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THE THORNY ENTANGLEMENTS OF THEATER AND COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY IN THE NETHERLANDS

Anti-colonial Critique and Imperial
Nostalgia in J. Slauerhoff's Play
Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1931)

Sruti Bala

Of Rogue Heroes

In the wake of the massive world-wide protests under the banner of Black Lives Matter, a group of demonstrators gathered in the main square of the city of Hoorn in the Netherlands in late June 2020, calling for the removal of the massive bronze statue of the seventeenth-century colonial figure of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, prominently placed in Coen's city of birth.¹ The demonstration, not the first of its kind, followed a series of petitions and appeals to the municipal government, which gained significant media attention. In a gesture that can only be termed a publicity stunt, the Dutch parliamentarian and leader of the right-wing party *Forum voor Democratie*, Thierry Baudet visited the square in Hoorn in mid-June 2020, demonstratively placing a bouquet of flowers at the base of the statue, tweeting that such an act marked his "adoration for a national hero" and "pride towards a site of national historical importance."²

The very same Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587–1629), erstwhile Governor-General of the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century, is also the protagonist of a play by the Dutch writer J. (Jan Jacob) Slauerhoff, published in 1931, which is the subject of investigation of the present chapter.³ Through a reading of the play and its curious production history, the chapter seeks to investigate some of the thorny entanglements between theater and colonial historiography in the Netherlands. The chapter addresses the concerns of this volume through the specific question of staging the colonial past. Dealing with colonialism and its aftermaths is not only a matter of material

reparations or setting historical records straight but also a complex process of collective cultural introspection, intimately tied to the present. The arts play a significant role in this process, influencing the narratives, images, vocabularies and attitudes with which a society comprehends its colonial pasts and grapples with its post-colonial conditions. At the same time, the arts in general, and theater more specifically, have also served as ideological stages for the mobilization and legitimization of territorial conquest and civilizational missions.

The present chapter underlines the need to think theater historiography in terms of multiple pasts, and reflects on how every staging of the play compels an interweaving of these plural pasts, to speak with the call of this volume. The chapter examines the politics of this interweaving, or rather entanglement, from two angles: first, it considers how every attempted staging of Slauerhoff's play brought the Dutch colonial past to bear upon the immediate political circumstances, thus raising questions of legitimizing current agendas with a selective understanding of the past, as well as questions of comparability and shared histories. Second, the chapter pays attention to the gendered and sexualized dimensions of performance historiography. It examines how the play articulates the relation between colonizers and colonized in gendered terms, thereby emphasizing the importance of feminist perspectives on performance historiography. The choice of this play has to do with the fact that it was one of 100 play texts selected as part of an initiative to revive the Dutch and Flemish language theater canon.⁴ The inclusion of any play in a canonical list is based on the assumption of its long-term "stageworthiness," that it deserves to be part of the Dutch repertoire in the present and in the future. I leave aside, for the moment, the question of the underlying assumptions of canonization and the role of canons in educational and cultural policy, no doubt a subject of intense discussion but one that exceeds the scope of the current chapter. I rather set out to ask what it might mean to stage a play such as Slauerhoff's *Coen* at a time when public debates in the Netherlands and other European urban sites emphasize the need for the decolonization of art history and for the dismantling of colonial hero worship in public spaces? How might the play and its production history be interpreted today in a way that constructively contributes to a historicized understanding of the colonial project, beyond the simple polarities of heroism and despotism? How does the play reveal prevalent self-conceptions of Europe that are entangled with its colonial pasts?

Jan Jacob Slauerhoff's only play, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen*, written in 1931, is a fast-paced tale of imperial fantasies and the anxieties that accompany them. With its central narrative woven around the historical figure of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, the play dislodges Coen from his mythical status as national hero and moves in episodic strides through various phases and facets of his decline. In doing so, it touches on the easily wounded nerve that ties national pride to greed, masculinity, and racial and religious supremacy. The play's canonical status is contested on several counts. Early appraisals of the play all seem to

broadly agree that it is not of the literary caliber of the rest of the writer's oeuvre.⁵ Slauerhoff (1898–1936) was a Dutch poet and novelist who travelled around the world as a naval doctor. His works are regarded as belonging to the late romantic tradition, yet refreshing in terms of his anti-authoritarian and cosmopolitan worldview, characterized by adventure, a search for the unknown, and a longing for faraway places.⁶ Though he was a celebrated writer during his lifetime, the publication of his only play did not particularly excite reviewers at the time. One reviewer chides it as being characterized by a narrative rather than dramatic approach, as being unsuitable for staging because of its frequent change of scenes and, thus, as being dramaturgically flawed.⁷ Another reviewer cites the use of antiquated language as making the play inaccessible to theatergoers of the twentieth century.⁸ Others worry that the play contains historical imprecisions and misrepresents certain events.⁹

