot 1822* [G.A. de Bruijne, ed.] (Amsterdam, Leiden, 1982 [1822, 1846]), pp. 124, 170. A.F. Lammens, *Redevoering ten betooge: dat de sterfte of het afnemen van het getal der neger-slaven, in de kolonie Suriname, niet zoo zeer aan mishandelingen, maar hoofdzakelijk aan andere oorzaken moet toegeschreven worden* (Amsterdam, 1823), p. 11. E. Beyer, *Suriname in deszelfs tegenwoordigen toestand door eenen inwoner aldaar* (Amsterdam, 1823), p. x. G. van Lennep Coster, *Herinneringen mijner reizen naar onderscheidene werelddeelen* (Amsterdam, 1836), p. 118. Teenstra, *Negerslaven*, pp. 140–4, 324–5. Van der Smissen, *Beschouwingen*, Vol. 2, pp. 126–8.
45. Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, p. 766. Also C.Ph. Vlier, 'Verhandeling over den voormaligen toestand der kolonie Suriname', *Surinaamsche Almanak* (1833), pp. 223–84. Van Lennep, *Herinneringen*, p. 118. Teenstra, *Negerslaven*, pp. 140–1 and *passim*.
46. The few non-Dutch writings are Malouet, *Collection*. Kunitz, *Surinam*. Albert von Sack, *A Narrative of a Voyage to Surinam: Of a Residence there during 1805, 1806 and 1807: and the Authors Return to Europe by the Way of North America* (London, 1810). Leschenault de la Tour, *Extrait d'un voyage à Surinam* (Cayenne, 1824). P.J. Benoit, *Voyage à Surinam: Description des possessions Néerlandaises dans la Guyane* (Bruxelles, 1839). Vidal de Lingendes, 'Guyane Hollandaise: Regime des esclaves à Surinam', *Revue Coloniale* (mai 1848), pp. 1–41. These eyewitness accounts were cited with some frequency only by Dutch authors.
47. Gert Oostindie, 'The Enlightenment, Christianity, and the Suriname Slave', *Journal of Caribbean History* 26 (1993).
48. Malouet, *Collection*, pp. 115–7. In 1813, however, in the last days of the British occupation governor Bonham, drawing upon two decades of working in the Caribbean, claimed that he knew of no colony where slaves were as badly treated as in Suriname. Half a year later, he affirmed what he thought to be the widespread conviction 'that it is an extremely severe punishment for a Negro to be sold to a planter in Suriname'. Quoted in Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, p. 56, and again in De Kom, *Wij slaven*, p. 31.
49. Kunitz, *Surinam*, p. 146. Lammens, *Redevoering*, p. 17. Beyer, *Suriname*, p. 98. Leschenault, *Extrait*. G.P.C. van Heeckeren van Waliën, *Aanteekeningen, betrekkelijk de kolonie Suriname* (Arnhem, 1826), pp. 78, 84, 96. W.H. Lans, *Proeve over de oorzaken van verval en de middelen tot herstel der Surinaamsche plantaadjen* ('s-Gravenhage, 1829) pp. 29–31, 38. Vlier, 'Verhandeling'. Van Lennep, *Herinneringen*.

- Benoit, *Voyage*, pp. 26, 37, 72. W.H. Lans, *Bijdrage tot de kennis der Kolonie Suriname* ('s-Gravenhage, 1842), Vol. 2, pp. 139–41. Teenstra, *Negerslaven*, pp. 30–3, 107, 137, 140–1. G.P.C. van Breugel, *Aansporing ter bevordering van het godsdienstig onderwijs der slaven en kleurlingen op plantaadjen* (Haarlem, 1842), pp. v–vi. G.B. Bosch, *Reize in West-Indië en door een gedeelte van Zuid- en Noord-Amerika: Derde deel: [Reize naar Suriname, in brieven.]* (Utrecht, 1843), pp. 174–5. Vidal, 'Guyane', pp. 11–20. Egbert van Emden, H.G. Roux and J. Frouin, *Onderzoek ten gevolge der circulaire van den heer Otto Tank* (Paramaribo, 1848), pp. 3–4. Van der Smissen, *Beschouwingen*, Vol. 1, pp. 22, 90–1, 112–3, Vol. 2, pp. 114–6, 126–8. C.A. van Sijpesteijn, *Beschrijving van Suriname, Historisch-, geografisch- en statistisch overzicht, Uit officiële bronnen bijeengebracht* ('s-Gravenhage, 1854), p. 199. A. Kappler, *Zes jaren in Suriname: Schetsen en tafereelen uit het maatschappelijke en militaire leven in deze kolonie* (Utrecht, 1854), p. iv. *Eerste rapport der Staatscommissie*, pp. 240, 262, 291. Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, pp. 721, 732. And in retrospect, 'Suriname en zijne vooruitzichten', *De Economist* 2 (1870), p. 769. W. Boekhoudt, 'Uit mijn verleden': *Bijdrage tot de kennis van Suriname* (Winschoten, 1874), p. 114. E.J. Bartelink, *Hoe de tijden veranderen: Herinneringen van een ouden planter* (Paramaribo, 1916), pp. 14–8, 35–6, 59.
