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Connecting Metropole and Colony? Harlequin Travels to Suriname

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In her ground-breaking book, *White Innocence*, Afro-Surinamese Dutch anthropologist Gloria Wekker points out that scholarship still overwhelmingly discusses metropolitan and colonial cultures ‘as separate worlds [...] that did not impinge upon each other’.¹ This isolated treatment of cultural formations in either the Netherlands or its colonies neglects the constant movement and interaction of bodies, goods and knowledge that impacted and shaped those two orbits. Taking Wekker’s complaint seriously, this chapter will seek to study the cultures of the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean together in a single field of analysis.² More specifically, it will turn to the popular Harlequin figure, originally from the Italian commedia dell’arte tradition, and evaluate his relation to the principles and practices of colonial power at the time when he travelled across the Atlantic and started populating the Paramaribo stages in the decades around 1800.

Harlequin is a particularly intriguing figure because he embodies exclusion and empowerment simultaneously. In a period marked by the expansion of slavery and increased imperialist fervour, Anglo-American scholars have argued, Harlequin’s black mask could be easily interpreted

¹ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 25. The research for this article informs my bigger project, ‘Blackface Burlesques’, which is supported by the Research Foundation of Flanders (FWO). I would like to thank Michiel van Kempen for making available to me his unpublished survey of theatre performances in Suriname (1770–1999), and for drawing my attention to Harlequin’s similarity to the Afro-Suriname trickster, Anansi.

² This is also the approach recommended by Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper in ‘Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda’, in Stoler and Cooper (eds), *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 4.

as a reference to Afro-Atlantic identities.³ Many aesthetic and dramaturgical elements of the 'harlequinade' (a pantomime featuring Harlequin), whose black-masked protagonist was often connected to idiocy, lust and subjection, were later moulded into the racist fare of minstrel performers (which are discussed in Chapter Five of this volume).⁴ However, experts in the commedia dell'arte tradition also stress that we should not underestimate the subversive nature of Harlequin.⁵ He has been a pure outsider since his sixteenth-century origins in Italy and was positioned as critical of stories that were managed by those in power. As one of the traditional *zanni* or servants, Harlequin broke all conventions and was able—often with the help of supernatural forces—to transform himself into anything, thus embodying sociopolitical change and celebrating the relativity of orders.

As a consequence, the harlequinade seems to simultaneously carry out and challenge the Manichaeic dichotomies between metropole and colony, and between sentiments of the colonizer and the colonized. Such binaries were strategically produced and reproduced by colonials, but as Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper remind us, they have also been etched deeply in our historiographies.⁶ While these categoric conceptions have proven enduring, they were entirely out of sync with the centrality of colonialism in metropolitan wealth and with the quotidian experiences in the overseas colonies. This paradox recalls what Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has referred to as the 'intimate distance' of colonial relations. In the metropole, Dillon asserts in *New World Drama*, white people distanced themselves from racialized exploitation by taking recourse to geographical distance and representational strategies of erasure whereas, in the colonies, colonists dissociated themselves in juridical and biological terms from black

³ These include John O'Brien, *Harlequin Britain: Pantomime and Entertainment, 1690–1760* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 117–37; Robert Hornback, *Racism and Early Blackface Comic Traditions: From the Old World to the New* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁴ For a trans-European study of Africanized Harlequins and their relation to minstrel culture, see Hornback, *Racism and Early Blackface*. Eric Lott, too, pays some attention to Harlequin's roots in the commedia dell'arte in *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993; 2013), p. 21.

⁵ One text that captures Harlequin's subversive character quite brilliantly is Michele Bottini, 'You Must Have Heard of Harlequin...', trans. Samuel Angus McGehee and Michael J. Grady, in Judith Chaffee and Olly Crick (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 55–56.

