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Suriname and the Atlantic World, 1650-1800

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Conclusion

The history of the Atlantic world challenges national and empire-centred understandings of the past. Already at the onset of sugar production in the Atlantic basin in the fifteenth century a host of Europeans and Africans of wide-ranging origins were involved in Atlantic trade and production systems. On Madeira there were Italian, Flemish and French merchants operating the sugar trade.⁷⁵⁷ The practice of producing sugar with enslaved Africans spread from Madeira, São Tomé and the Canary Islands across the ocean to Hispaniola and Brazil. Sugar production for the European market hardly ever took place on the African continent. The African states and “a striking angel with a flaming sword of deadly fevers” successfully resisted the European penetration of their lands in ways that the Indigenous Americans could not.⁷⁵⁸ But while the enslavement of Amerindians did not persist, the enslavement of Africans came to provide a reliable source of labour for European projects in the Americas.⁷⁵⁹ The result was the largest forced migration in human history. In the 1580s sugar refining took hold in the Dutch Republic at the same time that the first Dutch slave trading activities were undertaken, mainly in support of Portuguese colonisation of Brazil.⁷⁶⁰ The sugar refiners and merchants active in Amsterdam had rarely been active in those trades before they migrated from the southern Netherlands, but they transported the technical knowledge with them.⁷⁶¹ The fact that producing sugar from a specific cane, with specific techniques and using enslaved Africans as workforce gained prominence throughout the tropical regions of the Atlantic basin is testimony to the interconnected workings of the Atlantic world.

⁷⁵⁷ A. Vieira, “Sugar Islands. The Sugar Economy of Madeira and the Canaries, 1450-1650,” in *Tropical Babels: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World*, ed. Stuart B. Schwartz (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 42–84.

⁷⁵⁸ On the use of soft and hard power by the Portuguese and their settlement on the West African coast see: Charles Ralph Boxer, *Four Centuries of Portuguese Expansion, 1415-1825: A Succinct Survey* (University of California Press, 1969) This includes the famous quote by João De Barros from 1552 on the effect of the African disease environment on Portuguese colonists, traders and missionaries. .

⁷⁵⁹ Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade*, 18–22.

⁷⁶⁰ Wim Klooster, “Het begin van de Nederlandse slavenhandel in het Atlantisch gebied,” in *Alle streken van het kompas. Maritieme geschiedenis is Nederland* (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 2010), 249–262.

⁷⁶¹ A. H. Poelwijk, “In dienste vant suyckerenbacken.” *De Amsterdamse suikernijverheid en haar ondernemers, 1580-1630* (Verloren, 2003), 124–126., <http://dare.uva.nl/document/69158>; The research by Poelwijk confirms the older findings by Reese on the introduction of the sugar trade in Amsterdam. Reese, *De suikerhandel van Amsterdam*, 135.

While the traces of Europe-wide engagement with the Atlantic world can be found from the beginning, they only gained great intensity after the middle decades of the seventeenth century. After 1650 the Northern Europeans who joined the profitable transatlantic operations became increasingly successful at introducing the plantation model in the Guianas, the insular Caribbean and southern parts of mainland North America. The scale of North European slave transports from Africa to the Americas came close to equal the massive numbers of people forced across the ocean by the Iberians.⁷⁶² From 1650 onward the myriad of connections that resulted from the expansion of the plantation system and the slave trade formed a human web that was tied together by formal and informal cultural, religious, economic and kinship ties. The Europe-wide engagement with trans-Atlantic trades and production systems was interconnected across formal imperial boundaries through intercolonial trade, emulation of techniques, circulation of knowledge, cooperation in joined projects and of course through war and market competition. For contemporaries outside the Atlantic world it was clear that this area could best be treated as a unity. A Cantonese guide to the “People of the Great Western Ocean” from around 1701 grouped the populations facing the Atlantic Ocean from Europe, Africa and the Americas together, disregarding European racial or national distinctions.⁷⁶³ This world of transoceanic and interimperial connections became a hotbed for creole cultures, economies and social relations, all with distinct local and regional characteristics.

