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A response to Plantations in the Peatlands? Domestic Colonization and Settlement in the Nineteenth-Century Dutch North

Hanneke Stuit

This piece makes two useful comparisons that help to shed light on and generate new questions about Dutch colonial history. In the first instance, it seeks to connect two, perhaps underrepresented, projects of colonial expansion on Dutch soil, that of the Colonies of Benevolence in Drenthe, which materialized in the year 1818, and the Peat Colonies in Drenthe and Groningen, which arose from the 1600s onwards but reached their peak in the 19th century. Both driven by the perceived need to settle wastelands – either for the purpose of plain extraction of resources in order to get rich, as was the case in the Peat Lands, or for that of educating impoverished populations through agricultural labor as in the Colonies of Benevolence – Zwiers invites the reader to consider how these initiatives achieved their goals by means of "swampification" (Vickers 2023). In this process, wastelands, particularly wetlands like swamps, bogs, moors, fens and peatlands, are stripped of their intricate value as complex ecosystems through discursive acts that stage these lands as ugly, disease-ridden and useless unless cultivated. In this sense, the Dutch North was "settled" in an environmental sense, decimating thousands of square kilometers of wetland, even if the important difference with other settler colonial contexts remains that "large scale elimination of (specifically racialized) native populations" did not take place in this context (Zwiers).

The concept of swampification also initiates a second, internationally oriented comparison. Mindful of the differences between the Colonies of Benevolence and the Peatland Colonies, Zwiers aligns these particular forms of domestic colonization with plantation logics elsewhere, in this case in the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, and the United States. This plantation comparison seems particularly apt in the context of the Colonies of Benevolence (see also Stuit and Ten Westenend 2024), for which (un)willing settler colonists were handpicked by urban municipalities elsewhere in the Netherlands so that they could work in a regime that can only be described as bonded labor, though not slavery (colonists were not property, could one day be free and the violence was much less abject).

The Peat Colonies, on the other hand, were buoyed by a US inspired discourse of frontierism, as Zwiers makes clear. This definitely aligns them with the US context, but also means they were organized much more opportunistically, with poorer people migrating to the North voluntarily in order to find work while the elites attempted to "strike gold" there. In contrast to the colonists in the Colonies of Benevolence, which were designed in an intellectual tradition heady with charity relief and prison reform (Arneil 2017; Schrauwers 2021), laborers in the Peat Colonies were technically free to find

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employment elsewhere. In this sense, the Peat Colonies lacked the explicit carceral dimensions and intentions that characterized the Colonies of Benevolence (Stuit, Bernaerts & Puddu, forthcoming). These are the same carceral dimensions, that, in the escalated and abject architectural technology of the camp, have fueled the most aggressive and punitive aspects of settler coloniality (Mbembe 2019, 9-41; Stoler 2016, 68-121; Forth 2024, 39-65). The plantation also stands in this tradition (McKittrick 2013).

All of this to say that Zwiers contributes to a better understanding of Dutch colonial histories by exploring connections with settler colonialism. By emphasizing the Peat Colonies, Zwiers makes clear that the economic opportunism of frontier thinking has caused the destruction of large swaths of the Northern Dutch ecosystem that is still noticeable in the landscape and soil today. The same is true for the Colonies of Benevolence, which – basically a stone's throw away – introduced a plantation logic that prepared the route for intensified monoculture and broke the back of traditions of land held in common in the name of progress (Schrauwers 2001, 299-300). Zwiers allows us to see the two Dutch initiatives not just as geographically adjacent and contemporaneous, but also as a conceptual tandem consisting of the internationally circulating imaginaries and practices associated with the plantation and the frontier.

Such an interpretation of situated historical events may at first seem counterintuitive, but actually helps in recognizing that both Dutch history and the concept of settler colonialism work differently than may be estimated at face value. The term settler colonialism tends to be reserved for settings of a particularly violent nature where colonists and colonialism "came to stay" (Wolfe 2006, 388). Such a perspective, however, obscures that colonialism always has lasting impact and that it is always violent regardless of its intentions. The Dutch case abroad shows, for instance, that so-called trade colonialism can be equally genocidal, as the expedition of Jan Pieterszoon Coen on Banda shamefully makes clear (Ghosh 2021, 19-22).

Importantly for the Dutch domestic context, Zwiers's perspective makes clear that the imaginaries of settler colonialism (plantation logic, frontierism, and, one may add, how agriculture was thought to emotionally tie colonists to the new land,) made itself felt in the Dutch domestic context by facilitating other, admittedly "milder" forms of colonization, the long term environmental impacts of which are perhaps no less devastating in the long run. The realizations that come from these connections, however, are not about comparing, or worse, equating levels of violence – the importance of these inalienable differences remains. Rather, it is about looking carefully at each context anew, without eschewing uncomfortable parallels, so that colonialism's impact on the present, both in the landscape and the sort of interhuman and interspecies relations that it scripted, can be acknowledged with greater precision.

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