⁶ Stoler and Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony', 8.

people—enslaved or otherwise subjected—with whom they lived in profound communion in spatial terms.⁷

Attempting to connect Dutch metropolitan discourses to those of the colony, this chapter will think of Harlequin as a hybrid figure who materializes the connection between the zones. I here employ the term ‘hybridity’ as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin and fleshed out by Homi K. Bhabha. Bakhtin has used the concept primarily in a linguistic context, referring to the idea that one utterance can be double-voiced. This happens quite evidently in Creole languages but, as Robert C. Young asserts, Bakhtin also uses hybridization to describe ‘the ability of one voice to ironize and unmask the other within the same utterance’.⁸ Such politicized hybridity emerges in society through a ‘carnavalesque aesthetics’, in which transgressive behaviour thrives beneath the surface of social order, constantly threatening to overturn the status quo.⁹ In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha shifts this undermining of authority through hybridization to ‘the dialogical situation of colonialism’.¹⁰ Hybridity, for Bhabha, rises as an active moment of resistance when colonial power loses its supposed purity and finds itself open to criticism. Harlequin was a nimble and gaudy type who, wearing a black mask, subscribed to the boundaries that (white) authority had drawn up, but at the same time his small-scale revolutions could destabilize those boundaries.

The harlequinade has received little scholarly attention in relation to the Netherlands and Suriname, even though it became a staple of the theatrical culture on both sides of the Dutch Atlantic. Harlequin emerged in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth-century Low Countries as a part of fully fledged comedies, entr’actes or short slapstick episodes. In the closing decades of the eighteenth century then, the harlequinade made its entrance into Amsterdam pantomime and dance productions with high-tech stages, special effects and large orchestras. These new musical productions focused primarily on exotic fantasy, grandeur and magic.¹¹ In the Netherlands, Harlequin also

⁷ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, *New World Drama: The Performative Commons in the Atlantic World, 1649–1849* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 131–32.

⁸ Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 19.

⁹ See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ Young, *Colonial Desire*, 21; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 102–22.

¹¹ Jacob Adolf Worp, ‘Arlekijns en Krispijns op ons tooneel’, *Noord en Zuid* (1896), pp. 35–43; Robert Erenstein, ‘De invloed van de commedia dell’arte in

appeared regularly as a trickster figure in carnivals and youth culture. He first entered the Suriname stage in 1789 in a pantomime production by one S. Azor, titled *De Chineese Schim, genaamd Arlequin de Tovenaar* (The Chinese Silhouette, also known as Harlequin the Magician). Many more pantomimes and harlequinades were programmed in the years and decades that followed, but these productions have remained unstudied until today. The limited studies on Suriname's theatrical culture focus on the overwhelming presence of canonical Amsterdam box-office successes in the Paramaribo repertoire list, including the tragedies and comedies of Voltaire, Lucretia W. van Merken and, most prominently, August von Kotzebue. This has led researchers to assume that the Suriname stage largely mirrored that of the Netherlands.¹² However, we need to be careful not to treat colonial-era Caribbean theatre as a mere copy of the metropolitan model—nor should we assume that the metropole offered any kind of model at all.¹³ According to Dillon and Peter Reed, it was precisely the often-neglected burlesque genres that were open to local revisions.¹⁴ Pantomimes, dance acts and masquerades were, by their nature, ephemeral. They relied heavily on the situation in which they were staged and were not always tethered to a written script—something that severely complicates our understanding of these productions today.

As my case study, I will analyse the Dutch farce *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* (Harlequin, magician and barber) in the fraught context in which it was produced as it cruised the ocean and took to the Suriname stage in April 1813 and August 1814. Written in 1730 by the Dutch comic

Nederland tot 1800', *Scenarium: Nederlandse reeks voor theaterwetenschap*, 5 (1981), pp. 91–106.

¹² Michiel van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*, Vol. I (Breda: De Geus, 2003), pp. 95–101; Merel van Leeuwen, 'Kotzebue en de ondergang of redding van het Nederlandse Theater: De import- en exportroute van *De kruisvaarders van August von Kotzebue* naar en van de Amsterdamse Schouwburg in de negentiende eeuw' (MA dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2019), pp. 70–75.

¹³ Stoler and Cooper, 'Between Metropole and Colony', 3. Scholars have made this point in relation to theatre in France and Saint Domingue, too. See various chapters in Jeffrey Leichman and Karine Bénac-Giroux (eds), *Colonialism and Slavery in Performance: Theatre and the Eighteenth-Century French Caribbean*, Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021).