50. Lammens, *Redevoering*, p. 26. Lans, *Proeve*, p. 30. G.P.C. van Breugel, *Dagverhaal van eene reis naar Paramaribo en verdere omstreken in de kolonie Suriname* (Amsterdam, 1842), pp. 55, 77, 82–5. Bosch, *Reize*, pp. 149–50. W.E.N. Winkels, *Slavernij en emancipatie: Eene beschouwing van den toestand der slavernij in Suriname* (Utrecht, 1856), pp. 35–6, 89. In retrospect, B.C. van den Ende, *Oud en Nieuw over Suriname's verleden en toekomst: II.* (Kampen, 1875), p. 3. A. Kappler, *Holländisch-Guiana: Erlebnisse und Erfahrungen während eines 43 jährigen Aufenthalts in der Kolonie Surinam* (Stuttgart, 1881), p. 10. This was a favourite comparison in all last vestiges of slavery; for example, Jorge D. Flinter, *Examen del estado actual de los esclavos de la isla de Puerto Rico* (New York, 1832), p. 46.
 51. Bosch, *Reize*, p. 165. W.H. Lans, *Emancipatie door centralisatie: Schets van een ontwerp tot behoud van Suriname* ('s-Gravenhage, 1847), pp. 81–2. Winkels, *Slavernij*, p. 115. G.S. de Veer, 'Aanteekeningen over de Emancipatie der slaven in de Ned[erlandsche] West-Indische koloniën', *Themis. Regtskundig Tijdschrift*, 2 (1861), p. 176. The occasional comparisons to other slave systems provide different clues. Spanish and even French slavery were apparently still seen as milder variants (Van der Bosch, quoted in Siwipersad, *Nederlandse regering*, p. 18; and Otto Tank, 'Circulaire. Aan de Heeren Eigenaars en Administrateurs van plantaadjes in de kolonie Suriname', *Berigten uit de Heiden Wereld*, 14 (1848), p. 95). So was slavery in the Dutch colony Curaçao; Bosch, *Reize*, p. 361; see also H.D. Benjamins and Joh. F. Snelleman, (eds.), *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch West-Indië* ('s-Gravenhage, Leiden, 1914–1917), p. 641. British representations of Suriname slavery were extremely negative. See Bonham as quoted in Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, p. 567. C.E. Lefroy's 'factional' *Outalissi: A Tale of Dutch Guiana* (London, 1826). E. Cust, *Reflections on West India Affairs; After a Recent Visit to the Colonies* (London, 1839). Such accusations did not go undisputed (e.g., 'Schetsen uit Nederlands West-Indië', *Biäna-Lala, Indisch Lees kabinet tot aangenaam en gezellig onderhoud* 1 (1853), p. 238. Also, in retrospect, W.G. Palgrave, *Dutch Guiana* (London, 1876), p. 144. Lans, *Bijdrage*, pp. 166–7, in a rare comparison, ranked US slavery as worse.
 52. Particularly Van Hoëvell's *Slaven en vrijen* (1854), the Dutch counterpart to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In his preface, Van Hoëvell informed his readership that he had never visited Suriname and merely acted as a compiler of information provided by fellow abolitionists. Likewise, the abolitionist historian Wolbers (1861) drew on literature and archival sources, but had never visited the colony.
 53. Day-to-day evidence, for example, in *Verzameling van uitgezochte verhandelingen, betreffende den landbouw in de kolonie Suriname* (Amsterdam, 1804), p. 19. Kunitz, *Surinam*, pp. 87–8, 152–9. Van Breugel, *Dagverhaal*, pp. 76–7. Bartelink, *Hoe de tijden*, pp. 46–7.