The success of trade and production and its reliance on connections beyond the constraints of national colonial projects also created the conditions for the disintegration of the Atlantic world. Atlantic warfare in the middle decades of the eighteenth century was what “opened the door” to many of the decisive revolts that would come to shape the following decades.⁷⁶⁴ In the Age of Revolution numerous European colonies along the Atlantic West coast became powerful enough to successfully fight off direct European rule. The case of Haiti, with all its specificities, showed similar processes of increasingly self-confident non-white citizens gaining political and economic power. Also in the Dutch inhabitants of the colonies could be found to lay claim to their autonomy.⁷⁶⁵ The subsequent end of the slave

⁷⁶² TASTD.

⁷⁶³ Kenneth Pomeranz and Steven Topik, *The World That Trade Created: Society, Culture, and the World Economy, 1400-The Present* (M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 43.

⁷⁶⁴ Wim Klooster, *Revolutions in the Atlantic World: A Comparative History* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 5–6.

⁷⁶⁵ Han Jordaen, “Slavernij en vrijheid op Curaçao: de dynamiek van een achttiende-eeuws Atlantisch handelsknooppunt” (Ph.D., Universiteit Leiden, 2012); Karwan Fatah-Black, “The

trade disconnected the plantation colonies from their supply of enslaved Africans. This meant that the connection between the Americas and the African west coast faltered and that the need to finance the slave trade with European credit also waned. The Atlantic interactions based on war, enslavement and plantation production disintegrated around 1800.⁷⁶⁶ The system of interconnected cities became one of increasing territorial divisions along the borders of (nation) states.

* * *

The networks of cities are more telling of the structure of the Atlantic world than the traditional maps detailing the areas controlled by various empires and states. Wind and ocean currents, trade relations and ship routes offset the territorial control of early-modern states in the Atlantic. The basic material for this investigation has been the data of ships moving to and from Paramaribo. Historians have often studied Suriname and Paramaribo from a Dutch or Surinamese national perspective. Using the actual movements of ships has enabled me to transcend both the “national” and “triangular” understanding of Paramaribo’s function in the Atlantic world, and instead has shown the city to be the centre of a star-shaped network connecting multiple Atlantic regions. Shipping routes have been used to analyse the shift in the inter-city network of Paramaribo, and also provided entry into further research into the reasons for these shifts. The shipping connections did not only signify circuits of economic exchange. The movement of goods was paired with the movement of people and ideas as well. The Atlantic world, and Paramaribo’s role within it was not static, but changed over the eighteenth century. At first the fort was founded as a gatekeeper protecting the plantations and also controlling what goods could come in and out of the settlement. Over the course of the century Paramaribo turned into a colonial city with connections throughout the Atlantic world. This dynamic development in the eighteenth century can be attributed to a large extent to the city’s non-Dutch network. There was however a limit to the city’s dynamism. The limited productivity in the city itself prevented further growth of the town beyond that of a nodal point, leaving the city and the colony so dependent on the metropolis that economic or political independence was unthinkable for eighteenth-century colonists.

Patriot Coup D’état in Curaçao, 1796,” in *Curaçao in the Age of Revolutions, 1795-1800*, ed. Gert Oostindie and Wim Klooster, vol. 30, Caribbean Series (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011), 124–140.

⁷⁶⁶ For the periodization of the disintegration of the Atlantic world see: Bailyn, *Atlantic History*; Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *The Atlantic in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Benjamin, *The Atlantic World*.