¹⁴ Dillon, *New World Drama*, 156; Peter Reed, *Rogue Performances: Staging the Underclasses in Early American Performances* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 19.

playwright Willem van der Hoeven, the farce stages the tricks Harlequin played on (and tribulations he suffered at the hands of) some of the well-known *vecchi*—here Pantaloon, Capitano and Doctor Belloardo. At first sight, *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* is completely detached from any explicit colonialist themes and patterns. However, it does produce scenes and dramaturgies that bring to the fore the complex dynamic between colony and metropole, and between colonizer and colonized. It can teach us about the opportunities and obstacles that arise when studying those fields in reference to each other.

Coding Harlequin's mask

Before travelling to Suriname, *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* had proved extremely popular in playhouses across the Netherlands.¹⁵ Although van der Hoeven wrote the harlequinade down in 1730, its Amsterdam premiere took place in 1698 and it had been staged dozens of times in the following years. It is thus very likely that some of the aesthetics and arrangements had changed drastically by 1730. The farce was a favourite with the public in the Amsterdam Theatre until the 1780s, and it was programmed long after in other playhouses across the Netherlands. Indeed, it was so popular that Cornelis Troost, one of the most famous Dutch artists of the eighteenth century, dedicated one of his works to *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* in 1737 (see Figure 1 below).

Van der Hoeven's farce never became this popular in Suriname, but it did have two healthy runs at the Jewish Theatre in April 1813 and August 1814. There were two main theatre buildings in Paramaribo. The Holland Theatre, also termed the Christian Theatre, was constructed in 1775 and its main residing troupe Pro Excolenda Eloquentia, containing both professional actors and amateurs, presented up to eight new productions a year.¹⁶ As in the metropole, Jewish people were not welcome in the Holland Theatre. Given that at least **one-third** of the white population in Suriname was Jewish, this policy was remarkable. The local Jewish people, however, built their own playhouse in Saramaccastraat in 1776. Their main theatre company, De Verreezene Phoenix (The Resurrected Phoenix), was known for its professionalism, and created some twelve new productions every year, in addition to burlesque shows and circus

¹⁵ For a list of performances in the Amsterdam Theatre, see the Onstage database of the University of Amsterdam: <<https://www.vondel.humanities.uva.nl/onstage/plays/837>>, accessed 15 February 2023.

¹⁶ Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis* I, 96.

performances.¹⁷ Nothing is known about their production of van der Hoeven's farce, except that it was paired with C.G. de Falbaire's *De school der zeeden* (The School of Morals) in 1813 and with Kotzebue's *De papegaai* (The Parrot) in 1814.

The plot of *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* is quite simple. Harlequin is the mischievous and witty servant of Anthonio, who is in love with Pantaloon's daughter Sofy. The latter, however, is fated to marry either Capitano or Doctor Belloardo. In keeping with the commedia tradition, Capitano and Belloardo represent physical and intellectual haughtiness: the former constantly brags about his military bravery yet flees as soon as action is needed, while the latter is an arrogant type who uses Latin phrases in and out of season. The farce mainly shows the schemes of Harlequin to trick Pantaloon into believing that Anthonio, whose financial means are apparently insufficient, is in fact the best match for his daughter. By making himself invisible, for instance, Harlequin is able to repeatedly hit Capitano and Belloardo with his trademark stick and create confusion.

Traditionally, Harlequin's presence on stage was socially coded. His creative gimmicks challenged existing orders and made those in power look like incompetent fools.¹⁸ In van der Hoeven's farce, it is Harlequin's goal to prevent a marriage based on capital and prestige and to advance an affectionate relationship that transcends socioeconomic divides. But could audiences understand Harlequin's mask as racially coded too? Before looking at Paramaribo, let us examine how Harlequin was perceived in the metropole. It is not clear when exactly an Afro-diasporic identity became available as a referent for Harlequin's mask in the Netherlands. The first production to unambiguously present Harlequin as black was Jean Rochefort's 1803 pantomimic ballet, *Pantalon, Oost-Indisch planter, of Arlequin uit slaverny door toverkunst* (Pantaloon East Indian planter, or Harlequin magically liberated from slavery), in which a wood nymph magically transforms a plantation slave into the black-masked Harlequin and gives him supernatural powers to rebel against his former masters. Evidence suggests, however, that Harlequin may have already been racialized decades earlier. A Dutch carnival cartoon of 1742, for

¹⁷ Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis* I, 97–98; 192–95. For a contemporary discussion of the Jewish Theatre, see David Nassy, *Geschiedenis der kolonie van Suriname* (1791) (Amsterdam: S. Emmering, 1974), pp. 181–82.