 54. For example, on the food situation. See Von Sack, *Reize*, p. 137. F.A. Kuhn,

- Beschouwing van den toestand der Surinaamsche plantagie slaven: Eene oeconomisch-geneeskundige bijdrage tot verbetering deszelven* (Amsterdam, 1828), p. 9. Lans, *Bijdrage*, Vol. 2, pp. 150–2. Lans, *Emancipatie*, pp. 6–7, 58–61. G.J. Mulder, *De voeding van den neger in Suriname* (Rotterdam, 1847). Van der Smissen, *Beschouwingen*, Vol. 1, p. 27.
55. Blom, *Verhandeling*, p. 82. Kuhn, *Beschouwing*, p. 23. *Eerste rapport Staatscommissie*, p. 233. Characteristically, Lammens (*Redevoering*, p. 17) in an explicit apology for slavery tried to demonstrate that the estimated 50 per thousand decrease could not be attributed to abuses – but apparently he accepted the incorrect view that the demographic situation had not improved since the 1780s. With the benefit of hindsight, it may be noted that improved demographic performance to a large extent was an autonomous process linked to creolization, not to any specific ameliorative policies. But as this was no generalized wisdom at the time, one would have expected pro-slavery authors in particular to underscore their positions with this ‘evidence’ of the benevolence of contemporary slavery.
 56. Teenstra, *Negerslaven*, Vol. 2, p. 18. Also, for example, Teenstra, *Landbouw*, Vol. 2, p. 208. P.J. Benoit, *Reis door Suriname: Beschrijving van de Nederlandse bezittingen in Guyana* (Zutphen, 1980), p. 40. Teenstra, *Landbouw*, Vol. 2, pp. 18–9, 140–1. Kappler, *Zes jaren*, pp. 49–51. Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, p. 172.
 57. Lans, *Proeve*, pp. 66–70, Van der Smissen, *Beschouwingen*, Vol. 2, pp. 122–8, De Veer, ‘Aantekeningen’, Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, pp. 577–8.
 58. R.A.J. van Lier, *Samenleving in een grensgebied: Een sociaal-historische studie van Suriname* (’s-Gravenhage, 1949); translated as *Frontier Society: A Social Analysis of the History of Surinam* (’s-Gravenhage, 1971), p. 131. Boxer, *Dutch Seaborne Empire*. Richard Price, *The Guiana Maroons: A Historical and Bibliographical Introduction* (Baltimore, 1976). Price and Price, ‘Introduction’. Hoetink’s comparisons of the ‘harsh’ Suriname and the ‘mild’ Curaçao variants inadvertently underpinned the negative image of the former colony; Harry Hoetink, ‘Race relations in Curaçao and Surinam’, in: L. Foner and E.G. Genovese (eds.), *Slavery in the New World* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), pp. 179–87, and ‘Surinam and Curaçao’, in David W. Cohen and Jack P. Greene (eds.), *Neither Slave nor Free: The Freedman of African Descent in the Slave Societies of the New World* (Baltimore, 1972), pp. 59–83. Goveia, *West Indian Slave Laws*, pp. 50–3, suggests a harsh variant as well, but departs from a few pages in the *Encyclopaedie* (1914–1917) and extracts of Van Lier’s work only.
 59. Van Lier, *Frontier Society*, pp. 60–7, 126–38. Closer reading of the previous literature indicates some unexpected precursors to the concept of dehumanization. In 1854 the Dutch minister of Colonial Affairs, J.C. Baud, stated that ‘slavery not only dehumanizes the slaves, but equally the master’ (quoted approvingly in Wolbers, *Geschiedenis*, p. 776). Van Lier was strongly influenced by Gilberto Freyre’s similar analysis of abuse in Brazilian slavery (*The Masters and the Slaves: A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization* (Berkeley, [1933] 1986). The argument, of course, was ubiquitous; see David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York, 1984), p. 263.
 60. Boxer, *Dutch Seaborne Empire*, pp. 151, 240–1, stressed abuse as a factor leading to marronage and concluded that ‘By and large, man’s inhumanity to man just about reached its limits in Surinam.’ Goslinga’s views are surprising, as he painted a rather rosy picture of Suriname slavery up to the mid-eighteenth century. He attributed a subsequent change for the worse to absenteeism and the planters’ society’s reaction to marronage – Cornelis Ch. Goslinga, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and on the Wild Coast, 1580–1680* (Assen, 1971), p. 368, *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in the Guianas 1680–1791* (Assen, 1985), pp. 280, 294–6, 302–7, 357, 386–7 – and remains vague about nineteenth-century slavery – *The Dutch in the Caribbean and in Surinam 1791/5–1942* (Assen, 1990).
