

SALTWATER INSURGENCY: DROWNING AND  
GENDER DURING THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

*Publishable article*

RESISTING THE DUTCH SLAVERY ARCHIVES:  
EPISTEMIC JUSTICE AND HISTORICAL  
REDRESS THROUGH SLAVE SHIP REBELLION

*PhD proposal*

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Radboud University Nijmegen

Britt van Duijvenvoorde, s1045862

Supervised by Dr. Anya Topolski

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Britt van Duijvenvoorde, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works—including electronic media—have been identified and the sources clearly stated. Place: Oegstgeest. Date: 6<sup>th</sup> of March, 2023.

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## **Abstract**

This article is dedicated to resurfacing an enslaved female whom we encounter, drowning, in a witness testimony of the crew of the Dutch slave ship *Zanggodin*. To unfold a reading beyond the transcription of her commodified death, I investigate the five localities that conditioned her bodily inscription into history: the archive, the law, the ship, the ocean, and the womb. Traveling through these localities, I disclose, on the one hand, the historical violence against black females through the transatlantic slave trade system and, on the other, the excess black females proved to be to this very system. Excessive thus, I propose that the black female lineage provides an alternative to white, patriarchic systems of relation.

## **Introduction**

In one sense, the Dutch archive of the transatlantic slave trade is a closed system. The archival documents it harbors, are finite. Bound to a specific time and place, these documents are forged by those historically in power—that is, those affiliated to the Dutch colonial government and slave trading enterprises such as the *Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie* (MCC), the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC), and the *West-Indische Compagnie*. Their ship logs, trade books, resolutions, and letters present a one-sided, biased, and violent account of the history of slavery: all relate the dehumanizing slaving practices and discourses that erased enslaved Africans from the historical record. Yet this is not the entire story. The archive contains histories that are, ultimately, irreducible to the dehumanizing purposes archival documents historically served. The power and thus the responsibility of selecting which stories to attend to—and, by attending, to endow existence—is consigned to us. For, each time we are opening up archives, we are making choices. These choices—of ways of reading, of topics of attention, of narration—change how we come to see historical events. And conversely, reimagination of historical events circles back to shape our present worldly imaginations. Ethically, revisitation to the archive, then, becomes a matter of doing justice to erased (hi)stories and, subsequently, enabling new contemporary imaginations to emerge. History, in a very real sense, is in our hands. And with it, the future as well.

In an attempt to resurface black life from unritualized, dehumanized death, this article is dedicated to an enslaved female whom we encounter, drowning, in a witness testimony given by the crew of the Dutch slave ship *Zanggodin*. This witness testimony served as an insurance exhibit to determine if the loss of slave lives—through escape or counter-violence—during the revolt that took place aboard was justified. The witness testimony dedicates only one sentence to the drowned female—her existence attested to in no more than 25 words. In this one sentence, in these 25 words, we read how she drowned after having jumped overboard, together with a young boy. To focus on her is a *choice*. I could have focused on the boy or their relation, the mass revolt or the people who fled ashore. Choosing not to do so, has consequences for what history is written and how this done. Described below is thus only one *potential* reading of her act of drowning. My narration withholds narrative impeccability—it is necessarily incomplete, necessarily partial, but therefore infinitely open to other possibilities and alternatives.

Even though her archival transcription served a monetary purpose only, the drowned female breaks through the testimony in what I read as an act of resistance. The alternative reading of the female's transcription I perform, travels through five localities that condition her bodily inscription into history: the archive, the law, the ship, the ocean, and the womb. These five localities are crucial as they, historically, formed the substrata through which black, enslaved humans in general and females specifically were dehumanized. Retracing these localities, I attempt to disclose, on the one hand, the historical violence against black females through the slave trade system, on the other, the excess black females proved to be to this very system. Starting with the archive—our primary (written) access into history—I describe the skewed power dynamics of archival construction that condition the history writing of the historically dominant by virtue of the erasure of those they enslaved. Proceeding to the law of “partus sequitur ventrem,” or “through the womb,” I show that the stipulation that slave status was inherited through the female lineage meant the emptying out of indigenous symbolic ties and secured the superior social positions of white men in patriarchal, colonial societies. Thereafter, I describe how this colonial order of human difference manifested itself aboard slave ships. Based on this understanding, two interpretations of jumping overboard can be presented: one from the slavers'

perspective (jumping overboard) and one from the captives' perspective (jumping into the ocean). The section on the ocean, then, expands on the idea of jumping into the ocean to explain how the undifferentiated identities forced upon enslaved Africans through the slave trade system pose an alternative to the (shipboard) colonial regime. In the final section dedicated to the womb, I reconnect the drowned female with the drowned boy and argue that the offspring of enslaved mothers inherited the quality of being undifferentiated and, for this reason, the black female lineage carries within the potential to overcome colonial regimes and logics.

Before imparting the alternative reading of the black female act of drowning through the five localities mentioned above, I want to express my own emotional investment in this article, because writing this article was devastating. Multiple reasons shaped this difficulty, but I'll spell out the two most important ones. As a white scholar, most troubling to me in an academic sense were language and the limits of emphatic understanding. Unlike many black scholars, I cannot immerse myself in the particular assemblage of my being to understand what it means to live in the afterlife of slavery as an heir of enslavement.<sup>1</sup> But like them, I am affected by a racial, sexist, and ableist world order and, like them, I desire a better world. To begin to envision this, I invested in and learned from the great wealth of black studies. No doubt, I have not done so impeccably. But luckily, to echo Fred Moten, "it's like a great relieve to realize that at the same time that you realize you can't do it, that you realize I don't have to do it by myself anyways."<sup>2</sup> What struck me most, however, was pain. For it is hard reading an archive for traces that lead only to the repetitious erasure of people and it is hard when, finding them, they appear but in their death. I had hoped to find the drowned female and boy in the captain's letters or in the ship's journal. I had hoped to see them reappear; I had hoped to see them witnessed. But to face the fact that, once again, black individuals were only registered to account for monetary loss, pales the promise of archival retrieval and the historical reconstructions based upon retrieval. Yet if, in the face of such gaping historical recollection, this article succeeds, even in the slightest

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<sup>1</sup> See Christina Sharpe's explanation of "inserting the personal" and the "autobiographical example" as inspired by Saidiya Hartman in *In the Wake* (2016): 19, 24. For Hartman, see *Lose Your Mother* (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Fred Moten, "The Black Outdoors," Youtube, October 5, 2016, 43:17 to 43:25-, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t\\_tUZ6dybrc&t=6484s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_tUZ6dybrc&t=6484s).

manner, in writing a history “about what an archive does not offer” as well as a history of archival non-offering, I’d find hope in that (Fuentes 2016, 146).

## The archive

The *Zanggodin* sailed in the name of the free trading company the Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie and was on a triangular trading journey from the Dutch Kingdom to the African coast to Suriname and back to the Dutch Kingdom again. Its ship type was a snow. Snows were relatively small sailing vessels with two main sails.<sup>3</sup> Whereas snows were commonly fully dedicated to trading and trafficking human bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, the *Zanggodin*’s main commodity of interest was ivory. For this reason, it shipped the relatively small number of 45 enslaved individuals (slaving vessels often shipped between 100 and 600 African people). At the time of the revolt, the ship confined 67 enslaved individuals.<sup>4</sup>

In the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> of October 1769, the *Zanggodin* lay anchored in the Gabon river—currently known as the Ogooué river in Gabon. Jan van Sprang, captain of *Zanggodin*, ordered seven of his sailors to go to the coast to ransom water and build the coastal huts in which their commerce was to take place.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that four crewmembers lay ill, and seven others had gone to shore, aboard, business resumed as usual. Thus, at ten o’clock in the morning, van Sprang went up to the deck and inquired with boatswain Jan van der Wouw if the latter was ready to feed the enslaved. While making his way back to his quarters, the captives, who had been on deck to air themselves, attacked the captain and threatened to cut his throat with a blunt knife. Van der Wouw then shot at the enslaved to save his captain, who was released and quickly sought security in the ship’s cabin. During this upheaval, some of the captives had managed to get into a sloop and started escaping from the *Zanggodin*. While several

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<sup>3</sup> For an example of a “snow,” see <https://eenigheid.slavenhandel.mcc.nl/trajecten-van-de-reis/oversteek>.

<sup>4</sup> Of these, 21 either escaped ashore (to be recaptured) or died. MdbZA, 20, 2, Uitreiding der Schepen, De reizen, Snauw Zanggodin, Stukken betreffende de reizen, 3e reis: Guinee-Suriname, 1768 sep. 28-1770 juni 12, Journaal, 1385, 18 oktober 1769, fol. 60.