¹⁸ Scott McGehee, 'The Pre-Eminence of the Actor in Renaissance Context: Subverting the Social Order', in Chaffee and Cric (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* [AQ24], pp. 9–16.

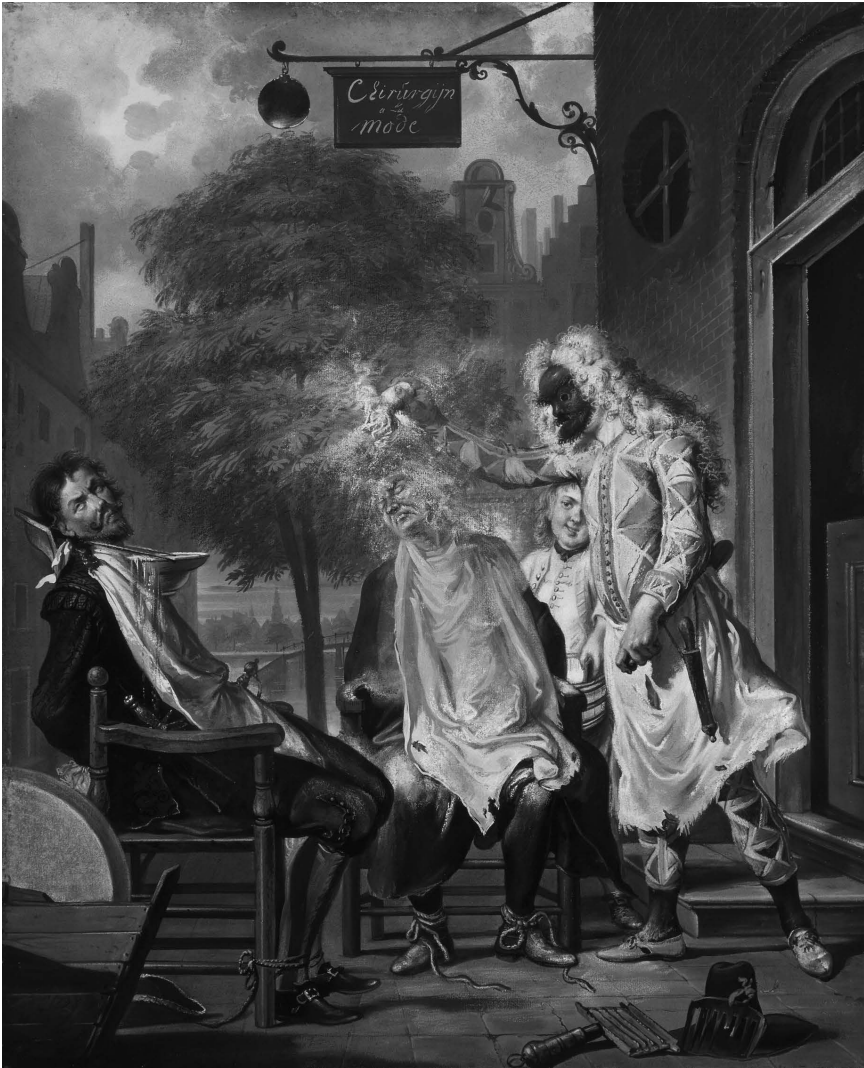


Figure 1: Cornelis Troost, *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier: De bedrogen rivalen*, 1738. The Hague: Mauritshuis. Inventory number 183. Retrieved through Wikimedia Commons.