Yet, despite the formal criticisms, there remains an abiding fascination in several early reviews and readings of the play with the way in which Slauerhoff approaches the historical figure of Jan Pieterszoon Coen, chipping away at the image of the daring¹⁰ and uncompromising statesman, and unravelling a psychically wrecked and megalomaniac tyrant behind the figure. Notwithstanding its open criticism of Coen, Slauerhoff's play was received according to the tenor of the rising nationalist wave in the Europe of the tumultuous interbellum years, as evidence of Coen's status as a big man of the Dutch Golden Age. This is no doubt the case in H. P. Geerke's 1929 hagiography of Coen, read by Slauerhoff, in which Coen is positively compared to Mussolini, "both humans, powerful figures, who sought to advance their fellow beings."¹¹ Indeed, one might argue with Benedict Anderson that the formation of a Dutch nationalism required the manufacture of a glorious past to which it could anchor itself, as well as a mythical hero, no matter how despotic, who represented the quest for territorial expansion and the imperial conquest of other, larger European powers such as the Spaniards.¹² This would explain why the first statue of Coen was thus erected 250 years after his death, in 1867, in what was then called Batavia, today's Jakarta; or what motivated Coen's hometown of Hoorn in the Netherlands to install a statue in his honor with much pomp and ceremony as late as 1893. The popularity of colonial figures such as Admiral de Ruyter, Witte de With, Maurice of Nassau, or Peter Stuyvesant grew in Dutch national literature and public culture in the late nineteenth century and remained till the Second World War. Literary scholars refer to the emergence of a genre of apologetic literature in the interbellum period, observing a correlation between works referring to the Dutch colonies and a growing patriotic nationalism at the cusp of the war in Europe and the expanding decolonization movements across Asia and Africa.¹³ Against this body of writing, Slauerhoff's choice of this hero-cum-tyrant of Dutch colonial history as the protagonist of the play might thus be seen as a means of

reckoning with the nationalist fervor of his times through the diverted route of a figure from colonial history.

On the Play's Production History

The play's controversial production history further elevated its place in the canon. *Coen* was never publicly staged till 1986, after earlier productions in 1937, 1943, 1948 and 1961 had been cancelled at the last minute or refused permission.¹⁴ The details around these cancellations offer intriguing insights into how the play evidently suggested an entanglement of the colonial past with the public affairs of the current time.

One of the first known attempts at performing the play was by a group of students of Indology from the University of Leiden in 1937. The students approached the writer Edgar du Perron, who held the rights to Slauerhoff's literary estate, for permission to stage the play, sending him a copy of the adapted version of their script. In two letters dated 1937 to his friend, the writer Menno ter Braak, Du Perron notes that he refused to give permission to a performance which distorted the substance of the play and had nothing to do with the spirit of the writer:

I just received this jaw-dropping blabber [...] with an adaptation by the gentlemen. Not only has the entire sadistic scene been scrapped, but in fact every single indelicate or unseemly word in the entire play has been removed. For example, where it should be "wedded and bedded spouse" [...] the word "bed" is gone! [...] Cortenhoeff is not allowed to have "the Spanish pox" [...]. When Sara imitates the voice of God "with a heavy distilled gin-laced voice," the gin is taken out.¹⁵

While it has not been possible to trace the script adapted by the students, it is evident from Du Perron's comments that the performance was motivated by a puritan attempt at rehabilitating Coen's image as a hero of the East Indies, which Du Perron found appalling and tasteless. That it was undertaken by a group of Indology students is not insignificant in this connection and can be read as an indication of the apologetic inclination of the Orientalists of the time toward the colonial territories.

Another production was announced in 1943 at the Gemeentelijk Theaterbedrijf (Municipal Theater Company) in Amsterdam, an agency set up to coordinate theater and performance activities during the war under German occupation. This performance too did not take place, because "the authority considered the portrayal of the pioneer of the Indies to be too rough and not ideal enough."¹⁶ In the case of the annual book gala event in 1948, the performance was cancelled by the Mayor of Amsterdam, d'Ailly, a week before the event, leading to much uproar, since the program brochures had

already been printed. Although no reasons were officially given, the cancellation was no doubt connected to the way the play might have been received in the light of the Dutch military interventions in the East Indies in the 1940s and the war crimes and mass violence that began in 1945. A play that placed Dutch colonial history in a negative light was deemed as inappropriate at a time that the Dutch sought to retain their grip on the Dutch East Indies.¹⁷

The 1961 production by the student theater group Kothurne was meant to coincide with Slauerhoff's twenty-fifth death anniversary and the anniversary of the Amsterdam Female Student Association. The performance was eventually restricted to a strictly closed, invited audience, following an order from the Amsterdam Mayor, Van Hall, who appealed to national interest in claiming that a performance of the play would touch on a sensitive nerve and undermine national unity. The play's anti-colonial sentiment was deemed as detrimental to public opinion at a time when the Netherlands was embroiled in the so-called New Guinea dispute.¹⁸

Dutch audiences first watched the play only in 1969, indeed not on stage but as an adaptation for television by Jan Blokker, with documentary inserts and several omissions in the script, such as the scene featuring two deserters of the Dutch colonial army. A similarly edited radio-play version was aired in 1981.¹⁹ The first full public performance of the play took place in 1986 by the Dutch Repertory Company in an adaptation by Hans Bakx in the basement or Soeterijn Theater of what was then known as the Colonial Institute, today renamed the KIT Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam.²⁰

For a play so evidently concerned with a figure from the seventeenth century, it is remarkable that its staging in the twentieth century evoked such intense nationalist sentiments and a fair deal of attention from local authorities. As Coen biographer Jur van Goor has argued, the reasons for the controversies around the play have less to do with its contents and more to do with the public debates around the end of Dutch colonialism in the East Indies and the aftermath of the Second World War.²¹ However, it is the play that allows for these entanglements to come alive, as it were, for its staging inevitably begs the question of its connection to the present, whether it be a matter of historical continuity or of the mode of writing history, remembering and judging past events.