While Atlantic integration took place within a web of interconnected cities, these urban networks have rarely been the starting point of historical investigation of Suriname's colonisation process. The histories of the specific locations within the Atlantic world, including Suriname, have been written along present-day national lines even though the linkages that shaped this world were connecting hinterlands to towns to other hinterlands that do not fall within the confines of any of the present-day nation states. The histories of the African diaspora, the European colonisers, and the ships on Paramaribo's *Waterkant* cannot be captured in a story of Dutch colonialism or the forming of the Surinamese nation. Enslaved Africans not only came from a wide variety of regions in Africa, they were undoubtedly conscious of others who were suffering similar fates in similar colonies. Colonists were freer to use the interimperial compatibility of colonies by moving from one place to another with relative ease. Palatines in the 1730s and 1740s left for Georgia as soon as they had a chance and Sephardic Jews left for North America in the late eighteenth century when the economic tide seemed more favourable there.

Interconnection across imperial boundaries did not mean that the Atlantic world was a self-organised arena for free enterprise. The history of Paramaribo's eighteenth century is clearly not a triumphalist history of stateless merchants creating personal networks across imperial boundaries. Such forceful projects by state institutions like the Admiralty of Zeeland mustering its warships to take possession of Fort Willoughby in 1667, or the Dutch States General arming the *staatse troupen* to fight off the Maroons, were *condicio sine qua non* of Suriname's colonisation. An attempt to lay out a guarded cordon around the plantations was as expensive as it was ineffective. However, it was possible to keep control of limited geographical spaces like cities and river mouths. In this sense Suriname was easier to control and close off from the sea than many of the Caribbean islands. The muddy coast with its sandbanks made any direct landfall difficult, and a few well-placed fortresses along the rivers were enough to bar unwanted access. Limiting sea-access to the colony served two purposes for the directors of the Suriname Company. It prevented a military take-over by a competing power, and indeed real attempts at take-overs occurred rarely. The day-to-day function of the restriction was to enforce import-duties, ensure that exports of 'high goods' went to the Dutch Republic, and smugglers were kept out.

The ability to project violence over long distances was only made possible by financial investments beyond the capability of individual merchants or even the Suriname Company. While planters and their lobbyists in the Republic could demand lower taxes, freer trade and more military protection – as they did in the aftermath of the Cassard invasion of

1712 – they were so unwilling to pay for the building of Fort Amsterdam that the haggling over who was to pick up the bill for this rather sensible project delayed the fort's completion until 1748. As discussed in Chapter 3 only the intervention by the States General could resolve the issue between plantation owners and the directors of the Suriname Company. States and state-like institutions were crucial to overcome the individual qualms of plantation owners, also in the supposedly networked, self-organised and decentred Atlantic world. In Suriname the infringements upon metropolitan restrictions – primarily the regional trade – were not an issue of limited geographical control by the SC, but could practically only take place with the connivance of the local representatives of the SC.

* * *

With the founding of the SC the lack of stability that had initially characterised Suriname's economy and military security ended. After the damage to the colony by war and the large scale emigration of English colonists and slaves, the period after 1683 saw the re-establishing of sugar production and severing trading relations (including slave trading) with the Amerindians. Part of the plan of the SC directors, who now governed the colony, was to profit from Suriname as a market for goods produced in the Republic. However, as demonstrated in Part 1 of this book, the regional connection proved so crucial to the survival of the colony that they allowed the regional trade to infringe on the initial plans. The rebuilding of the colony under the SC relied on colonists who were able to transfer knowledge about colonisation from earlier attempts, and who could rely on a significant personal Atlantic network. While initially there were traders in the colony (people involved in the buying and selling of commodities for profit) their role gradually declined. Once the shipping and credit relations between Suriname and the metropolis had consolidated, the personal aspect of maintaining these withered away and the relation between Paramaribo and the rest of the network came to depend more on formal contacts.