instance, openly referred to him as a ‘Blackie’ (‘Swartkop’)—a racist slur that was commonly used for people of African descent.¹⁹ Troost’s painting, mentioned earlier, seems to indicate that van der Hoeven’s Harlequin, too, may have been understood by Dutch audiences as a black individual. In it, Harlequin does not wear his conventional black half-mask with a red knob to symbolize diabolism, but a deep-brown, full-face mask with dark eyebrows and a beard. Since actors of the Amsterdam Theatre did usually wear the half-masks of the *commedia dell’arte*, it is intriguing that Troost, consciously or unconsciously, put forward a mask that more closely resembled a black man’s face than a stock *commedia* mask.

At the same time, it is unsurprising that Troost seemed to have in mind an Africanized character for Antonio’s servant in *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier*. Servitude in the metropole could be linked to blackness quite evidently. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, an Afro-Atlantic community had started to settle in the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam, and it swelled steadily through the next century. Most members of this community had travelled from Suriname with their (former) masters and were employed as servants in wealthy families.²⁰ As Karwan Fatah-Black and Matthias van Rossum have shown, some of these people would even have been enslaved (there is a persistent idea among historians that enslaved Africans and Asians who set foot ashore in the Dutch Republic were liberated all at once, but slavery existed there until well into the nineteenth century).²¹

Racialized and forced labour conditions are the undeniable backgrounds against which we need to read the Suriname productions of van der Hoeven’s farce. Although 1814 marked the year in which the

¹⁹ It is an allegorical cartoon in which Pulcinella and Harlequin represent two opposing sides in the Austrian War of Succession, Germany and France respectively. The cartoon is held at the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum and is available at <<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/collectie/RP-P-OB-83.772>>, accessed 15 February 2023.

²⁰ For the black community in early-modern Amsterdam, see Mark Ponte, “‘Al de swarten die hier ter stede comen:’ Een Afro-Atlantische gemeenschap in zeventiende-eeuws Amsterdam”, *TSEG / Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History*, 15.4 (2019), pp. 33–62; Carl Haarnack and Dienne Hondius, “‘Swart’ in Nederland: Afrikanen en Creolen in de noordelijke Nederlanden vanaf de Middeleeuwen tot de twintigste eeuw”, in Esther Schreuder and Elmer Kolfin (eds), *Black is Beautiful: Rubens tot Dumas* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008), pp. 88–107.

²¹ Karwan Fatah-Black and Matthias van Rossum, ‘Slavery in a “Slave Free Enclave?” Historical Links between the Dutch Republic, Empire and Slavery, 1580s–1860s’, *Werkstatt Geschichte*, 66/67 (2014), pp. 55–74.

King of the Netherlands—for reasons more strategic than idealistic—abolished the Dutch slave trade, concrete measures were not taken until 1819. Moreover, many plantations were booming in this period. The economic crisis of the 1770s (provoked by an insatiable demand for capital in the colonies, which led to a rash of speculation and, ultimately, a credit crisis) had resulted in a temporary reduction in sugar, coffee, cotton and mixed crop plantations in Suriname, from 406 in 1770 to 383 in 1812, only to mount back to 416 in 1820 and 564 in 1829.²² In the same decades, Suriname witnessed a rapidly shifting demography. By the time De Verreezene Phoenix produced *Arlequin, tovenaer en barbier*, more than half of the free population in Paramaribo was non-white. One reason for this development is the wave of white emigration in the 1770s, which gave free men of colour the opportunity to fill positions that had long been held exclusively by white people.²³ Most importantly, however, it was domestic relations that closed the gap between white people, people of colour (*kleurlingen*) and black people. The dearth of white women in Suriname, as in Indonesia, had turned concubinage into an established and accepted phenomenon in Dutch colonial sites. Women of colour who, willingly or unwillingly, entered into sexual relationships with white plantation managers could obtain freedom for themselves or, more frequently and successfully, lobby to have their children manumitted.²⁴

The question is how colonial theatre audiences made sense of Harlequin, his mask and his position as a servant in these charged circumstances of slavery and 'miscegenation'. Even though there is no confirmation that actors of De Verreezene Phoenix, like other troupes in Paramaribo, had black masks at their disposal, it is plausible that they did. First, the Jewish theatre company was known for its aesthetic skill. Second, and more importantly, advertisements for slave auctions indicate that Harlequin had become a prevalent[AQ25] name for enslaved people in Suriname.²⁵ This means that plantation

²² Kwame Nimako and Glenn F.W. Willemsen, *The Dutch Atlantic: Slavery, Abolition and Emancipation* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 68.