<sup>5</sup> The following transcription is based on Zeeuws Archief [MdbZA], Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie (MCC), 1720-1889, 20, Inventaris, Het bedrijf, 2, Uitreiding der schepen, De reizen, Snauw Zanggodin, 1764-1778, Algemeen, 1366.3, “Rekening van Averij Gros gevallen op t’Schip De Zang-godin met Laading,” fols. 120-128.

crewmembers were taking aim at the sloop, others tried to save from drowning the captives who had jumped overboard but had not managed to get into the flight boat. With the help of ropes, the crew tried to get those floating in the ocean water back on board. Although in the witness testimony the crew is presented as rescuers, this narrative is interrupted abruptly when we read: “regardless all help brought, a negress and a boy would rather drown themselves as a means of help.” Immediately after this assertion, the witness testimony jumps to another event.

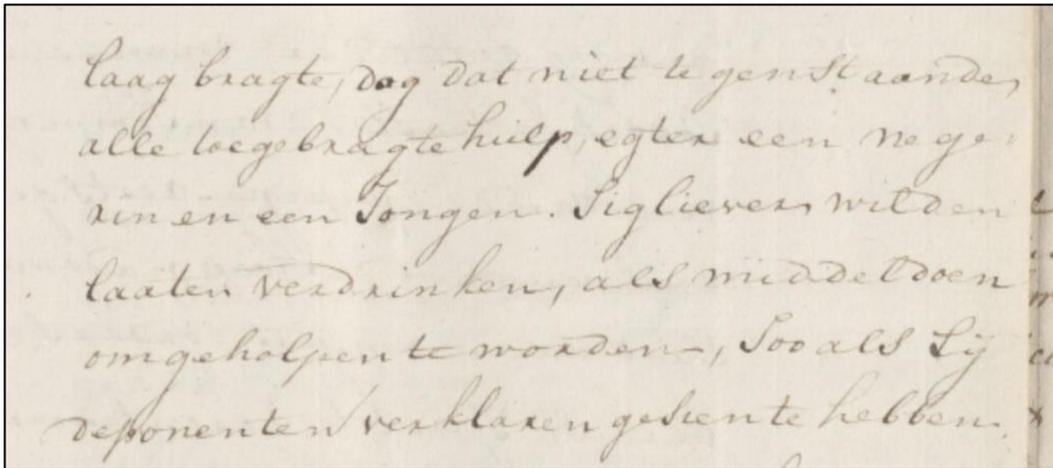


Figure 1. Extract from witness testimony relating the revolt aboard the *Zanggodin*: “regardless all help brought, a negress and a boy would rather drown themselves as a means of help.”. Source: MdbZA, 20, 2, 1366.3, fol. 124.

I pause at this passing remark to uncover how the drowning of the enslaved female fits within the economy of statements conditioning her death while also exceeding the discursive limits of this economy. In the single sentence articulating the fact that she exists, she is found dying and generically un/named as “negress”—a double death encompassing both physicality and symbolism. Absent any personal qualifications and relegated instead to a dehumanizing form of genericity, I cannot refer to her but in terms of her symbolic transcription. All we learn about the female through her place in and as archival transcription, is that she drowned. Nothing else about her is registered; her name, her heritage, and her relationship with the drowned boy are forever unknown.

Adopting the concept of the “female” to refer to the drowned female, I risk committing a symbolic appropriation—or violation, even. Firstly, I repeat therewith

the historical reduction of black females to their sexual reproductive organs and capacity. Secondly, it should be taken to heart, as Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí (1997) explains, that many African communities did not organize themselves according to a Western gendered framework. Yet, caught within a dominant academic linguistic field that has been constructed, historically, upon sexual and gendered human difference, my own narrative does not escape “the economy of statements that it subjects to critique” (Hartman 2008, 13). Taking on the concept of “female,” however, the aim is not to join the ranks of Western sexual and gendered identity, but to make space for the specific social subject enslaved black females proved to be.

For slave captains, besides slave insurgencies and illnesses (both representing danger for the crew), deaths of the enslaved were the only events registered about the enslaved. The sole reason for this was the accountancy of the ledger: profit and bodies needed to add up. Commodified, the loss of the enslaved female’s life signified solely as monetary loss that required explanation to the ship’s insurers (Lurvink 2019).<sup>6</sup> If justified, that is, if the violence against and violations of enslaved individuals were judged as preventing further damage to the ship and the white lives upon it, the monetary losses were often reimbursed by the insuring party. Deaths, thus, were registered not out of respect, but as bureaucratic requirement. This “violence of arithmancy” is the reason that so many enslaved individuals appear only in their disappearance (Snorton 2017, viii). In the slave trade system, their *deaths* were the only things ‘worth’ mentioning.

Sylvia Wynter (2003) draws attention to the organization of power underlying the iniquitous evaluation of human life undergirding the archive of slavery. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to adopt Wynter’s terminology, the idea of the human was defined by Man, an abstraction that corresponds roughly to white Christian European males. Organized by race, this conception of humanness was then deemed to pertain in various degrees to different racialized human subjects. Along Man’s self-referential code of human difference, degrees of humanness were stratified phenotypically over a value

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<sup>6</sup> Slave ships and their cargo were often insured. For the *Zanggodin’s* account and declaration, see MdbZA, 20, 1366.3, “Rekening van Averij Gros gevalen op ’t Schip de Zang Godin en desfelfs laading, gevoert geweest bij cap: Jan van Sprang, zijnde die Averij gesprooten uijt opstand onder de slaaven in Rio de Gabon op de kust van Africa op coorschreven schip ontstaan,” fols. 124-125; “Verklaaring wegens Tumùlt onder de slaaven op ’t schip de Zang Godin,” fols. 130-131.

distinction between life and death, distinguishing Christian, white Western European man as human par excellence, allocating him with livable positionalities, qualities, and geographies. His non-European, black, and pagan others were correspondingly deemed lesser human or nonhuman and relegated to unlivable and deadly ones. According to this interpretation of “race,” and following Wynter herein, race was (and still is) a symbolic code rather than a biological determinant. Man’s determination and distribution of power and human life and death is, however, not the entire story. It is not *her* story; she is not reducible to the terms set by the people that enslaved her nor to the narration they upheld to justify her enslavement.

Moved by the desire to imagine her story beyond archival bounds, in the following, I envision another narration—one based on historical contextualization and critical fabulation (Hartman 2008). Both aspects are necessary for retelling the drowned female’s story. Historical contextualization is, firstly, needed to provide an account of the violent conditions in which she had to exist. Critical fabulation, a writing practice conceived of by Saidiya Hartman, then goes beyond historical contextualization in that it attempts to envision the structures of and conditions for archival representation. Straining, thus, against the limits of the archive, I set out to write a history of femaleness and drowning under slavery while, simultaneously, acknowledging the partiality of the archive and my narrative account based thereupon. In so doing, I hope to make visible, at once, the drowned female and the production of her disposability.

### **The law**

Before presenting an alternative narration of the enslaved female’s act of drowning, it is firstly necessary to provide an account of the specific forms of violence and violations enslaved black females encountered during slavery. Focusing on enslaved females during the slave trade era, I aim to disclose the centrality of black femaleness for the propagation of the slavery. The transition from the singular case of the drowned female to the experience of enslaved females *as such* is justified in part because, as I show below, the slave trade system worked by virtue of the homogenization and

reduction of black females to reproductive vessels. Thus, in a sense, the black female encountered violence *alike*, but not *identical*, to other black females.

The slave system that organized societies in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was structured to give exclusive property rights to white males. Based on a racialized idea of humanity, this system secured the superior social and legal positions of white men. Included in patriarchic authority were “slavery’s technologies of violence through marking,” technologies that consisted in the power to (re)name African family names and roles in the interest of white society (Spillers 2003, 21). Branded and demarcated within the Dutch colonial symbolic regime, the enslaved were usurped by a cultural symbolic that variably dehumanized them through generic depictions—“slave,” “negress,” “*f*300.” By denigrating the enslaved through such New World typifications, patriarchic white societies attempted to destroy African indigenous cultural markings. Doing so, the kinship relations articulated in African (familial) names and the power of African indigenous ties, were destroyed.