Between Violence and Desire

Slauerhoff's play focuses on the last months of Coen's life. Since Coen's wife, Eva Ment, is pregnant at the beginning of the play, and delivers a girl child at the end, it can be deduced that less than nine months elapse in the fictional time of the play. The play takes the license to conflate facts relating to the first and second historical invasions of Batavia (1628 and 1629) in one incident, thereby dramatically sharpening the downfall of Coen. The play is structured

in 11 acts (in Dutch: *tafereel*, a term originating from the Old French, carrying the connotations of scene, description, enactment and surface of projection), each subdivided into short, chronological scenes. Its episodic structure references the form of Shakespearean tragedies. The play is located in different sites of the colonial establishment in Batavia, with the crucial scenes taking place in the board room of the Dutch East India Company. Almost precisely half-way through the play (act 5) is a scene in a churchyard, which rather explicitly references the canonical graveyard scene in *Hamlet*, including a reflexive monologue.

The play opens with Coen's secretary and personnel gossiping about his poor health and fiery temperament. Within the first four scenes of the first act, the central elements of the plot are rapidly introduced. We are informed that the mighty Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies suffers from nightmares and numerous ailments. He announces plans to destroy the surplus harvest of spices to prevent it from being sold to the British. The arrival of a delegation of "native" rulers from Bantam is anticipated. The territory has been occupied by the Mataram army. Coen dictates a letter to the heads of the East India Company in Europe, by whom he feels abandoned, frantically appealing for more personnel and resources. He partly attributes the financial and territorial losses of the Company in the Indies to the lack of discipline and morale amongst his personnel. In particular, he is increasingly worried about the lasciviousness and immodesty of those in his custody, notably Sara, the daughter of East India Company Officer Jacques Specx and a Japanese woman. Coen seeks to "resolve" the situation by arranging the marriage of a number of his officers to young white women brought to the colony from the Netherlands. Sara, however, is to marry the bald, sweaty-palmed and bad-breath pastor Hurnius, who is "to erase any heathen traces in her."²² The conflicts escalate at different levels in the course of the play: we learn that the Dutch troops in Fort Parel and Fort Orange are successively attacked by the reigning monarch of Mataram, with whom Coen was expecting to strike a spice trade deal. Several officers desert the Company; others are held hostage. Coen's position as Governor-General is increasingly under question. Meanwhile, Sara, who manages to postpone her marriage to the pastor by seeking permission to be of assistance to Coen's wife, Eva Ment, until she delivers her baby, is discovered in her room in the amorous company of the young officer Cortenhoeff,²³ an act deemed as criminal, "a villainous dalliance."²⁴ Coen is enraged and orders their immediate death. Cortenhoeff is executed, but Sara escapes death in the last minute, thanks to the arrival of her father, Jacques Specx, who also brings with him the news that he is to succeed Coen as Governor-General of the Indies. The play ends with the news of Coen's death in bitterness, resentment, loneliness and defeat. Coen is rarely alone on stage; he is surrounded by personnel and company officers of various ranks, almost all of whom fear, loathe, envy or plot against him, even as they bow in obeisance to his orders.

François Blaeu, Coen's secretary, appears throughout the play as commentator and observer—"I am but an interested spectator"²⁵—trusted by Coen enough to question him and speak truth to him, yet himself mistrustful of Coen and envying his powerful position, willing to defend Coen to the end, if only in order to retain the right to appoint his successor.

The "Specx Affair"

While the play revolves around the figure of Coen, it curiously places the figure of Sara Specx and the so-called Specx Affair center stage. The historical figure of Saartje or Sara Specx was the daughter of an unknown Japanese woman and Jacques Specx (1585–1652), head of the East India Company establishment in Hirado, Japan and, later, Governor-General in Batavia (1629–1632). Since Company policy at the time sought to prevent what was then termed the "bastardization" of the Dutch population in Asia, children born out of extramarital liaisons between Dutch Company officers and indigenous women were sent to Batavia to be raised under the supervision of the Company.²⁶ When Saartje's father, Jacques Specx, was repatriated from his appointment in Japan, she was left under the guardianship of Jan Pieterszoon Coen and his wife, Eva Ment. The "scandal" around Saartje took place in 1629, when she was probably barely 13 years old, and was found in the company of Pieter Kortenhoeff, a 16-year-old reserve officer in the Company's service, himself raised as a mixed-race subject in the Company establishment in Batavia.²⁷ Coen, appointed as their guardian, was furious about this affair and announced that Kortenhoeff would be sentenced to death, a punishment that was executed the very next day. Sara was initially sentenced to death by drowning, but since she was under 14, her punishment was reduced to a public whipping. Although Sara escaped death, her father, Jacques Specx, later appointed as the successor of Coen in Batavia, fought the case at a high level, with the financial support of Kortenhoeff's uncle in the Netherlands, revealing that the case was a matter of concern and debate in metropolitan Europe as well.²⁸

Slauerhoff's play dramatizes several elements of this historical event, largely in line with archivally documented facts. Sara's affair with Cortenhoeff and the scandal it caused become the catalyst of climax and catastrophe in Slauerhoff's play. Coen's response was no doubt considered harsh and disproportionate even at the time, not only because of their young age, or because they were both under his guardianship, but also because Kortenhoeff had, in fact, officially asked for her hand in marriage, which should have technically acquitted him of the accusation of *crimen maiestatis* (high treason). Slauerhoff, however, introduces another twist in the plot, namely that Sara is figured as the object of desire of not only the minor character of Cortenhoeff, and the lustful pastor Hurnius, but also of Coen's chief secretary, Blaeu, and indeed Coen himself: "We all are in love with her, possess her in our nightly

lustful thoughts. Each in his own way. [...] And you, who had the most power and did not use it in battle, eventually used your power to take revenge, to kill the one who knew to possess her.”²⁹ This figuration of Sara Specx in relation to Coen and other characters in the play is suggestive of some of the core concerns of the play, which happen to resonate with recurrent themes of colonial discourse, such as the tension between colonial violence and desire, nostalgia, the fear of “miscegenation” and the imagination of the relation between colonizer and colonized in gendered and sexualized terms. For if colonialism, as Anne McClintock has pertinently observed, is “as deeply concerned with violence and power as it is with questions of fantasy, desire and difference,”³⁰ then Slauerhoff’s play offers an opportunity to explore this uncomfortable ambivalence in a manner that remains relevant to the present day.