²³ Rosemarijn Hoefte and Jean Jacques Vrij, 'Free Black and Colored Women in Early-Nineteenth-Century Paramaribo', in David Barry Gaspar and Darlene Clark Hine (eds), *Beyond Bondage: Free Women of Color in the Americas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), pp. 145–68 (152).

²⁴ Hoefte and Vrij, 'Free Black and Colored Women', 153–56.

²⁵ These appear in *Surinaamsche Courant* 20 (11 March 1830), *Surinaamsche Courant* 63 (7 August 1832) and *Nieuwe Surinaamsche Courant* 74 (16 September 1835), to name but a few examples. As outlined in Chapter Nine of this volume, enslaved people named Arlequin, or Scapin or especially

managers and owners must have recalled the popular commedia figure as they purchased their new captives at the slave markets and gave them new names. The Holland and Jewish Theatres were indeed primarily oriented towards elite audiences and the largest share of the spectators—but not all of them, as we shall see below—would have been slave owners.²⁶ All this suggests that the black-masked Harlequin was perceived as a black individual. His servile status, in a society defined by and depending on the slavery-based plantation economy, will have supported this idea.

Marking Anthonio's servant as black also made sense in the light of the growing number of black people and people of colour who found a way to skirt the social, gendered and racial divisions along which colonial society was organized. More specifically, Harlequin's supposedly fixed racial and social identity may have been a reflection of the fear and anxiety which this new pattern provoked among white colonials.²⁷ Operating the logic of 'intimate distance', colonials insisted on a cultural, social and political dissociation from the free black people, *kleurlingen* and captives—people with whom they lived in close spatial intimacy. In an attempt to prevent social boundaries between white people and black people from collapsing, in 1804 the Court of Policy and Criminal Justice, for instance, raised taxes on manumissions from 50–100 to 250–500 guilders.²⁸ Numerous other regulations were proposed to maintain legal and socioeconomic distance, and all of them had the same professed objective: openly signalling that black people's inferior status was unalterable.²⁹ The correlation between blackness and servitude was presented as immutable and was crystallized in the figure of Harlequin, who possibly confirmed and perhaps reinforced the strict boundaries which colonials so nervously cemented in their new regulations and laws.

Figaro—all potentially subversive servant figures—were present in colonial Saint-Domingue (and elsewhere).

²⁶ Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis*, [AQC4]98.

²⁷ For more on concubinage in the Dutch East Indies and the implications of these sexual bonds for white, male, colonial identity, see Ann Laura Stoler, 'Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures', *American Ethnologist*, 16.4 (1989), pp. 634–60 (638).

²⁸ Hoefte and Vrij, 'Free Black and Colored Women', 149.

²⁹ Hoefte and Vrij, 'Free Black and Colored Women', 152.

The politics of blackface ridicule

Harlequin's black mask, however, was not solely a symbol of racialized subjection. As I have argued elsewhere for the Amsterdam stage, Harlequin also was a ready-made figure for racialized comic appropriation.³⁰ Mediated through generic conventions, he was a nimble, infantile and lusty black type who conjured a subtle mix of fascination and aversion, of laughing with and laughing at. Throughout the farce, Harlequin's bold jokes and ventures towards Capitano and Belloardo meet with reprimands from Pantaloon, who repeatedly attacks Harlequin both verbally and physically. Ignoring these demurrals and assaults, Harlequin is always energized to take his opponents for a further ride. He is pre-eminently a figure who brings together sentiments of terror and pleasure. It is perhaps no coincidence then, that the harlequinade as a genre seems to subtly disappear from the Amsterdam stage in tandem with the arrival of minstrelsy. In Paramaribo, too, the final recorded harlequinade, *Pantaloon Bakker of De drie bedrogen minnaars* (Pantaloon Baker, or The three deceived lovers), was scheduled some years after the first minstrel troupe, the 'American Ethiopian Minstrels', took to the stage in 1854.³¹