Hortense Spillers’ distinction between the “body” and the “flesh” in her seminal work “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987) helps decode slavery’s technologies of marking which pertained specifically to black females. Spillers coins the flesh to give articulation to the particular relationship between gender and black people under slavery. In slavery’s organization of bodies, the captive body exists as stolen. When during the transatlantic slave trade, captive bodies were appropriated by the symbolic order of white society, a “theft of the body” was committed that disconnected captives’ agency from their bodies in order for them to serve the interests of their owners (67). Caught within an organization of bodies that symbolically usurped enslaved Africans, racialized slave bodies were expelled from ideas of proper embodiment and the social categories hinged thereupon. An assemblage of violence that consisted of iron chains, whips, knives, ropes, bullets, and brandings, a process of dehumanization, thingification, and commodification then reduced the enslaved to homogenous amassments (Cesaire 2001, 42). What remained of the enslaved after the theft of their bodies, was the flesh. Transformed into flesh, or surplus sites of meaning for white society, enslaved bodies were at once physically and symbolically appropriated to serve white imaginations of self and other (Lowe 2015).

In my reading of the history of slavery through Spillers' framework, the erection of the idea of body in the West worked feeds on the creation-destruction of African flesh. Put differently, bodily identities and the social and legal privileges anchored upon these identities in Western, slaving societies were developed by virtue of appropriating enslaved people for material as well as symbolic purposes. Attenuated by European cultural investments, the body and bodily recognition securing legal, social, and proprietorial recognition within liberal identity were tied specifically to a white, male idea of the body—Man—in contradistinction to his black others (Weheliye 2014, 39-40; 77). Whiteness and maleness, thus, became the nuclei of cultural identity and personhood and, as such, regulated the symbolic organization of all bodies. A twofold reconceptualization of the body follows. Firstly, the body is not a natural entity but a symbolic one. Thus, bodies are not an empirical givens, but discursive instances belonging to (a) specific context(s). Secondly, the body is never neutral; it is invested with cultural descriptions from the West—the gendered, racialized, classified body.

Black females' flesh was specifically crucial for the (re)production of the racialized order of human bodies that secured the perpetuation of the slave trade system. The multifarious subjection of black females included, most prominently, the exploitation of their reproductive capacities to produce new slaves. Notoriously in this regard was the legal doctrine "partus sequitur ventrem," which translates to "through the womb." This British law was instituted in 1662 and mandated that all captive offspring was to inherit the legal slave status of their enslaved mothers (Morgan 2018). Even though "partus sequitur ventrem" legally covered only then-British territory, ideologically, the heritability of slave status through the female lineage governed Western slave trading nations and their colonies at large. Violently marking enslaved females as reproductive vessels, what "partus sequitur ventrem" conditioned was the symbolic violation and resignification of black motherhood: black females reduced to sex and reproductive capacity. Slavery's appropriation of black wombs, combined with the prohibition of black motherhood, transformed black females into anchor points of captivity, capital, and reproduction. Enslaved male and female flesh, in this regard, were sites operated upon by political and libidinal interests; gendered subject-positions no longer referred to the respective domestic roles of "man" and "woman" but were ungendered to translate instead to a metric value indicating the amount of space their

bodies took in aboard slave ships or to a certain monetary amount (gulden) as shown in figure 2.<sup>7</sup>

Due to the destruction of gender through the thingification, metrification, and monetarization of enslaved individuals in the slave trade system, gender difference produced ungendered flesh. Decoupled from the private, domestic sphere, kinship was dismantled and relations amongst the enslaved were dispersed in a network of property relations. This total commodification of interrelations was underscored by the fact that slave owners could invade the captives' claims of kinship at any given moment, rendering the enactment of familial relationships practically impossible (Spillers 1987, 74). Children and parents could be sold off without notice, enslaved males and females were prohibited from performing their parental roles, and intermarriage was interdicted. Thus, the physical and symbolic demolition of gender and kinship as constitutive fact of slavery ultimately renders unanswerable questions such as: how were the drowned female and the drowned boy related to each other?

*Lijst Der Vijf de hand verkochte Slaven in Suriname* f. 1170

Buyer Name	M	V	Js	Md	A	Price (Gulden)
De Mevr. M <sup>rs</sup> . Guckenaar	1	1	1	1	1	675
Van den Oever en Hattorf	1	3	1	1	1	639.50
Dorckrijck theater ten	1	1	1	1	1	612
H. de Bonting	1	1	1	1	1	280
M <sup>rs</sup> . van der Meer	1	1	1	1	1	883
Juda Salob Polak	1	1	1	1	1	550
Baron van Gouke	1	16	7	8	22	10000
<i>Somant</i>	2	25	8	10	15	16750

Figure 2. “List of slaves sold ‘out of hand’ in Surinam.” Selling the enslaved “out of hand” is another way of saying “on the spot.” On the left side of this picture, the names of the buyers are penned down. On the right side, the number of captives bought are described, followed by the amount of gulden varying accordingly. From left to right, the headings read: “M” (male), “V” (female), “Js,” (boy), “Md” (girl), and “A” (all). Source: MdvZA, 20, 1387, f. 56.

<sup>7</sup> The infamous diagram and description of the Brookes’ shows how spatial inhabitation of slave ships was allocated via gender assignments. See <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/diagram-of-the-brookes-slave-ship>.

Not only did the exploitation of black females' wombs increase the "slave labor stock," but with every childbirth within the slave system their flesh also reproduced the border between free and captive positionalities. Since it was black females who passed on the slave status to their offspring, it was also black females who helped secure the freedom of white society. For, since kinship, like domesticity, was anchored on the nuclear white patriarchic family, the flipside of "partus sequitur ventrem" was that children born from white females—still legally regarded property of their husbands—automatically attained the property of "whiteness" and were thus deemed free (Fuentes 2016, 76, 82-83). Due to the markedness of black females as forebearers of "slave status," the entire black female lineage was thus subjected to the white man's grammar of marking and valuation; yet, conversely, the Law of the Father—the white man's name, property, inheritance claims, and legal personhood—directly depended on black female flesh. For, by controlling black females' flesh, the racial-sexual colonial order organizing free and unfree positionalities that justified (the propagation of) the slave system could be controlled as well. Forcibly stripped from her kin, personhood, gender, and sense of belonging, the total objectification of the captive female body into flesh held together the slave system and the subject-positions regulating and regulated by this system.

Black females' symbolic reproductive function was however obscured by the slave system itself. By locating the source of enslavement in and as endemic to black females through "partus sequitur ventrem," the originary white, patriarchic violence of the slave system that, in fact, enforced this symbolic reality, remained concealed. In this, we can see how "the expectations of slave property are ontologized as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved" (Hartman 1997, 27). Put differently, the external symbolic imagination of the slaveholding class is deemed to spring forth from innate nature of enslaved females. In extension, the obscured markedness of black female flesh secured a patriarchic, white organization of life and lineage. Thus, white patriarchy was naturalized through the naturalization of the identification of black females' reproductive capacities with "slave status." By disconnecting the violent use of black females' flesh from (the development of) white, male subjecthood, what takes place is a material and archival erasure of the foundational violence against black female flesh during the slave trade era.

What is furthermore important to make explicit, is that, by coining the flesh, Spillers reveals the intricate relation between the material and the semiotic. Since our linguistic field has been (and is still) geared towards the expression of dominant society, words are lacking to describe suppressed realities in. The flesh, then, discloses not only the hitherto invisible reality of the high crimes against enslaved flesh. It furthermore reveals that our linguistic field itself developed by virtue of the symbolic plenitude of black flesh. When, thus, Spillers writes “sticks and bricks *might* break our bones, but words will most certainly *kill* us,” she delineates the dispossession instituted by slavery through the demolition of African self-marking and the conversion of this emptied ground into a foundation of symbolic plenitude used for white imagination and self-understanding (Spillers 1987, 68). Our language is simultaneously condition, product, and prolongation of the racial logics of slavery; our narrations are, likewise, caught in a language that serves the history written by slavers and the erasure, violation, and dehumanization of the enslaved. Importantly, however, even though black female flesh secured white freedom and black captivity, and therewith Man’s grammar of life, their symbolic plenitude forms at the same time the condition of this order’s demise. This fleshy capacity to distort and exceed the order of the human as determined by Man is the topic of the following sections.

### **The ship**

When performing an alternative reading of the act of drowning by the drowned female, it is important to take note of the twofold directionality of drowning. On the one hand, the act of drowning signifies jumping *overboard* while, on the other, it means jumping *into* the ocean. This dual aspect is incredibly important because it reveals a similarly dual account of the drowned female’s oceanic leap: while jumping overboard places shipboard as central point of reference, jumping into the ocean centers what is beyond. Our choice of narrative focus, then, becomes constitutive of how we come to understand the drowned female and the greater narrative of slavery wherein she is placed. In this section, I focus on the significance of jumping *overboard* as a refusal of the colonial order of Man manifested aboard the ship. In the section hereafter, the ocean is centered as an at once alternative view and vantage point into which the female plunged.