Fantasy of Conquest and Fear of Engulfment

The setting of the play is in and around the East India Company’s council chambers and quarters in Batavia, the name given to the Dutch East India Company’s colonial headquarters in what is today Jakarta, which Coen wants to rename as New Hoorn, after his hometown in Holland. Batavia, however, always remains in the backdrop, sometimes as the fantasy of a conquered territory, at other times as the site of threat and hostility. In the play text, Batavia does not feature center stage but rather appears in the italics of stage directions and scenographic indications: “Outside a canal, over which a bamboo bridge, flanked by palm trees on the side. Malays slink past, back and forth, catching cockroaches and sprinkling water.”³¹ The colonial territory is figured in the play both as mysterious, beautiful and desirable, holding promises of immense treasures, and simultaneously as threatening, potentially contaminating, inflammable. The colony is imagined at some distance from the scene of action of the play, outside of it, yet engulfing it. “Why are you afraid?” Coen’s wife, Eva Ment, asks Sara, “the natives will not come here. The Governor is the terror of the entire archipelago”³²—as if it were not the East India Company that were invading the Indies but rather the Indies that were menacing to the Company. This tension between the imagined safe, intimate, domestic “inside” of the colonial headquarters and the rough, unpredictable and threatening “outside” of the colonies is scenographically indicated in the play. What we mainly see on stage is the life on the “inside,” yet rather than affirming this imagined uniform society, Slauerhoff sets it up as a façade in order to chip away at its supposed stability and homogeneity.

The play does not primarily address the resistance and insurgence of the colonized, but it does reveal the internal tensions within the Company establishment in Batavia as well as the asymmetries on racial, economic and social grounds within and amongst the colonizers. The colonizers are not depicted as one homogenous community. Not all is well with the powerful

Governor-General as the play begins. Coen is surrounded by officers who despise him and desert the Company, servants who gossip behind his back, and subjects under his guardianship disobeying his will. The European directors of the Company are deaf to his pleas, as they are primarily concerned about the profits Batavia brings, and less so about the welfare of the colonies. "I don't count on anything anymore. I know what we can expect: delays overseas, betrayal all around us, barely any troops and a perennial scarcity of cannonballs. In this nothing will ever change."³³ Slauerhoff's depiction of Coen, however, does not mention anything about the massacre of Banda in 1621, in which tens of thousands were killed in the battle over the monopoly of the spice trade, nor of his involvement in the Indian Ocean slave trade.³⁴ Yet the play is not an apologetic appraisal of the human side and personal qualities of this tyrannical ruler. Rather, we become audience to the pathetic and crumbling foundations of power and its ambivalent attraction to that which it seeks to conquer or vanquish.

One instance of this internal tension in the Company is the conflict between Coen and Specx, which is not only a battle over imperial power but also over domestic control and prescriptions of how Europeans ought to behave in the colonies in the domestic sphere. Coen is the guardian of Specx's mixed-race daughter, Sara, and his inability to discipline her and her desires, or place her in the grip of missionary Christianity and white supremacy, becomes emblematic of his political failure to keep the European model intact, as it were. Whereas Coen's dread of racial and religious contamination stands for the loss of colonial power, Specx, on the other hand, can be associated with the proud fantasies of masculine territorial conquest and the rewards that come to men when crossing racial boundaries in the form of concubinage or domestic sexual servitude. In both cases, paranoia and megalomania go together.³⁵ The obsession with maintaining and patrolling the racial, religious and spatial boundaries between colonizer and colonized as well as the nostalgia for the European homeland are paradoxically accompanied by an intense fascination for and attachment of the colonizer to the colonies, its people and its products, an aspect that Homi Bhabha has famously theorized as the ambivalence of colonialism.³⁶ Sara is figured as the focal point of this fascination, as nearly every male character in the play turns out to be infatuated with her. "She has the soul of her land, she is coaxing, charming, pliant, but also sly as a fox."³⁷ She is desired and simultaneously also mistrusted and loathed.

"Tell me," Sara questions Eva Ment in a moment of intimate conversation, "don't you also long to be from here?"³⁸ That rhetorical question is, of course, addressed equally to herself, who imagines herself as belonging more to the local population than to the Dutch colonial environment in which she is brought up. Sara's fantasies of becoming a geisha in Japan seem to have more to do with Slauerhoff's orientalist projections of her longing for submission and being desired by the European as other, than with a quest for cultural

belonging by a mixed-race subject under colonialism. This is worth noting because of its theater historiographical implications, namely when we imagine what a staging of the play might look like in our own times. I would like to argue that it is the historiographical task of any contemporary adaptation of the play to self-reflexively comment on these layers of fantasy that are projected onto the colonial past, which extend to the present day. In what way historiographical? Because every staging assumes a relationship of the subject of the play to the contemporary moment of its staging. Staging a historical play about an event and a figure from seventeenth-century Dutch colonial history suggests that there is a resemblance or continuity between that historical-fictional time, the time of writing the play and the present time, or that there is something to be learnt from those pasts that is of relevance to the present. The task of performance becomes historiographical to the extent that it is not only a work of interpreting sources but also, in doing so, a work of critically investigating the position of the observer in relation to these historical pasts.