 61. Price, *Guiana Maroons*, pp. 25 and also 9, 21–7, 33. See also his *To Slay the Hydra: Dutch Colonial Perspectives on the Saramaka Wars* (Ann Arbor, 1983), pp. 7–13, and *Representations of Slavery: John Gabriel Stedman’s ‘Minnesota’ Manuscript* (Minnea-

- polis, 1989), pp. 7–9, and *Alabi's World* (Baltimore, 1990), pp. 4, 6, 11, 376–7, 385.
62. Price and Price, 'Introduction', pp. xiii–xiv, lxiv.
 63. I now intentionally ignore Voltaire.
 64. See particularly David Brion Davis, *Slavery in Western Culture: The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Ithaca, 1975); and his *Slavery and Human Progress*. Dutch Caribbean slavery is all but ignored in this monumental trilogy, which may say something about the linguistic inaccessibility of the relevant Dutch sources, but also speaks of the absence of serious debates in the Dutch world.
 65. The African slave trade to the Dutch Caribbean was effectively stopped in 1808 as England had at the time occupied the Dutch colonies. After the peace which put an end to the Napoleonic wars, the Dutch agreed to a definitive abolition of the trade (1814), a decision confirmed in 1818.
 66. Cust, *Reflections*, p. 70. Characteristically, an earlier report by an author of Scandinavian origins had ranked Danish slavery as mild; C.D. Wadström, *An Essay on Colonization, Particularly Applied to the Western Coast of Africa* (London, 1794), p. 151. Cust in contrast mentioned Dutch and Danish slavery in one breath as deplorable.
 67. Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore, 1983), and *Alabi's World*.
 68. Postma, *The Dutch*, pp. 299–301, Van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast*, p. 330.
 69. Humphrey E. Lamur, *The Production of Sugar and the Reproduction of Slaves at Vossenburg (Suriname) 1705–1863* (Amsterdam, 1987), pp. 27–36, 74–5, Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, pp. 131–8, Van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast*, pp. 326–66.
 70. Circumstantial evidence is overwhelming, but hardly any quantitative research is available; see, however, Robert Cohen, *Jews in Another Environment: Surinam in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden, 1991), pp. 35–65.
 71. *West-Indisch Plakaatboek*, Vol. 1, pp. 673–4. Herlein, *Beschryvinge*, p. 95. Also, a.o., Hartsinck, *Beschryving*, Vol. 2, pp. 915–6, Blom and Heshuysen, *Landbouw*, pp. 382–3, *Verzameling van uitgezochte verhandeligen*, pp. 14–5, Von Sack, *Reize*, pp. 137–8, Teenstra, *Landbouw*, Vol. 1, pp. 430–4, Van Lennep, *Herinneringen*, p. 101, Van Breugel, *Dagverhaal*, p. 86. Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, pp. 156, 286–7.
 72. Price, *First-time*, p. 48.
 73. Whereas on the islands the introduction of the steam mill reputedly increased work load, observers in Suriname therefore came to the opposite conclusion.
 74. A Suriname administrator explaining mortality rates to an absentee owner in the Netherlands, quoted in Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, p. 229.
 75. Humphrey E. Lamur, 'Fertility Differentials on Three Plantations in Suriname', *Slavery and Abolition*, 8 (1987), pp. 313–35. Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, pp. 251–8, Van Stipriaan, 'Surinaams contrast', pp. 332, 343.
 76. 'Everywhere slavery is practiced, victims tell of beatings, rape, hunger and torture.' *Newsweek*, 4 May, 1992, special issue on contemporary slavery.
 77. David Turnbull, *Travels in the West: Cuba; with Notices of Porto Rico and the Slave Trade* (London, 1840), p. 48. The relevance of an 'idealistic' approach to nineteenth-century Cuban slavery has been forcefully refuted by Franklin W. Knight, *Slave Society in Cuba during the Nineteenth Century* (Madison, 1970) and Manuel Moreno Fraginals, *El ingenio: Complejo económico social cubano del azúcar* (La Habana, 1978).
 78. Rosemary Brana-Shute, 'Approaching Freedom: The Manumission of Slaves in Suriname, 1760–1828', *Slavery and Abolition*, 10 (1989), pp. 44, 60. Reliable figures for the last decades before emancipation are not available; see Van Lier, *Frontier Society*, p. 102.