One thing stands out with respect to the ship's name, *Zanggodin* ["Singing goddess"]: it has a gendered nature. Ships, in general, were deemed to be women and the name *Zanggodin* underscores this fact (Mellefont 2000, 6). In case of the transatlantic slave trade, this gendered nature symbolically makes sense. As important rite of passage of becoming a "saltwater slave"—the name referred to by enslaved Africans to depict slaves abducted from the African mainland as opposed to the "creoles" born in the colonies—, the slave ship functioned as a generative vessel (in its destruction) during slavery; through shipping, African subjects attained their "saltwater slave status" (Smallwood 2007, 7). In line with this, Edouard Glissant writes, "this boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death" (Glissant 1997, 6). Designating the slave ship as matrix and womb, Glissant explicates the naturalized connection between female reproductive capacities, the slave ship, and slave status. Doing so, he draws attention to how the slave ship formed an at once destructive and generative schism that leaves an excess in its ruinous wake: saltwater slaves also brought resistance against and imagination beyond the order of Man that undergirded slavery.

A slave ship's spatial distribution was a manifestation of colonial human difference. As Jordan Winthrop explains, the ostensible difference between white Europeans and enslaved Africans "provided the mental margin absolutely requisite for placing the European on the deck of the slave ship and the Negro in the hold" (Winthrop 2012, 171). On deck, white Europeans were protected against deadly environments in a twofold spatial way. Firstly, railings performed a barrier between what were deemed livable and unlivable spaces. Beyond the ship's boundaries, the ocean's water and the African coast presented a deadly environment that took the lives of many Europeans and Africans because of sickness (such as yellow fever or malaria), warfare, or drowning (Behrent 1997). In addition, the ship's hatch, preventing uninterrupted mobility between deck and hold, entrenched the crew's liberated positions on the livable deck while securing the captivity of the enslaved in the deadly hold. Thus, the enslaved were prohibited from performing counter-violence against their captors. Within this symbolic order, the crew as a manifestation of Man regulated who would live and die. In their hands lay the amount of food rationed to enslaved subjects. Their punishments could sign a death-penalty. And when an enslaved person

jumped overboard, the crew used all power and means to prevent this loss of life—even if unwanted by the captive who jumped.

Since railings enacted the boundary between free and captive positionalities, slave ship crews made sure that railings were incredibly difficult to jump over. Due to the many attempts made by enslaved individuals, slavers had increasingly put nettings around the ships and chains around captives' limbs to keep them from doing so—to keep them in their place, captive in the deadly hold aboard the slave ship. If told from within the slaver's frame, slaves jumping overboard was silliness. As the symbolic world order organized along Man's supposed superiority justified the enslavement of his lesser human, black others, their slave status was regarded incontestable. Jumping overboard, then, would present an impossibility: contestation of the slave system's order upheld aboard. Therefore, actions of revolt were often ascribed to passions, illness, or godless intentions, to avoid acknowledging the inhuman foundation of the slave trade system—the fact *humans*, not *commodities*, were traded.<sup>8</sup> This agential aspect was, moreover, impossible to acknowledge since the commodification of slaves meant that they were stripped of human qualities such as agency. Reduced to commodities, the loss of slave lives due to drowning amounted, for the enslavers, to monetary loss only.

Railings, however, signify differently if viewed from perspective of the enslaved. These wooden walls were the main obstructions for the enslaved who wanted to escape the deadly organization of human life aboard. In their cases, jumping over the railings could be seen as a performance of freedom; a way to escape a deadly slave ship *into* the ocean. Reading the drowned female's transcription in this sense, her “dismissal” of the crew's “means of help” presents a refusal to be exist in the colonial organization of human life epitomized by the ship's spatial organization. Recalibrating the drowned female's oceanic leap accordingly, I take recourse to Achille Mbembe's reading of suicide as a form of symbolic disinvestment:

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<sup>8</sup> See slave ship *Middelburgs Welvaren*, Nationaal Archief (NA), Inventaris van het archief van de Sociëteit van Berbice (SvB), 1.05.05, Ingekomen Stukken, Uit de kolonie, Algemeen, 108, brief 25 februari 1751, scans 252-256.

“To willingly take leave of one’s own existence by committing suicide is not necessarily to make oneself disappear. Rather, it is willingly to abandon the risk of being touched by the Other and by the world—a gesture of disinvestment that forces the enemy to confront his own void. The person who commits suicide no longer wishes to communicate, [...] no longer seeks to participate in the world as it is [...] The person who commits suicide [...] shows how, as far as the political is concerned, the true contemporary fracture opposes those who cling onto their bodies, who take their bodies as the basis of life itself” (Mbembe 2019, 49-50).

The above quotation ties together the themes of the body, symbolic investment, and the life-death symbolic discussed before. Having a (white male) body secured “life,” personhood, and property and worked both to prioritize white bodies and, from this superior position, to reduce black individuals to flesh. Along the liberated and captive subject-positions of the body and flesh respectively, suicide can be read along different interpretive levels. Whereas for the slavers, the destruction of the white, male body was identical to the absolution of life, the destruction of an enslaved body, reduced to flesh, translated not to the absolution of life but to the destruction of property. For the enslaved, however, suicide can be read as an attempt to escape the dominant symbolic system that regulates the erection of white bodily personhood by virtue of the structural destruction of enslaved bodies to flesh. Since the body is not a natural but rather a naturalized determinant for life, suicide can thus be seen as an act of disinvestment from this bodily stipulated world order (Moten 2013, 754). Attempting to attain a place beyond such a carceral symbolic system, the black female’s suicide by drowning comes to signal a disinvestment from a world order that reduced her being to a bodily insignificance grounded on white imaginations.

Moreover, the drowned female’s suicide signals a refusal to be “touched by the Other”, that is, to function as symbolic plenitude on Man’s terms. Refusing to near death on the other’s terms, the female’s act of drowning is a form of “stealing (oneself) away”, which a reference to complete as well as shorter-lived escapes from slavery, ranging from escape into marronage to secret marriages (Hartman 1997, 66). The

phrase “stealing (oneself) away” reveals the paradoxical situation wherein a slave, as *property*, is acknowledged self-possession and agency to steal itself away. To use Hartman’s words, by stealing herself away, the drowned female engendered “nothing less than a fundamental challenge to and breach of the claims of slave property—the black captive as object and the ground of the master's inalienable rights, being, and liberty” (Hartman 1997, 69). Disinvestment by suicide, then, is a political act and a concrete social logic insofar as it signifies an interrogation and refutation of the dominant bodily symbolics in the world and points to an alternative understanding of human life. In extension, the drowned female’s refusal can be read, at once, as a refutation *within* this order as well as *of* this order (from outside this order). For, not only does her drowning act signify the refusal of the body, but it also forms a refusal of the notion that the body is the ultimate guarantee for life.

### **The ocean(ic)**

In this section, I delve further into the significance of jumping *into* the ocean. The ocean, as a site, is crucial to understand the alternative views and vantage points enslaved individuals took in during the transatlantic slave trade. During Middle Passage, the forced migration from Africa to the Americas, oceanic death manifested itself in at least two ways. As demonstrated by the above section, the ocean was, on the one hand, used as a site of resistance by the enslaved. Beside escaping the deadly organization of life aboard the slave ship, it was furthermore believed by some African communities that one could return to Africa by committing suicide (Pierson 1977, 151). Considering suicide as a way to “return to Africa,” the enslaved exerted an irreducible belief in African community and black life when committing suicide. On the other hand, the crew made use of this oceanic sphere and its inhabitants (sharks) to deter the enslaved from fighting to their deaths and disrupting Man’s world order (Rediker 2008; Bennet 2018). To give an example, slavers tried to repel the enslaved from jumping overboard by mutilating captive bodies, because it was believed that a defaced bodily condition would make returning to the African homeland undesirable (Pierson 1977, 154).

Through the unritualization of black deaths during the Middle Passage and the demonization of the ocean as a deadly space, blackness and the ocean became intricately linked in their deadliness. Bench Ansfield helps clarify the relation between oceanity (the uninhabitable) and blackness (the inhuman): “the essential condition for the spatial status *uninhabitable* is the occupier’s inhumanity, and conversely, the implication of the occupier’s inhumanity is the production of an uninhabitable place” (Ansfield 2015, 133). In this mutual construction of (non-)identity and (non-)place, the uninhabitable ocean spatializes the otherness of black people, thereby spelling out the uninhabitability of the ocean, the deadliness of the enslaved within it, and the supposed transparent translation between the two (McKittrick 2006, 130). The ocean, then, as an uninhabitable place of residence, became an ostensibly natural locality of belonging (a biome) for enslaved individuals.