The racialized, gendered and sexualized connotations of these male power fantasies are evident in the play, and they are typical tropes of colonial discourse. Feminist scholars of colonial historiography have pointed out that the assertion of the rulers' supremacy in the colonies is often done in terms of virility, patriotic masculinity and racial purity.³⁹ Slauerhoff, too, repeatedly employs these tropes: natives tend to be figured as naked, sensual, either sleepy or mercurial in temper, either lazy or bogged down by the conditions of manual labor—in any case, bodies perceived and imagined through the vantage point of colonial power: “below the bridge, one sees a pirogue passing by with half-naked natives”⁴⁰; or “An *alang-alang* field. Troops from Mataram squat along the roadside, chewing betel leaves, smoking corn leaf cigars, or sleeping.”⁴¹ In his references to the landscapes and the natural environment of the colonies, Slauerhoff seems to unwittingly adopt the colonial depiction of nature as simultaneously inert and extravagant, made available for human extraction and consumption.⁴² As scholars have pointed out, this figuration of nature rose in popularity in the seventeenth century through the genre of still life paintings that characterize the art historical period known as the Dutch Golden Age. However, regardless of whether or not the playwright affirmatively uses these as nostalgic imaginations of the colonial period, it is important for any interpretation or staging of the play to unravel the ambivalences between colonial violence and colonial desire.⁴³ This might be done by paying more dramaturgical attention to the ways in which the “inside” and “outside” of colonial power are represented and how unstable the boundaries between them are.

In his critique of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Partha Chatterjee questions Anderson's assumption that all anti-colonial nationalist movements imagined their nation along the lines of models offered to them by Europe.⁴⁴ He argues instead that in their social institutions and practices,

these movements often distinguished between an “outside” sphere of statecraft, economy and technology, where the European model was adopted as required, and an “inside” domain of cultural uniqueness and identity, which governed language, family and gender relations and which sought to carve out a sovereignty and autonomy, untouched by colonial power. In reading Slauerhoff’s play in the light of Chatterjee’s argument, it is interesting to ask how colonial discourse conversely also developed its own distinctions between “inside” and “outside.” The play invites such a historiographic shift of perspective, wherein one might investigate not only how the colonies are shaped by Europe but also how Europe’s self-conception is shaped by its colonies.

Colony as Woman and Woman as Colony

In her study on the figure of Pocahontas in American colonial historiography, Helen Carr argues that the relationship between colonizer and colonized is often modeled in terms of the power relationship between men and women, specifically that the analogy “provided a fund of images and topoi by which the difference European/non-European could be politically accommodated.”⁴⁵ For instance, the colonized land is often rendered as the passive, feminized recipient of male custodianship.⁴⁶ “You need not go into the interior territories in search of conquest,⁴⁷ Coen tells his officers, with the allusive linking of territorial conquest to the acquisition of women. “Decent ladies are in absence of their natural guardians,”⁴⁸ he continues, figuratively linking women with nature and, by implication, with unconquered territory, both requiring, indeed waiting for, masculine colonial protection and custodianship. Interestingly, the Dutch word *voogd* stands for both governor and guardian; it refers to the male role as both the guardian of land as well as of children. It is noteworthy, in this context, that in colonial discourse, both colonial subjects and women are often represented as children.⁴⁹

The play offers an explicit commentary on the place of women in the colonial project. “If only there were enough women, the bulk of East Indian trade would be yours [...]. We must plant a colony, women must be sent expressly for this purpose,”⁵⁰ remarks Blaeu with reference to Coen’s plea to the directors of the Dutch East India Company to send white Dutch women to the Indies. It is historically documented that it was common practice to send poor or orphaned white women and girls to the colonies in the early part of the seventeenth century, on the one hand as a measure to increase the population of the white settlers and create a social life and environment that emulated the European bourgeois model, but, on the other hand, it was also a measure to supposedly prevent sexual encounters between white men and indigenous women.⁵¹ The policy was thus shaped by a fear of “miscegenation” or racial intermingling, which was widely regarded as a threat to the civilizational

mission of colonialism. In one of several monologues of self-doubt and self-deprecation, Coen laments the crumbling of his power and ambitions:

The house of Nassau has fallen. Orange is faltering. If it collapses, we are done for and everything will once again be as it was before we arrived; with only some additional ruins, graves and bastards. A somewhat lighter tinted Javanese, an occasional blue-eyed one, that is all that will remain as a reminder of us. Our shame!⁵²

Coen is depicted here as not merely concerned about the material profits of the East India Company but equally obsessed about the civilizational mission of establishing a powerful, white ruling class in the colonies. The fact that Slauerhoff picked up on this might also be connected to the resurgence of Nazi eugenics in the period when he wrote the play, and this might have been a way to critique the racism and petty moralism of his times. In reading these lines against the current backdrop of a resurgent, aggressively masculine, racialized nationalist politics in different parts of the world, not only in the Global North but also in formerly colonized countries such as India and Brazil, as well as in other imperial contexts such as Russia, Slauerhoff's figuration of *Coen* needs to be interpreted with a reflexive and historicized positioning of the present in relation to the colonial pasts.