The intercolonial movement of goods was important for the continued existence of the colony, but was seen as detrimental to the Dutch companies who also sought to profit from the sales of provisions to the colonists. Also on the other side of the connection, on the North American and Caribbean side, instructions from the British state were to restrict such trade. As for the Dutch, many successive owners and managers of the colony attempted to restrict inter-colonial movement. First Abraham Crijnsen and later also the Suriname Company tried to block British ships to sail up the river. But these attempts never did the colony any good, as lack of food, draught animals and supplies could ground plantation activity to a halt. This is not to say that this trade was characterised by a favourable balance of exchange for the plantation owners of local Surinamese merchants. The

exchange between Suriname and Barbados and New York in the seventeenth century had been rather equally matched, but it became very unbalanced in the eighteenth century. North American ships loaded with finished products were bringing in so much value that it would take two whole shiploads of molasses to pay for them. And that was only the price of molasses in Suriname, once the syrup had been turned into rum or was resold to consumers the North American merchants had made up for any losses that they might have encountered by selling their products in Suriname. This hampered local productivity in Paramaribo, although it did soften the one-sided exchange with the merchant houses and investors in the Dutch Republic. The shift in the balance of power between the planters in the colony and the owners in the Republic did much to improve the products shipped out from the colony. When ship captains were desperate to find return-goods in the early decades of the colony, sugar planters were getting away with shipping burned uncured sugar in heavily leaking barrels. Due to the consolidation of the connection, with professional freighters loading in consignment the quality of the exports improved.

The growth in plantation production after the end of the War of the Spanish Succession created a growing group of people with interests in the colony, both in Suriname, in the Republic and on the North American east coast. The plantation owners and those who provided essential services to the colony were profiting and they were increasingly demanding protection and privileges from the States General and the Suriname Company. For the market in Amsterdam the rapidly expanding coffee production also increased Suriname's position vis-à-vis the VOC, whose coffee trade remained rather stable throughout the entire eighteenth century.

While the federated and splintered nature of the Dutch Republic and its Atlantic activities prevented a nationally organised West India Interest, there were networks of interested parties integrated in the city and provincial governments in the Dutch Republic, and people addressing the States General. They managed to push for the building of Fort New Amsterdam, the privatisation of the slave trade and when the trade with Suriname fell on hard times in the aftermath of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, merchants and planters received beneficial measures. However, as has been noted many times before, Surinamese goods did not receive protection from competing suppliers within the French, British or other domains. The privilege of the colony did not exceed the limits set by wider merchant-interests in the Republic. Also in Suriname's urban network, particularly British North American colonists, started to oppose metropolitan restrictions and tried to have a say in how much they were taxed, and how these taxes were spent. In cities like Boston, Baltimore and New York large scale tax evasions by North Americans was prevalent among captains and merchants bringing in

molasses from the French and Dutch West Indian possessions. Their activities completely undermined the enforcement of the Molasses Act and encouraged industrial production in the thirteen colonies.

Private entrepreneurs became confident enough to try and break open the last monopolies of the WIC, in which they succeeded, and the exclusive rights to Suriname's slave trade ended in 1738. Chapter 6 discussed how from the 1740s until the mid-1760s the onset of the private slave trade secured a steady influx of slaves, and with it the sums of credit extended from the metropolis to the planters in the colony. While the WIC commissioners had been central to recovering debts made by planters when buying slaves, the private companies set up their own system of payment, credit and debt recovery. In the 1750s the debts of planters incurred from buying slaves had risen to an alarming level, and the Amsterdam banker Gideon Deutz used the opportunity to buy up the debts in the form of a mortgage, and started reselling this to investors in the Republic. The fund system (*negotiatiestelsel*) expanded in the 1760s after the credit crisis of 1763 had been overcome, giving the planters and the slave traders another lease of life. The success of this system was great; so much capital was made available that private slave trading companies mushroomed, confident that they would be able to sell their cargo at a good price. Speculation resulted in a bubble, and once it burst, plantations were sometimes abandoned, but many befell the bigger investment funds, centralising ownership and management towards the end of the eighteenth century.