Over and against the symbolic concatenation of black inhumanity and oceanic uninhabitability, I propose that the black female’s drowning troubles this naturalized interlaced identification and attests to an oceanic *habitation* of black *humanity*. During the forced slave migration of the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Ocean was situated between the littorals of African land “no-longer” and American land “not-yet.” Due to the uncertainty of where their coerced ocean journey would lead, the enslaved found themselves suspended in the oceanic. This suspension is “oceanic” because African subjectivities were reduced to fleshy undifferentiated identities that were forcibly excluded from land-locked cultural identity formations (Spillers 1987, 72). These land-locked cultural identities ranged from gender to nationality and even showed in the fact that slaves’ monetary value was undetermined until they reached shore. Following Spillers, such violent displacement of human beings as undifferentiated cargo, however, at the same time, allowed “for a wild and unclaimed richness of *possibility* that is not interrupted, not ‘counted’/’accounted,’ or differentiated until its movement gains the land” (Ibid.). Despite—or maybe, in some twisted form of brutality, by virtue of—the brutal attempts of effacing African family and proper names and eradicating indigenous social roles and marks, the slave vessel’s human-cargo carried, as undifferentiated identities, the possibility to go beyond gendered and racialized ideas of the human and, therewith, offers “a counter-narrative to notions of the domestic”

(Ibid.). In other words, the enforced symbolic plenitude of the enslaved provides a ground to envision the human and human relationality otherwise.

The potential of undifferentiation manifested itself in the material interplay between the bodies of water of the drowned female and the ocean as well. For, their underwater submergence allowed for a convergence of aquatic lifeforms and elements in a nutrient cycle that recycles the water and substances of which our bodies are composed in(to) the ocean's water. In this underwater world, organisms disintegrate and are consumed by other organisms, growing life from oceanic deaths; either eaten by sharks or decomposed on the ocean floor, 'human' remains, reduced to shark excrement or bone gravel, enable the growth of coral, plankton, and algae (Sharpe 2016, 74-76; MacLeod 2013, 48-49). And these plankton and algae, in turn, (re)produce the air human beings and other earthbound mammals breathe as aquatic photosynthesizers (Falkowski 2012; Fink 2020; Tynan 2010, 145). The view of the human body—and its lung capacity specifically—as an isolated entity distinguished from its environment that guarantees life becomes complicated since the drowned female's convergence with these lifeforms reveals that there is life beyond the (physical) body and its breathing capacity. As such, her oceanic leap potentially attests to aspirations that are untied to determinations of life in terms of bodily, land-locked identities.

If the body as an isolated form is regarded as symbolically constructed and finds itself implied—or in other words, enfolded—within a living organistic network, then the boundaries between what is self or other, life or death, become porous. The reality of oceanic livability, that is, the nutrient cycle recycling maritime life, thus, directly contradicts the ocean's depiction as “suffocating,” “deadly,” and “uninhabitable” as understood through European man's symbolic order. Giving iteration to such intricate mutual implications of oceanic life and death, in his *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant writes:

“Whenever a fleet of ships gave chase to slave ships, it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains. These underwater signposts mark the course between the Gold Coast and the Leeward Island.

Navigating the green splendor of the sea—whether in melancholic transatlantic crossings or glorious regattas or traditional races of yoles and gommiers—still brings to mind, coming to light like seaweed, these lowest depths, these deeps, with their punctuation of scarcely corroded balls and chains. In actual fact the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green.” (Glissant 1997, 6)

While slavers might have attempted to kill the African subject through techniques of dehumanization—the demolition of kinship, the naturalization of the “slave status,” the rite de Middle Passage and oceanic detachment—the quotation by Glissant above draws attention to the new forms of black life that appeared within such destructive conditions. Arguing against the idea that slavery eradicated the enslaved their humanity completely, the “balls and chains gone green” in the above quotation represent the irreducibility of life as it renews in maritime spaces and as new diasporic forms of life. As such, the “underwater signposts” reveal a historical markedness that at once confers transoceanic violence *and* generation—a generation of life symbolized as flourishing “green splendor of the sea” that is “light like seaweed.” In this sense, the oceanic reveals how undifferentiation is filled with a richness of possibility often obscured by the violence of impossibility. Similarly, we read with Glissant: “Then the sea, never seen from the depths of the ship's hold, punctuated by drowned bodies that sowed in its depths explosive, seeds of absence” (Glissant 1999, 9). These drowned bodies, Glissant assert, do not signify in disappearance only. Their “seeds of absence,” elsewhere dubbed “invisible presence,” (67) bear witness to imprint itself in memory and matter, in remembering made heritage and the oceanic nutrient cycle of life.

Rereading the female’s drowning act in accordance with the above exposition, leaping into the ocean was a way for enslaved subjects to exert, albeit in extremely terroristic and distressful situations, a belief in themselves—in their black, fleshly, oceanic existence beyond the bounds of white bodily imagination (Piersen 1977; Stevenson Jr. 2018). The belief that by drowning one returned to the land of the

ancestors, in this sense also reveals a commitment to a life or existence beyond Man's world. The female's suicide, then, reveals a fleshy detachment from the world order in which she is at once constitutive of, constructed by, and secluded from ideas the body, personhood, and humanity. In so doing, she allowed for a reclamation of the saltwater on her own terms: her drowning resignifies, simultaneously, the ocean's saltwater status and her own in terms of possibility rather than deadliness. Leaping into the ocean, the drowning female refused the world order and its dominant symbolics in which she, as a black female, was marked to belong in terms of "deadliness" in the likewise "deadly" and "uninhabitable" ocean.

### **The womb**

As established before, being oceanically and fleshy beyond the white Man's idea of humanity, black females carry an exceptional potential for conceptualizing issues of redress and regeneration in the context of the transatlantic slave trade. Such regenerative potential, I propose in this section, is anchored in a figure that has been present in the background—or should I say, the depth—of this article: the drowned boy. In the following, I explore the relation between the drowned boy and the drowned female to argue that the inherited the status of being "undifferentiated" by enslaved offspring further enfleshes the counter-narrative against the white nuclear family and its patriarchic and white supremacist mythology.

What is unique about black 'males' as heirs of enslaved Africans is that, even though the kinship relations and gender attributions of enslaved offspring were undone during the Middle Passage, enslaved 'males' were touched in an inescapable manner by their mother: "partus sequitur ventrem" reflected the uncertainty of fatherhood (Papa's Maybe) and the certainty of black or enslaved motherhood (Mama's Baby). In the precarious situation of breached kinship and undetermined gender status, the mandate of "partus sequitur ventrem" enforced the condition of ungendered flesh to be passed on to captive offspring. In yet undefined familial and human statuses, their status became one of "man/woman on the boundary" (Spillers 1987, 74). On the one hand, enslaved 'males' were rendered invisible, since society, tuned to the Law of the Father, was organized around white men whose property (land, commodities, enslaved human beings, name, whiteness) regulated societal relations. In

this situation, black ‘males’ were excluded from the category of the male body, because their blackness and slave-status inhibited any acclamation of either manhood or embodiment. On the other hand, in this circumstance where kinship, however much precarious, was tied by the female slave lineage, enslaved ‘males,’ foreclosed to being lawfully male, became the only group of ‘males’ in society that “has had the specific occasion to learn *why* the ‘female’ is within itself” (78). Touched, thus, by their mothers, enslaved offspring represented their mothers’ undifferentiated flesh (and blood).

The inherited indeterminacy of man/woman on the boundary fosters in the fe/male heirs of slavery the potential of embodying and imagining a counter-narrative against notions of the domestic as anchored in a white nuclear family. Rather than striving for inclusion into a patriarchal society that expels them, it is by tapping into the enforced symbolic plenitude on their own terms that black fe/male heirs can possibly subvert the racial-sexual difference inherent in the patriarchal institution of naming and placing. Thus, by acknowledging “the ‘female’ within,” black heirs of the history of slavery are capable of embracing the ungendered oceanic space of ‘femaleness’ that allows for conceiving humanity outside of the “patronymic, patrifocal, patrilineal, and patriarchal order” (Snorton 2017, 103).