The position of the white woman in the colony is a curious one in this regard. The white woman in the colony—in this case, Eva Ment—is both subordinate to as well as an active upholder of colonial norms.⁵³ Ment fiercely defends her husband and his civilizational mission, though she also admits to his being “irascible and somewhat rough.”⁵⁴ In speaking about herself, she has no doubts that a woman's role is in being obedient and subservient to her husband: “She must be where her husband is, bear and raise his children, obey, and if it must be, suffer.”⁵⁵ What suffering implies for the wife of the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies is, of course, a relative question. Eva, however, despite distancing herself from the “natives,” also compares her fate to that of all women elsewhere in the world. It is the fate of women everywhere to suffer, she concludes, hoping thus to bring the conversation with Sara to an end. “And that is not just here, it is also the case in Holland, and in Japan even worse. Don't you know that the woman is the slave of man there?”⁵⁶ Here again, the relation between man and woman is drawn in terms of a political economy that is tied at once to the colonial enterprise as well as to the Calvinist ethic of suffering. The white woman in the colony recognizes that the control of women's bodies and sexualities is part of the maintenance of colonial power.⁵⁷ She imagines herself as both necessary to the preservation of the system, as a beneficiary of it, and, at the same time, as universally allied with those enslaved in colonialism. This universalist white feminist position would need to be carefully taken apart and complicated in any staging of the play.⁵⁸

As a mixed-race subject under colonialism, Sara occupies a slightly different position, straddling between the colonial environment of Batavia and her imagined affinity to Japan. She refuses the Calvinist ethic of suffering, insisting she would rather be indulgent and ornamental rather than subject herself to feminine tasks of labor such as serving, washing and cleaning. “I have not yet learned to make and serve tea, but I know thirty-three dances, and I can play the *samisen* too.”⁵⁹ In choosing Cortenhoeff over the pastor Hurnius, she defies Coen and, with him, the politics of respectability that was part and parcel of the civilizational mission of colonialism. A staging of the figure of Sara would thus need to take into account the numerous orientalist and nostalgic projections that Slauerhoff endows her with and unpack these in a historically responsible way.⁶⁰ The task of interweaving performance histories can thus be interpreted as a feminist task, questioning established, canonized understandings of colonial histories and paying attention to the gendered dimensions of their asymmetries and hierarchies.

Questions of Interpretive Methodology

The above reflections about Slauerhoff’s play are informed by the curious circumstance that it is a play that has been censored and cancelled more often than it has been performed. The production history reveals important insights into how performance is a form of historiographic practice. Performance as the lived life of a play text is not only a means of challenging culturally canonized understandings of the historical subject of the play but an active intervention in the present, an interweaving of the present with multiple pasts. In the best case, it can complicate and offer nuanced understandings of the past as well as shape the relationship between the past and present into a multidirectional one. In the worst case, it is an exercise in manipulating and manufacturing history to suit some limited agendas of the present. The absence of a large number of performances is, however, not a major hindrance to the study of the play, as this chapter adopts a speculative approach to performance historiography. It is concerned with ways of bringing historical facts and events to life in the present, thus also anticipating possible future ways of representing pasts. Considering the implications of the inclusion of Slauerhoff’s play in a list of 100 most important plays in the Dutch/Flemish language, the chapter seeks to imagine what would be required for possible future stagings of the play, to do justice, as it were, to the representation of colonial pasts.

The chapter investigates how Slauerhoff’s play invites, indeed insists, on an interpretation, which would connect its historical subject to the contexts of the times in which it is staged. Because the play is entangled with its interpreters and the contexts of interpretation, and the historical events it portrays seep into the contemporary and past interpretations of these events, the play is suggestive of multiple performance frames, connecting different times and

histories. It does not therefore suffice to speak of these multiple frames in terms of comparison, as in: What was it like then, and how is it like now? What are the commonalities and differences between the spatio-temporalities of the Dutch East India Company era and our own time, or between Dutch and other colonial sites? Such an approach suggests a point of view that postulates that the interpreter can be separated from the comparable times and spaces, and summons a “we” that begs the question of its own history. Such comparative moves are never straightforward or innocent. They demand a certain self-positioning of the reader, artist or the audience toward the play and its subject as well as toward the play’s production history. They imply choices about the scale of comparison and the inherent logic of comparison. They call for setting up or recalibrating the frames of reference.⁶¹ The play compels such a self-positioning.

The question is thus not only how to but why stage a play such as Slauerhoff’s *Coen* in a contemporary setting. What promises or challenges does this interweaving of different histories offer? The play is intriguing in the way it unravels the ambivalences and gradations of colonialism. It is valuable for the way it places the historiography of Dutch colonialism in the East Indies in relation to Slauerhoff’s own time, which we now know as the interbellum period between the wars of the twentieth century in Europe. Its production history reveals how the play resonated with and created frictions with the hegemonic views of the post-war and post-colonial Netherlands. A twenty-first-century staging of the play would ideally need to retain and explore those ambivalences and contradictions, not just in the way they pertain to the historical event of colonialism but also in their traces in the present time and space, and no doubt dependent on whether the interpretation is undertaken in Leiden or Jakarta or Curaçao. For instance, what is to be done with certain parts of the script that would no doubt be considered as racist or offensive if used on the contemporary stage? Ought these parts to be skipped or eliminated in order not to offend anyone in the audience? How might such an erasure be different from the 1937 version of the play, where Indology students in Leiden deleted certain parts of the script, which they felt would depict the protagonist in too negative a light? How might the exoticized depictions of women and natives in the play be translated to a contemporary context? What kind of a casting practice might complicate the script? How might a performance sensitize us to certain absences such as that of enslaved persons in the play? Such questions must not be quickly brushed aside with liberal arguments that seek to mobilize freedom of expression or easy condemnations of the past as conservative and backward. Sometimes, as in the instance of the absence of the Banda massacres in Slauerhoff’s play, it is the task of a possible future staging to explicitly comment on or redress this absence, for ambivalence in this case would only reinforce the erasure. However, in other instances,

such as the manner of Slauerhoff's depiction of the domestic lives of colonial administrators, a possible staging would need to retain and explore the ambivalence with which they are portrayed in the play. For it is this ambivalence that allows for a connection of the colonial past with the present time to realize this present as entangled with these histories. Any possible future adaptation of the play would necessarily need to confront theater makers and audiences with these uncomfortable questions.