With the tremendous availability of credit and relative peaceful relations of the Dutch with the other empires, all the ingredients were there for a boom in production. The 1760s, 1770s and 1780s were three decades of tremendous turnover of Surinamese products on the Amsterdam market. The representatives of trust funds were later blamed for the collapse of the system in the 1770s, but this blame-game glosses over the enormous growth that had taken place over the period. After the financial crisis of 1773 metropolitan merchant firms took more direct control over production, while representing a smaller amount of owners with large portfolios. The supply of North American provisions in exchange for Surinamese molasses intensified, most strongly with the area that was to become the heartland of North American independence.

The third part of the book focussed on how the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War damaged the colony's shipping, but also that production did bounce back in the 1780s. When in the 1790s the Dutch lost their Atlantic power to the Americans – who took over the shipping in the Atlantic – the slave trade came to a standstill. Unable to rely on other avenues for the supply of new labour (unlike its neighbouring colonies Demerara and Essequibo), production faltered. The nationalisation of the

Suriname Company by the Batavian Republic in 1795 was only an intermezzo in what was the end of the Dutch Atlantic world. The declining hold of the Dutch over Suriname was completed with the British occupation of 1799.

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The tightening of the connection between the plantations and the Dutch Republic might on the surface appear as one of the many forces which was slowly tearing apart the integrated Atlantic world, and recreating the relation between colony and motherland within a nationally defined city network. However, more than anything it was the rise to power of the North Americans as the great freighters of the Atlantic Ocean, and maybe even the world, that was quickly sealing the fate of several branches of Dutch colonial enterprise. In the aftermath of the Fourth Anglo Dutch War, the non-Dutch ships were bringing more and more slaves to the colony. The shipping of goods to and from the colony had always been partly the domain of non-Dutch ships. But when it came to the shipping of 'high goods' the Dutch defended their privilege as long as they could. By now the Americans were also overtaking the shipping of sugar, coffee and cotton to Amsterdam. Slave trading and freight shipping had often been mentioned as areas that made the colonial project of the Dutch in the Atlantic worthwhile. Now they were being outflanked even in the connection to their own colony. When the British attacked Suriname in the late 1790s, the colony fell. While under foreign occupation, the British abandoned the slave trade in their domain, effectively also abolishing it for the Dutch, who took the formal step in 1814.

Looking back at the history of colonisation it becomes clear that there was a strong Atlantic dynamic to Suriname's development. The conquest and subjugation of present-day Suriname could rely on resources from Atlantic subsystems beyond the narrow limits of the Dutch Atlantic. In many cases of cross-Atlantic colonisation, this conquest paradoxically also produced the gravediggers for Europe's dominance. By setting up new centres where economic power was concentrated and military forces could be mustered, cities and colonies along the Atlantic coast gained momentum in the second half of the eighteenth century, resulting in a series of independence struggles. While this development towards independence bypassed Paramaribo and Suriname, this did not mean that connections and circuits outside European control were absent. Much of the colony's economic and social development rested on Atlantic circuits beyond Dutch control.

This book has attempted to position Paramaribo within the field of Atlantic history by broadening our conception of the city to that of an Atlantic nodal point. By taking ship movements as a starting-point, questions

were raised about the connections that developed from Paramaribo to the rest of the world, about the maritime aspect of Paramaribo's development, and the importance of the Dutch as middlemen in the Atlantic. The investigation that followed revealed that Paramaribo was not only connected to various non-Dutch places around the Atlantic, but also that these connections were fundamental to the colony's founding and subsequent development. Paramaribo also turned out to be a place where both Dutch and British trade-restrictions were cunningly evaded by cooperating merchants, captains and local state officials. The research into the maritime aspects of the city's economy resulted in the discovery that not just the enslaved, but also European sailors were working on the colony's rivers. The combined availability of both enslaved and maritime contract-labourers hindered the development of an urban docking industry. For the study of the Dutch in the Atlantic world it was important to find that the famed Dutch brokers were not the ones serving as intermediaries between the developing industries of North America and the Dutch plantation economy. Although the data of non-Dutch shipping in Suriname had been known since the research by Johannes Postma, it was a surprise to find the extent to which the New Englanders were the proverbial Dutch of the eighteenth-century North Atlantic.