Reduced to flesh, the drowned female nurtured the grounds for otherwise possibilities in throughout the localities discussed in this article: the archive, the law, the ship, the ocean(ic). From an opaque archival locality, she attests to transatlantic oceanic recycling and intertwinement in the deep sea. Growing the seeds for the potential of new beginnings, she collapses onto sandy coasts, bearing new oceanic lands grounded on undifferentiated identity. Mis/carrying, furthermore, her flesh, she bears witness to otherwise imaginations. To these spheres, we can now add the lineage of undifferentiation running through black females’ flesh (and blood). Finding extension in their children’s lives, it is in *their* flesh (and blood) that black females sowed an invisible, fleshy presence, stimulating for new generation(s) of humanity beyond its determination by European man.

In my reading, which is only one reading, the drowned boy was with us all along. Grounding his oceanic features. Attempting to affirm the ‘female’ within. Breathing out his final breath near her, with her, picking her—the oceanic counter-narrative to domesticity—over the white crew’s (t)ropes to get him back in place on

board the slave ship to refunction according to their schemes. Choosing the female lineage of undifferentiation over patriarchy's colonial symbolic shipboard order, the boy claims what Spillers calls "the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to 'name')," which is the potential of black females to forge lineage, create flesh, and mark humanity (differently) (Spillers 1987, 80). By diving into the depths of the ocean(ic), the drowned boy reclaims his mother—whether *she* is his mother or not—and exhibits a belief in an otherwise form of living beyond the societal order organized by the white crew. Their cooperative drowning acts, I suggest, can be regarded as a faith in the potential of black humanity to forge lineage. Choosing the 'female' within, the drowned boy opts for naming to be undifferentiated instead of regulated by the Law of the Father. Carrying, thus, the "female within", black fe/males on the boundary (re)present the vantage points from which to think lineage, kinship, and in large, humanity otherwise, which become open, unbounded, fluid: oceanic.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have presented various threads of stories that all, to some extent, weave together a narrative account of the drowning of an enslaved female. Wanting to imagine her oceanic leap differently than the one sentence, the 25 words dedicated to her existence in the witness testimony that transcribed her act, I made choices. Having done so, I acknowledge that my narration is, necessarily, incomplete. Archival documents contain various, sometimes opposing or contrasting, stories. To illuminate one thing, I overshadow another. There is, thus, always a dimension of subjectivity in the writing of history and, therefore, a demand for responsibility, which renders the notion of neutrality a violently illusionary aim.

Above, I aimed to show how the drowned female's suicide signals at once a disinvestment from the dominant symbolic order that reduces enslaved individuals to flesh and an attestation of black life. As such, the black female transcends her death as stipulated by the colonial world order dominated by Man. Accordingly, her act of drowning challenges the life-death symbolic that organized this order. Opting for some form of being beyond physical death, the black female's oceanic leap reveals how illusionary, how culturally invested or even species-related any such life-death

distinction is. In an at once literal and symbolic sense, I have argued, the black female *lives on* not just in the oceanic cycle but also in her offspring. For, the inheritance of ‘female’ enfleshment by enslaved offspring ensured the carrying on of her disfranchised, undifferentiated status. With this condition of undifferentiation, what was simultaneously inherited was the specific oceanic vantage point from which it is possible to ground new imaginations of what it means to be human. And this reimaginative possibility is, if my writings managed to touch you, further conferred to us, readers. If our present relating to history shapes the conditions of our contemporary as well as future times, then the construction of our future potential is anchored in our witnessing our histories otherwise. Sowed thus, within us, the seeds to revise the archivally imbalanced historical narratives transcribing the black female and boy’s deaths, it is within us that the drowned female and boy get to live on. To keep them from dying (again), please cultivate carefully.

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RESISTING THE DUTCH SLAVERY ARCHIVES:  
EPISTEMIC JUSTICE AND HISTORICAL  
REDRESS THROUGH SLAVE SHIP REBELLION

*PhD proposal*

## **Abstract**

This project is committed to uncovering the lives of the enslaved in the Dutch slavery archives. Since these archives were historically construed by European men working for the Dutch colonial government and for big slaver companies such as the Middelburgse Commerce Company (MCC), the Verenigde West-Indische Compagnie (VOC), and the West-Indische Compagnie (WIC), the human beings they enslaved appear in the archives only in their captors' terms, or not at all. This one-sided representation of the history of slavery creates a situation of epistemic injustice in which Dutch historical consciousness reads its history of enslavement predominantly through the eyes and ethics of the enslavers. Concentrating on the experience of enslaved individuals aboard slave ships, the proposed project combats this epistemically unjust production of history in a twofold way. Firstly, archival research is conducted to provide a first-ever account of shipboard resistance that spans occurrences in both the East and West. Secondly, philosophical analysis is used to, on the one hand, assess the historical power asymmetries that conditioned archival imbalances and, on the other, employ new reading methods to recenter enslaved people as subjects of knowledge.

**Keywords:** *Dutch slavery, archive, knowledge production, epistemic justice, redress, shipboard resistance.*

## **Description of research**

Although still too often presented as a minor note to history, the Dutch slave trade era took up roughly three centuries, from 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During these years, the Dutch shipped around 500,000 enslaved individuals to the Americas and up to 1.1 million people around the Indian Ocean. All we can know about these enslaved lives, however, is what their captors wrote about them. For, historically, those affiliated with the Dutch Kingdom and big slaving companies had the power to construct archival documents (Ketelaar 2020). The traditional Dutch archives of the MCC, VOC, and WIC reflect this fact. Consisting mainly of archival documents forged by slaving company employees, the enslavers' practices and perspectives are foregrounded, whereas the enslaved are written out of the historical record. As a result, a situation of

epistemic injustice emerged wherein the voices and actions of the enslaved find iteration only in their captors' terms, if they find iteration at all. With notable exceptions (van Rossum 2015, Fatah-Black 2018, Kars 2021; Palm 2016), Dutch scholarship working with these archives has dedicated itself predominantly to bringing to light the organization and practices of big slaving companies rather than the captive experience (de Kok 2020; Emmer 2006; Emmer and Gommans 2021; Gaastra 2003, 2012; Klooster 2016; Oostindie 2005; Paesie 2014; Postma 1990). As a result, our knowledge production about the Dutch history of slavery is geared to narrate the enslavers' story and erases, yet again, the enslaved. Counteracting this one-sided, epistemically unjust knowledge production, this project proposes the following research question:

*How can the epistemic injustice inherent in the Dutch history of slavery be ethically redressed?*

In an attempt to decolonize and rectify the Dutch history of slavery, the proposed project aims to disprove ingrained colonial discourses and confirm the resilience of historically oppressed enslaved human beings. To accomplish this, the project returns to the archives (Zeeuws Archief, Nationaal Archief) to amplify the voices of the enslaved, using an interdisciplinary approach that brings into conversation theories of philosophy, gender studies, black studies, subaltern studies, and history. Two methodologies are connected to find and magnify enslaved voices: archival research and philosophical analysis. Archival research will be performed to excavate case studies of slave resistance. In addition, philosophical reading methods and conceptual tools will be used to engage the archives, as these are paramount in providing archival readings that go beyond colonial archival discourses. The need for ethical readings and tools cannot be overstated. While historians have reconstructed history from *within* the limits of the archives, they less often acknowledge that these limits are set by historical power imbalances (Hartman 2008; Lowe 2016; Sowande 2016; Trouillot 1995). As such, historical reproduction remains inevitably caught within the fraught conditions of archival retrieval. By contrast, philosophical analysis lays bare the ethics of knowledge production and the power distributions present in both archival texts and the construction of archives. Furthermore, philosophical analysis represents a

powerful methodological tool to, on the one hand, deconstruct the concepts and discourses inherited from the slave trade era and, on the other, imagine new ones in the face of their insufficiencies.

Internationally, new reading strategies have already been adopted to read colonial archives (Fuentes 2016; Guha 1999; Hartman 1997; Raben 2019; Stoler 2009). Addressing the specific site of the slave ship, admirable scholarship has dedicated itself to narrate the archivally and historically submerged slave experience (Hartman 2008; Mustakeem 2016; Rediker 2007; Smallwood 2007; Taylor 2006). As of yet, however, their application on shipboard resistance in the Dutch context is absent. Data about the Dutch is paramount if we are to forge a necessarily global perspective of slaving practices and how they were resisted. Not only does centering Dutch archival material counteract the dominance of an Anglophone academic field and its overreliance on specific, exemplary Anglophone cases, missing out thereby on the global character of the history of slavery (Taylor 2006). In centering the Dutch context, this project also gives hearing to the ethical need to counter “white innocence,” a form of feigned innocence with regards to past as well as racist practices in the Netherlands held in place by the denial or downplaying of Dutch colonial violence and racial discrimination (Wekker 2016).