Notes

- 1 I acknowledge with gratitude the valuable research inputs and feedback I received from Rob van der Zalm and Veronika Zangl. An earlier, Dutch version of this text was published in Sruti Bala, "'Een Kolonie Moeten Wij Planten': Over Het Toneelstuk 'Jan Pietersz. Coen' (1931) van J. Slauerhoff," in *In Reprise: Tweëntwintig Nederlandse En Vlaamse Toneelstukken Om Opnieuw Te Bekijken*, ed. Rob van der Zalm et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 63–75.
- 2 Thomas Borst, "Jan Pieterszoon Coen Wekt Wrevel in Hoorn; Gemeente Weigert Betoging Rondom Beeld," *De Volkskrant*, 16 June 2020, <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/jan-pieterszoon-coen-wekt-wrevel-in-hoorn-gemeente-weigert-betogingrondom-beeld~beb95cb7>. My translation.
- 3 J. J. Slauerhoff, *Jan Pietersz. Coen* (1931; repr., Amsterdam: De nieuwe toneelbibliotheek, vol. 150, 2012).
- 4 The ongoing initiative *In Reprise* (In Revival) has assembled a longlist of 100 and a shortlist of 25 plays in the Dutch/Flemish language from different historical periods. The process involved a broad range of experts in Dutch and Flemish theater, an extensive survey of public opinion as well as an empirical analysis of historical statistics about the popularity of plays in terms of ticket sales and production figures. The initiative has resulted in an extensive website with historical documentation on each play and its production history, a book-length publication with essays on select plays, and a partnership with theater companies to stimulate and support the staging of these plays and an inclusion in their repertoires. See <http://www.inreprise.org>.
- 5 For a selection of reviews of the play, see the website of the project, "De Lijst van 100," *In Reprise*, accessed 7 January 2022, http://www.inreprise.org/lijsjt_100?s=t&id=dwslau001janp001.
- 6 See a biography of the writer in *Koninklijke Bibliotheek*, "J. J. Slauerhoff (1898–1936)," Royal Dutch National Library Online Resources, accessed 7 January 2022, <https://www.kb.nl/themas/nederlandse-literatuur-en-taal/schrijversalfabet/jj-slauerhoff-1898-1936>.
- 7 Ben van Eysselsteijn, "Jan Pietersz. Coen in Drama Uitgebeeld: Een Nieuw Nederlandsen Tooneelstuk," *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, sec. Kunst en Letteren, 8 January 1932, Delpher.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 "Toneelspel 'Jan Pieterszn. Coen' Verboden Door Burgemeester van Amsterdam," *Leeuwarder Courant: Hoofdblad van Friesland*, 20 February 1948, Delpher.
- 10 The Dutch word *koen* means daring, doughty, fearless.
- 11 H. P. Geerke, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen: De Baanbreker in Ons Indië* (Utrecht: De Haan, 1929), my translation; Jur van Goor, "Sara Specx En de Reputatie van Jan Pieterszoon Coen," in *Het Koloniale Beschavingsoffensief: Wegen Naar Het Nieuwe Indië, 1890–1950*, ed. Marieke Bloembergen and Remco Raben (Leiden: KITLV, 2009), 145.

- 12 “He may have been a rogue, but he was our very own rogue,” a Dutch politician is said to have remarked about Coen. The quote was visualized in a 2012 exhibition on Coen in the West Friesian Museum in Hoorn; see Westfries Museum, Vind Magazine, and Polder Vondsten, eds., *Coen! Geroemd En Verguisd* (Hoorn: Westfries Museum, 2012), accessed 4 March 2022, <https://wfm.nl/coen>. It is noteworthy that Benedict Anderson argues that anti-colonial movements such as in French Indochina adopted a model of nationalism taken from the Dutch colonial model of *beamtenstaaten*, a point I will return to later in this chapter. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso Books, 2006), 99.
- 13 W. H. van Helzingen, *Daar Werd Iets Groots Verricht Nederlandsch-Indie in de XXte Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1941). This is a widely cited instance of such apologetic literature, published 10 years after Slauerhoff’s play. See J. M. Pluvier, “Recent Dutch Contributions to Modern Indonesian History,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 8, no. 2 (1967): 202.
- 14 Westfries Museum, Vind Magazine, and Polder Vondsten, *Coen! Geroemd En Verguisd*, 81; J. H. W. Veenstra, “Slauerhoff, Coen En de Oorlogsmisdaden,” *Maatstaf* 17, no. 6 (1970): 337–50.
- 15 Edgar du Perron to Menno ter Braak, Tjitjoeroeg, 8 February and 14 April 1937, in *Briefwisseling tussen Menno ter Braak en E. du Perron 1930–1940*, rev. ed., Literary Museum in the Hague in Cooperation with Foundation Menno ter Braak (DBNL, 2009), my translation.
- 16 M. Wolters, “Het Nederlandsche Repertoire,” *De Waag*, 27 October 1944, 596. At the time of publication of this article, the periodical *De Waag* was still under the editorship of the National Socialists, and Wolters happened to be the acting Head of Theatre and Dance in the Department of Public Education and Arts. In the article, he defends both Slauerhoff as well as Coen as “unique, unrivalled figures” and expresses regret about the banning of the play. This instantiates how, even within National Socialist circles, the historical legacy and value of J. P. Coen remained malleable and contested.
- 17 Apart from the above instances, Aalders presents evidence for a failed attempt at performing the play in the 1950s by a student theater company in Utrecht. See Hein Aalders, “Een ‘ploertig Stuk’ En de Openbare Orde, De Wereldpremière van Slauerhoffs ‘Jan Pietersz. Coen,’” *De Parelduiker* 22, no. 1 (2017): 48. See also Wim Hazeu, *Slauerhoff: Biografie*, 4th ed., Open Domein 28 (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2018).
- 18 “Na Lang Beraad Toch Opvoering,” *De Tijd De Maasbode*, 5 October 1961; Aalders, “Een ‘ploertig Stuk.’”
- 19 Tom Rooduin, “De Beul van Banda,” *Radio Doc*, 19 March 2017, <https://www.nporadio1.nl/radio-doc/onderwerpen/399724-de-beul-van-banda>.
- 20 Hazeu, *Slauerhoff*, n556, n564.
- 21 Jur van Goor, *Jan Pieterszoon Coen, 1587–1629: Koopman-koning in Azië* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2015).
- 22 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 16, my translation.
- 23 Cortenhoeff is the name of the character in the play, which is based on the historical figure of Pieter Kortenhoef. The spellings used throughout the text indicate this distinction.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 104.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 26 Ann L. Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 637.