 79. Stedman, *Narrative* (1796), Vol. 2, p. 194 [1988, p. 465]. Brana-Shute, 'Approaching Freedom', Hoetink, 'Surinam and Curaçao', Van Lier, *Frontier Society*, pp. 96–116.
 80. Brana-Shute, 'Approaching Freedom', p. 48, Siwipersad, 'Nederlandse regering', pp. 80, 104, 168–9, 180.
 81. Herlein, *Beschryvinge*, p. 97, Van Heeckeren, *Aanteekeningen*, p. 100, Van Breugel, *Dagverhaal*, p. 88, *Eerste rapport Staatscommissie*, pp. 305–6, Bartelink, *Hoe de tijden*, pp. 14–8. See also Maria Oomens, 'Veelwijverij en andere losbandige praktijken:

- Bevolkingspolitiek tegenover Surinaamse plantageslavinnen in de 19e eeuw', *Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis* 7 (1986), pp. 152–71, and Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, pp. 157–64.
82. Even if not as dominant as in previous centuries, Sranan Tongo is still the *lingua franca* in today's multicultural country. In the Leewards Netherlands Antilles, the vernacular of all social classes is Papiamentu, in the Windwards Netherlands Antilles English.
 83. Van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast*, p. 112; also his 'The Surinam Rat Race: Labour and Technology on Sugar Plantations, 1750–1900', *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids/New West Indian Guide* 63 (1989), pp. 94–117.
 84. For example, Pistorius, *Beschryvinge*, p. 91. D.H. Gallandat, *Noodige onderrichtingen voor de slavenhandelaaren* (Middelburg, 1769), p. 36. Von Sack, *Reize*, p. 139.
 85. Hartsinck, *Beschryving*, Vol. 2, pp. 909–10, Blom, *Verhandeling*, pp. 331–2, *Verzameling van uitgezochte verhandelingen*, pp. 15–21.
 86. Humphrey E. Lamur, *De kerstening van de slaven van de Surinaamse plantage Vossenburg 1847–1878* (Amsterdam, 1985). Oostindie, 'Enlightenment'.
 87. The influential essay, Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston, 1992 [1976]), has several references to Afro-Suriname culture.
 88. Lewis, *Main Currents*, pp. 109, 124–7.
 89. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975). Sjoerd Faber, *Strafrechtspleging en criminaliteit te Amsterdam, 1680–1811: De nieuwe menslievendheid* (Arnhem, 1983). Herman Franke, *Twee eeuwen gevangen: Misdaad en straf in Nederland* (Utrecht, 1990).
 90. From the 1780s through the 1830s, rates of absenteeism may have been as high as 70–80 per cent; J.H. Adhin, *Development Planning in Surinam in Historical Perspective* (Leiden, 1961), pp. 54–5. See also Van Lier, *Frontier Society*, pp. 41–2. Gerard Willem van der Meiden, *Betwist bestuur: Een eeuw strijd om de macht in Suriname 1651–1753* (Amsterdam, 1986), pp. 93–4, 126. Oostindie, *Roosenburg*, pp. 398–401, 414–5. Van Stipriaan, *Surinaams contrast*, p. 303.
 91. Hoetink, 'Race relations', and 'Surinam and Curaçao'.
 92. Van Lier, *Frontier Society*, pp. 32–3.
 93. I do not see any solid ground here to subscribe to past or present views regarding the alleged particularly harsh conditions of slavery under Jewish planters. I would suggest that, if not informed by downright anti-semitism, such interpretations suffer from a distorted perspective. As Jewish planters were the largest single group of planters, *ceteris paribus* one would only expect that most evidence regarding abuse related to this group. And as the late-eighteenth century saw the demise of the Jewish planter class, it is not surprising that their image remained associated with the harshest days of Suriname slavery.
 94. Van der Meiden, *Betwist bestuur*. Watson, *Slave Law*, pp. 102–14.
 95. Harris, 'Myth of the Friendly Master', pp. 200, 204. My writing has been informed by an uneasiness with lingering representations of Suriname slavery. Some demystification seemed appropriate. Evidently no apologetics are involved here. I would simply suggest that there is no need for the counterpoint of a grotesque variant of slavery for us to appreciate the resilience and heroics of the Maroons' struggles or the slaves' negotiations for a life of their own, even within the conditions of slavery.