Scope-wise, the project limits itself to research resistance aboard slave ships. Focusing specifically on captives’ shipboard experience, the project brings to light the pervasive defiance of enslaved individuals from the moment they were forced to board the slave ships. Shipboards are of special interest since slave resistance occurred aboard slave ships far more often than acknowledged: on one in ten international slave ships, mass revolts happened, while singular acts of rebellion were even more ubiquitous (Richardson 2001). This crucial dimension of the slave trade era has been obscured due to contemporary scholarships’ focus on resistance on land rather than the ocean (Cain 2011; Kars 2021; Palm 2016). The proposed PhD project will thus bring to light a hitherto unappreciated dimension wherein shipboard rebellion does not figure as a minor aspect of the Dutch slave trade, but as one of its most fundamental characteristics. When scholars *do* attend to shipboard rebellion in the Dutch context, their focus is predominantly on individual instances of mass revolts (Balai 2013; Sleight and Westra 2012; Paesie 2016). Missing, therefore, is an account of shipboard

resistance in the Dutch context that spans from East to West and incorporates all forms of resistance.

## **Structure**

This PhD project consists of two interwoven parts. In the first part, archival research into the traditional MCC, VOC, and WIC archives is conducted, which lays the basis for the philosophical research carried out in part two.

When construing a new historio-philosophical narrative of enslavement and resistance aboard slave ships, what is firstly needed is a thorough grasp of the archives. Reading journals, letters, and testimonies in Old Dutch handwriting in search of shipboard resistance is a laborious activity that requires great paleographic skill. Collecting and organizing these various forms resistance, this project provides the first Dutch inventory of shipboard resistances that spans a transoceanic scope. Such investigation uncovers still unexplored connections between various instances of resistance and brings to light underresearched occasions of shipboard resistance. The revolt aboard the MCC ship the *Zanggodin* is a case in point. When this ship lay anchored in the contemporary Ogooué river in Gabon in 1769, some of the enslaved managed escaped in the sloop. While scholarship's focus on spectacular, mass revolt has rendered this relatively small slave revolt unresearched, it was during this revolt that the second-largest number of enslaved individuals in Dutch history succeeded in getting back to shore. Shedding light on such underexposed instances of resistance could teach a great lot, not only about the nature of slave insurrection, but about the slave trade as such.

What follows in the second part is a philosophical analysis consisting of a structural component and a conceptual one. On a structural level, the project starts from the assumption that the construction of archives as institutions and the archival documents harbored therein are infused with power. Put differently, historical distributions of power organized the production of knowledge (Hartman 1997; Trouillot 1995). The first step in reading colonial archival documents, then, is to pry loose the organization of power that conditioned oppressive archival logics. Taking recourse to the example of the *Zanggodin* again, when reading its shipboard organization within a wider colonial context, it becomes clear that life on board was organized via

a racialized idea of humanity that determined European white men as fully human, whereas his African black others were thought lesser so (Wynter 2003). This is reflected in the archival documents relating the events aboard the *Zanggodin*. For example, the witness testimony describing the revolt denotes all white crewmembers with their full name, stating repetitiously which deponents attest to which recounted facts. Such recognition of legal subjectivity is withheld from the enslaved however. In their cases, the complete absence of any mention of their names or origins besides dehumanizing generic terms as “male slave” and “female slave” discloses that they were not regarded full human beings nor, in extension, legal subjects. Instead of recognizing the discursive power inherent in the creation of documents and information, historical scholarship tends to repeat this historically dehumanizing discourse and recommits the erasure of captives’ experience by focusing mainly on the company operations by enslaving companies. The proposed project, on the other hand, begins from the recognition that historical power distributions are a constitutive part of history and constrain archival retrieval. As such, laying bare the structures of power that allowed for the history of some by virtue of the erasure of others will be an integral part of the proposed project.

The conceptual component of the philosophical analysis presupposes that concepts need to be placed in their historical formations. By disclosing the symbolic congestion inherent in concepts, the project reveals that the conceptual apparatus used to investigate the history of slavery with is neither neutral nor innocent and obstructs rather than illumines understanding the captives’ experience aboard slave ships. Take the notion of “freedom.” Put in historical perspective, the rise of liberalism was directly connected to slavery. On the one hand, the material riches extracted from colonial peripheries by European metropolises conditioned the material development necessary for new bourgeoisie classes to demand for the “rights of man” (Lowe 2015). On the other, that the idea of human freedom emerged while nations were still deeply implicated in slavery also reveals that idea(l)s of “humanity” and “freedom,” although purporting to be universal, were either hierarchically or exclusively so. Stated differently, the conceptual apparatus with which European upper class white males first began to theorize their own ‘universal’ freedom developed in relation to the unfreedom of others (Hartman 1997; Karskens 2017; Patterson 1991). Freedom and

unfreedom were thus two oppositional parts of the same discursive structure. Scholarships' adoption of this binary abstraction then reduces the enslaved to a position of unfreedom and, often, without agency (Roberts 2015). What envisioning freedom in terms of those enslaved reveals instead, is that freedom and slavery are not stable, conceptual opposites, but that something akin to freedom within confinement was already present as resistance or flight (Bennet 2018; Snorton 2017). This important admission gives rise to the demand for an alternative conceptualization of freedom that begins from the enslaved their lived complexities of freedom.

## **Methodology**

When rereading traditional archival documents, three reading methods are employed, namely reading along, against, and beyond the archival grain. These methods are promising since they expose the power structures inherent in the creation of documented information and allow for the centering of absented human beings in the production of knowledge.

Reading the archive **along the archival grain** critically interrogates archival effacements alongside the archive's granular texture, or the internal logic of a body of archival texts (Stoler 2009). Such reading comes in two constitutive parts. Firstly, it concerns reading the archive for colonial perspectives to extract what kind of discourses and common-sense colonizers, at least in theory, upheld. Equally important however, is distilling from archival documents the anxieties and disagreements in the face of this common-sense. These are often to be read between the lines and require attentiveness to emotive language and the archive's structure. By reading along the grain one thus not only gains insight into professed colonial discourses but involves simultaneously close attunement to divergences from these discourses.

Similar to reading along the grain, reading **against the archival grain** wrests colonial logics from colonial documents but unlike the former, it then reverses the focus of historical inquiry from the pole of the historically dominant to that of the historically suppressed (Guha 1999; Guha and Spivak 1988). Using an analytic tactic of inversion, reading against the grain searches for submerged perspectives in colonial documents forged with quite different purposes. In reading colonial documents "from

the bottom up,” reading against the grain is involved in a project of knowledge reclamation of marginalized subjectivities as producers of knowledge themselves.

Reading **beyond the archival grain** consists in acknowledging that the complex social dynamics of people in colonial contexts are irreducible to abstract binary logics supposedly upheld by (Dutch) colonial powers and researchers alike (Raben 2019). In other words, historical lived experiences do not map onto theoretical abstractions. Instead, what is needed is attunement to fluidity and complexity. Giving hearing to this necessity, the proposed project proposes to broaden the idea of social dynamics to not only include interpersonal human dynamics but to also include dynamics between humans, animals, and materials (DeLoughrey 2019; Tynan 2010). In so doing, the ocean itself and the animals it harbors such as sharks can be grasped as co-determinants of captives’ shipboard experience.

### **Societal relevance**

In a world where, due to the structural denouncement of the value of black people’s lives, #blacklivesmatter still requires explicit pronunciation, we are more than ever in need of historical narratives that disprove ingrained and inherited colonial discourses and confirm the resilience, the contrivance, the empowerment of historically oppressed groups. Attempting to decolonize our knowledge production, this project consciously deflects European practices and discourses and centers the enslaved as subjects rather than objects of knowledge, i.e., as producers of knowledge themselves. Doing so, this project not only intends to redress the epistemic injustice of erasing the enslaved from history. Uncovering the insurgent knowledges of the enslaved, it furthermore contributes to imagining forms of living and knowing beyond our contemporary racialized-gendered world order. In envisioning new forms of being and knowing, history writing, as a production of knowledge, is of utmost importance since it informs our ways of knowing who we currently are, formed by the histories of who we were. And founded upon these historically informed contemporary capacities, we forge futures; futures that will flourish if we learn to listen to silenced, insurgent voices.

## **Work schedule**

The project consists of four parts: 1) archival work and literary review on shipboard resistance; 2) application of reading methods on selected case studies; 3) further archival research in Jakarta and/or Cape Town and application of reading methods 4) evaluation of the project's implications for the knowledge production of Dutch the history of slavery.

