

Nancy Jouwe – Transcript Translation (ENG)

Jozien: Welcome to, Met Terugwerkende Kracht (With Retroactive Force), a podcast and audio tour from Utrecht University in honour of International Women's Day.

Corinne: We are podcast makers Corinne Heyrman, Marieke van de Ven, and Jozien Wijkhuijs, and we are taking you on a tour through Utrecht.

Marieke: Along the way, we will make stops at places with an underexposed history and listen to people with a story to tell.

Jozien: We learn about the history of intersectional feminism in the city and at the university.

Nancy Jouwe: Utrecht, of course, has a very strong image of having nothing to do with this history and yes, our research has turned that around.

Corinne: At this stop, Nancy Jouwe on the history of slavery in Utrecht.

My name is Nancy Jouwe and I am a freelance researcher, writer and lecturer in the field of colonial history and the history of slavery in the Netherlands, and women's history, as well as their implications. I studied at Utrecht University, where I studied Gender Studies and Cultural History.

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Together with a team of historians and students, Nancy Jouwe researched Utrecht's history of slavery. Their results compiled the book 'Slavery and the City of Utrecht' ('Slavernij en de Stad Utrecht'). The city has always been seen as a small provincial town without colonial institutions, yet many traces thereof be can found – mainly on the spot where you are standing now.

Janskerkhof and, well, the streets around it, the Drift, the Nieuwe Gracht and the Kromme Nieuwegracht, you could actually call that a concentration point of this history. This is because people who were directly involved in the slave trade and slavery lived here. At Janskerkhof we don't even know half of it, I would almost say, but there you can already see various traces of people who were involved. For example, at Janskerkhof 13, which now houses the Humanities – or Religious Studies and Philosophy, a certain Van Vorst used to live there. He was the director general of Fort Elmina, the slave fortress in what is now known as Ghana, which used to be called the Gold Coast. And yes, that was because there was very lucrative trade to be made there. We also know that after his directorship he sold a slave ship with enslaved people to Suriname, which earned him around 100,000 in guilders at the time, which of course would be worth over a million now. And a year later he bought that property.

There is also someone from – say, a captain of colonial industry from the East. He also lived there, for example. So you see, it was also a popular area, this neighbourhood. It was really where the elite gathered, so you can also imagine that, yes, people met on the street there. You know, talking colonial business so to speak.

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You would also find women there.

The family of Belle van Zuylen at Kromme Nieuwegracht 3-5 lived there in the winter, while they stayed at slot Zuylen in Oud-Zuylen near the city border of Utrecht, in the summer. This, too, was a special research project, carried out by Carolien Driehuizen and Marja Doezen, who found out a lot about Belle van Zuylen's fortune, that consisted of colonial investments for at least 40%. We didn't do this to demonise Belle van Zuylen. But she is, of course, a famous figure in Utrecht one

of which Utrecht University is very proud. But she exists, of course, in a certain moment, in a certain place, and then it is not illogical that this happens. We know from her family, through their connection to van Zeeuwskerken, that they were involved in the trade of colonial goods anyway, you could say. But the fact that Belle herself had such a large share in it herself in terms of wealth, yes, that was a real discovery you could almost say.

Yes, and people immediately think: hey, is Belle van Zuylen being cancelled now? That is not at all the point. But it does give more complexity and more layers to the person.

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Enslaved people were also present.

On the very same Kromme Nieuwegracht, Drift, and Janskerkhof, we also saw black people walking around here in the 17th and 18th centuries. One woman that we know of, at least in Utrecht, was Siti. We do not know her surname, but she was an indigenous woman from Makassar, today's Sulawesi in Indonesia. She was 'ordered', let's say, and taken to the Netherlands where she became a servant in the household of Johan Gideon Loten, who had a very successful career with the Dutch East India Company. So, she walked around here, in this city. And she was not the only black servant; we found several more people, both from present-day Indonesia and from different parts of Africa. This is, of course, a story that is very unknown and one that people don't tend to even think about. This is why I think it is so pertinent to mention it – that a Siti also walked around here. She lived where the University library is now, in that building. Number 27. I spent so many hours in there: to borrow books, to write papers, to look things up. I was already into history then but think about it now: that you are walking around in the same space where a Siti had to work hard... She couldn't go back either,- and this appears in a letter exchange between Johan Gideon Loten and his brother, who was mayor in Utrecht -This also shows that she had indicated that she very much wanted to return home. But that was not an option, of course.

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I ask Nancy about the role of women in the history of slavery.

We always think that this was a very small role, that slavery was a men's affair. For Utrecht specifically I must say, much research still has to be done, but I think that Belle van Zuylen is a very good example of a woman who was really very important in this history. Yes, as a wife you supported your husband, and you also reaped the fruits of that work. We know of various stories from plantations in Suriname where the spouse of the plantation owner had to also put up with the fact that her husband sexually abused slaves, leading them to often direct their anger at the woman in question as opposed to her husband – the woman who, of course, was usually forced into these situations. Gender is a very important concept to use when researching slavery, certainly if you think of gender and race together in your analysis and classes. Then you arrive at something very important, I think, stories that should be told much more often.

Archives are not innocent spaces either in that sense; we mainly see, hear, and read the stories of the elite, of people in power. So you have to track these kinds of stories down through fragments that you find here and there.

I can imagine that some historians have seen this before us, but they didn't find it relevant because it wasn't relevant to their own research or they just weren't interested in it themselves, so they let it go. It's also a matter of how you interpret what you see at a given moment in that same source.

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It's hard to look for someone who is hidden, or forgotten, or not even mentioned.

Using specific search terms is actually very basically how you start a project like this. So, 'black'; 'slave', 'slave woman'... But you will also look into where people come from – say, a colony, then you can pay attention to what they specifically say about something. The moment you start scratching off the surface of the city, all sorts of things come to the fore. So we can clearly see that there is still much more to discover.

We especially hope that others will be inspired by this research and think: well, I'd like to know more about that. Also because it is unexplored territory, this should be interesting for historians in particular. You could say that some subjects are fairly chewed out by now, to put it irreverently. But there are also subjects where there are really more, many more traces to be found. This really is a subject like that.

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We could scratch off even more of the surface.

This is a history of several centuries, and that also means that there is work to be done, and that this will not be fixed by tomorrow, the day after tomorrow or by next week. But it has to be done. The work *has* to be done and the work *can* be done. And actually, the work can also be fun; because it teaches us things about ourselves. It also teaches us, I think, to look at things that we are not too fond of and helps us embrace those. It involves also a kind of work that leads to more emotional maturity I would almost say. So it has a multiple function also – it almost helps one become a better person. That sounds very 'hallelujah', but I do mean it. It can help you learn to look at your own mistakes and those of others, and to find space for them.

I do notice that many white people experience a sense of guilt. And I understand that: that's an emotion that pops up fairly quickly. Of course that also has to do with this whole idea of, 'oh I didn't know that, and now I'm hearing something and it makes me uncomfortable, and why didn't I know that'. Well, all sorts of things. But yes, I find guilt very unproductive at the end of the day, because it can paralyze you and you can start thinking that you have no agency. But that is not true. Accountability is the way out, I think.

We're all implicated. We all have a certain relationship to it. And it is part of Dutch history, and that is therefore also Utrecht's history.

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The next stop on the audio tour is at the University Library, where Corinne talks to Beatrice de Graaf about Hortense de Beauharnais.