- 27 Jur van Goor cites sources that mention the presence of enslaved women and other servants in the room, apart from Cortenhoeff. The presence-absence of enslaved persons in the play is another aspect that deserves attention; see Van Goor, "Sara Specx," 151.
- 28 Adrienne Zuiderweg, "Sara En Pieter, Een Bataviase Liefdesaffaire," *Indische Letteren* 22 (2007): 2–15; Michiel van Groesen, "Specx, Sara (1616/1617–ca. 1636)," *Digitaal Vrouwenlexicon van Nederland*, 13 January 2014, <http://resources.huylgens.knaw.nl/bwn1780-1830/DVN/lemmata/data/Specx>.
- 29 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 99–100.
- 30 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 15.
- 31 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 7.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 22.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 38–39.
- 34 Only one line in act 1, scene 4 mentions the existence of thousands of dead in broad terms: "While you traversed the Indian Ocean, they were beaten, thousands were killed, many rioters were reduced to ashes, leaving the Sultan indebted to you." *Ibid.*, 15.
- 35 Peter Hulme has argued that this coming together of paranoia and megalomania is a recurrent trope in male imperial discourse; see "Polytropic Men: Tropes of Sexuality and Mobility in Early Colonial Discourse," in *Europe and Its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1985), 26–27.
- 36 Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): 125–33.
- 37 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 101.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 39 Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable"; McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.
- 40 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 10.
- 41 *Ibid.*, 50.
- 42 In this regard, a contemporary staging of the play would ideally engage with the critique of colonial modernity's conceptions of nature. In a series of brilliant essays departing from the story of the nutmeg in Dutch colonial history, Amitav Ghosh pleads for a vitalist politics, one that pays attention to the entanglements of human history with non-human forces. *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2021), 40. In an essay in this volume titled "The Fruits of the Nutmeg Have Died," Ghosh references the work of art historian Julie Berger Hochstrasser, which relates the rise of the genre of still life paintings to the colonial enterprise: "The Conquest of Spice and the Dutch Colonial Imaginary: Seen and Unseen in the Visual Culture of Trade," in *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and Politics in the Early Modern World*, ed. Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 169–86.
- 43 Sarah de Mul, "Nostalgia for Empire: 'Tempo Doeloe' in Contemporary Dutch Literature," *Memory Studies* 3, no. 4 (2010): 413–28.
- 44 Partha Chatterjee, "Whose Imagined Community?," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 20, no. 3 (1991): 521–25.
- 45 Helen Carr, "Woman/Indian: 'The American' and His Others," in *Europe and Its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester: University of Essex Press, 1985), 46.
- 46 Hulme, "Polytropic Men," quoted in McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 26.
- 47 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 16.
- 48 *Ibid.*

- 49 See, for example, a study on respectability politics in the Dutch Caribbean context by Rose Mary Allen, "Biba Un Bida Drechi: Living a Respectable Life," in *Di Ki Manera? A Social History of Afro-Curaçaoans, 1863–1917* (Amsterdam: SWP Publishers, 2007), 215–34.
- 50 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 98.
- 51 Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable."
- 52 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 74.
- 53 For an extensive analysis of this subject, see McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.
- 54 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 22.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 56 *Ibid.*
- 57 McClintock, *Imperial Leather*.
- 58 This could be done with the help of studies such as Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) and Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving, eds., *Dutch Racism* (Leiden: Brill/Rodopi, 2014). These studies speak to the ways in which race, class, gender, sexuality and colonial history intersect in the Netherlands.
- 59 Slauerhoff, *Coen*, 19.
- 60 This might serve as an opportunity for theater makers to engage with recent scholarship, offering insightful guides in the process of historicizing a play, such as Reggie Baay, *De njai: het concubinaat in Nederlands-Indië* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep, 2008); Pamela Pattynama, *Bitterzoet Indië: Herinnering En Nostalgie in Literatuur, Foto's En Films* (Amsterdam: Prometheus/Bert Bakker, 2014); and Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002).
- 61 In this emphasis on self-reflexivity and positioning, I believe the *histoire croisée* approach is a valuable contribution to performance historiography; see Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, "Beyond Comparison: *Histoire Croisée* and the Challenge of Reflexivity," *History and Theory* 45, no. 1 (2006): 30–50.

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