During the first part an inventory of shipboard resistance is made by canvassing the existing literature on Dutch shipboard resistance in combination with extensive archival work on the MCC, VOC, and WIC archives. In this part, relevant case studies of shipboard resistance will be assembled for further exploration in part two. Case studies' relevance will be decided on either a) similarity to other cases or b) exceptionality. Serving as the bedrock of the proposed research, this inventory will be explored in the second part of the research through philosophical analysis. Firstly, theories on archival power will be employed to disclose the conditions of archival appearance and disappearance. Having laid bare these conditions, conceptual reading methods will be applied to the archives to trace submerged enslaved lives. Since the enslaved inscribed history with their actions more so than with their words, focus will be on meta-linguistic readings capable of deciphering non-linguistic expressions and spatial inhabitations. For example, the collective yells during the revolt aboard *Middelburgs Weharen* teach us a lot about the relation between sonority and collective resistance. Absent any first-hand witness testimony by enslaved individuals, analysis of the significance of sonar resistance depends, in this case, on a reading of the captives' occupation of space and non-linguistic shouts. Thereafter, the project's scope will be expanded in part three to include the archives in Cape Town and/or Jakarta, two major colonized port cities during the Dutch slave trades that registered many slave trade related events. Working with these archives, the archival research and application of new reading methods initiated in part 1 and 2, will continued. Finally, the fourth part will be dedicated to fashioning a conjoined account of shipboard resistance during the Dutch slave trades is fashioned, in the light of which the knowledge production of the Dutch history of slavery will be reviewed for the sake of redress.

<i>Time period</i>	<i>Activities</i>
September 2023 – September 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Archival work in MCC, VOC, and WIC archives.</li> <li>➤ Selection of relevant case studies.</li> <li>➤ Publication article: “Transoceanic Shipboard Resistance: Collaborations in Resistance aboard Slave Ships across Oceans.”</li> <li>➤ Article presentation at conference.</li> </ul>
October 2024 – September 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Continuation archival work and selection of case studies.</li> <li>➤ Application of reading methods to selected case studies.</li> <li>➤ Publication of article: “Choreosonic Resistance aboard <i>Middelburgs Weharen</i>.”</li> <li>➤ Article presentation at conference.</li> </ul>
October 2025 – September 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Further application of reading methods to selected case studies.</li> <li>➤ Archival work in Jakarta archives (Indonesia and/or Cape Town archives (South Africa).</li> <li>➤ Organization of international, interdisciplinary conference: “Surpassing the Patriarchive: Otherwise Historical and Archival Imaginations.”</li> <li>➤ Publication of article: “Tools of Dismantling the Master’s Ship: Resistance aboard the <i>Zanggodin</i>.”</li> <li>➤ Article presentation at conference.</li> </ul>
October 2026 – Augustus 2027	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Complete dissertation draft.</li> <li>➤ Publication of comparative article on shipboard resistance in Dutch context: “‘Yelling Hurray!’: Harmonies of Shipboard Resistance.”</li> <li>➤ Publication of article: “Hieroglyphics of the Flesh: Tortoises and Enslaved Humans in the Belly of the Ship.”</li> <li>➤ Publication of popularizing articles on shipboard rebellion and memorizing the slave trade in Dutch newspapers (<i>NRC, de Volkskrant, Trouw</i>).</li> <li>➤ Engage the Dutch Heritage Institute.</li> <li>➤ Article presentations at conferences.</li> </ul>

## **Summary for non-specialists**

Historically, the archives undergirding the Dutch history of slavery were created by the enslavers. Thus, big slaving corporations such as the Middelburgse Commercie Compagnie (MCC), the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC), and the West-Indische Compagnie (WIC) have set the parameters in which historical research can be done. These archives, filled with ledgers, trade books, insurance exhibits, and ship journals, propagate the dehumanizing practices and discourses that reduced enslaved individuals to commodities. Enslaved voices, it follows, appear only, commodified, in the enslavers' terms. As such, the Dutch history of slavery has been biased from the start. In addition, scholars still too often stay within the limits of the archive and thereby cause the perpetuation of the enslavers' perspectives.

This project seeks to redress the unjust situation in which the histories of the enslavers are written by virtue of the erasure of those they enslaved. What is needed to unearth the captive experience, is to return to the archives with new reading methods that, on the one hand, lay bare how archives condition the appearance and disappearance of human beings and, on the other, amplify the voices of the enslaved. Focusing on the slave experience and resistance aboard slave ships, the project involves all major slavery archives (MCC, VOC, and WIC) and aims to provide a first-ever transoceanic account of shipboard resistance. Slave ships are specifically interesting since these ships are often overlooked, crucial facets of enslavement. While these ships initiated the enslaved to a new oppressive regime under white rule, simultaneously, a great but unexplored amount of resistance happened aboard against this very regime: mass revolts happened aboard one in ten ships and singular acts of resistance happened even more frequently. Bringing to the surface the forms of shipboard resistance and their frequency will transform our conception of the place of resistance during the Dutch slave trades and reveal just how fundamental such acts of resistance in reality were.

Spurred on by the ethical motivation to radically alter who and what we include into the Dutch history of slavery, this project brings to light the underexposed histories of the enslaved. This is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, a fairer picture of the Dutch history of slavery can be painted if slave histories are attended to. In extension, these uncovered stories change our knowledge production. If, for a long

time, the Dutch history of slavery has been narrated predominantly from the perspectives of the enslavers, this reveals a predisposition as to what is regarded as worth knowing about: white, European men. To counter the one-sided, biased production of knowledge, attending to the perspectives, actions, and experiences of the enslaved alters who and what is esteemed as producing knowledge. Centering the enslaved as producers of knowledge, the project thus not only aims to change history but our ideas of what counts as knowledge as well.

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# BRITT VAN DUIJVENVOORDE

2343 TK Oegstgeest  
Netherlands  
britt.vanduijvenvoorde@ru.nl  
*Curriculum Vitae*

## EDUCATION

- Leiden University** **Sept. 2021 – Present**  
Master's Degree History (Avg. 8.6)  
*Specialization: Colonial and Global History*  
*Leiden*
- Radboud University** **Sept. 2019 – Present**  
Research Master's Degree Philosophy (Avg. 8.5)  
*Specialization: Ethics*  
*Nijmegen*
- Leiden University** **Sept. 2016 – Jul. 2019**  
Bachelor Philosophy (Avg. 8.1)  
Thesis: "Responsibility in Heidegger and Levinas"  
*Leiden*

## WORK EXPERIENCE

- Lumen Holland Rijnland** **Mar. 2022 – Present**  
Client support and advocacy (volunteer)  
Providing support for people with psychic, psychosocial, and addiction problematics  
*Leiden*
- Radboud University** **Feb. 2022 – Present**  
Teaching Assistant  
"Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues"  
"1492: Race, Religion and the Coloniser"  
*Responsibilities included teaching seminars, creating assignments, and grading.*  
*Nijmegen*
- Leiden University** **Sept. 2018 – Jul. 2019**  
Buddy Program  
Providing support for students with disability by helping them plan and prepare their assignments and exams.  
*Leiden*
- Leiden University** **Sept. 2017 – Jul. 2019**  
Mentorship  
Helping first year philosophy students adapt to and organize their academic studies.  
*Leiden*

## (INTERNATIONAL) CONFERENCES AND PRESENTATIONS

- Guest Lecture for course "Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues"** **Nov. 2022**  
"From Cultural Discontinuity to Epistemic Ignorance"  
*University*  
*Radboud*
- Oceans and Archives Conference** **Jul. 2022**  
"Choreosonic Resistance aboard *Middelburgs Welvaren*"  
*University of Amsterdam*
- Global History Student Conference** **Jun. 2022**  
"A 'Mad' Era: 'Glocal' Ideas of Madness in the 1920s"  
*Freie Universität Berlin*

## ARTICLES IN PROGRESS

- "Saltwater Geographies: Motherhood and Drowning during the Middle Passage"  
*Krisis: Journal for Contemporary Philosophy*

## RESEARCH NETWORKS

- Race, Religion & Secularism Network (RRS)

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE

- Ethics of Knowledge Production
- Indigenous Philosophy

## VARIA

- Volunteer at conferences “Of Times: Arrested Resigned Imagined. Temporality in Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida” (2019) & “Oceans and Archives” (2022)
- Reading groups: Indigenous Feminisms, Spinoza’s *Ethics*, and Merleau-Ponty’s *Nature Lectures*