Harlequin's ultimate prank in *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* is particularly interesting in this respect, because it includes an episode of explicit blackface ridicule. Wearing a blond toupée and a barber's apron, Harlequin pretends to be a **recently arrived** hairdresser who could transform the ugliest and oldest men into attractive suitors. Capitano and Belloardo, wanting to seduce the young Sofy, are lured into paying him a visit. Troost's painting shows this scene and depicts the men tied to the chairs in Harlequin's improvised shop. They wear an old sailcloth around their neck and a pot that had to serve as a shaving mug. Seeing all those *bric-à-brac* materials, Capitano and Belloardo become suspicious. As Harlequin heavy-handedly treats their hair with a currycomb, they bellow with pain: 'Ben jy een Barbier! Ik geloof eer dat je een Barbaar zult weezen' (*Are you a Barber! You are more like a Barbarian*).³² Harlequin, however, continues to work towards the supreme moment of his joke: painting their faces black!

³⁰ Sarah J. Adams, *Repertoires of Slavery: Dutch Theater Between Abolitionism and Colonial Subjection, 1770–1810* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2023), pp. 126–33.

³¹ Michiel van Kempen's inventory lists the first minstrel show in the summer of 1854 and the last recorded harlequinade in the summer of 1859.

³² [Willem van der Hoeven], *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* (Amsterdam: David Ruarus, 1730), 40.

Preparing for this antic, Harlequin must have thought that Pantaloon, who kept defending Capitano and Belloardo despite their stupidity, would never consent to black men, or men painted in black, marrying his daughter. When the two men finally leave the barber shop, their appearance provokes laughter among bystanders:

- MIZO Wat schepsels benne dit! Dit zyn twee kluchtige dingen!
- PIEROT Twee mooye vastelavond gekken, om mé in de bocht te springen.
- MIZO Zoet, jongens, trek zo niet, laat ons de menschen eerst bezien. Heeden! 't Lyken wel twee Moorze keuningén.³³
- MIZO *What kind of creatures are those? They are two farcical things!*
- PIEROT *Two lovely carnival fools, ready to go on a spree.*
- MIZO *Now, boys, easy, let us have a look at these men more closely. Dear! They look like two Moorish kings.*

Even though Capitano and Belloardo make haste to wash off their faces in the nearest creek, they are rebuffed and rejected by Pantaloon, who now admits that perhaps Anthonio is a better match for Sofy after all. Harlequin's comic carousel had proved successful.

Using blackface as an emblem of sexuality and folly was a trope in Dutch theatre long before van der Hoeven's harlequinade. As far back as the fourteenth-century Dutch farce *De Buskenblaser* (The Box Blower), for instance, blackface was used for such purposes. Attempting to look more handsome, the old white protagonist of the farce is tricked into blowing into a box, thus blackening his own countenance. As he shows himself lustily before his much younger wife, she mocks him for being 'swert al een moriaen' (I.120) (*black as a Moor*) and claims that she 'sach noit leliker creature' (I.125) (*never saw an uglier creature*).³⁴ Crafting Harlequin's barber scene, van der Hoeven replayed a longstanding association between stage blackness, laughter, sexuality and, as the reactions of Mizo and Pierot reveal, racial alterity. He also capitalized on the common sentiments of white metropolitans regarding the Dutch

³³ [van der Hoeven], *Arlequin, tovenaer en barbier*, 44.

³⁴ The Dutch quotations are taken from (anonymous) 'Buskenblazer, Sotternieën', in Pieter Leendertz Jr (ed.), *CD-ROM Middelnederlands* (The Hague and Antwerp: Sdu Uitgevers/Standaard Uitgeverij). English translations are cited in Hornback, *Racism and Early Blackface*, 43.

Afro-Atlantic community, whose members were generally held in low esteem, ridiculed and feared.³⁵

It is intriguing how part of the humour in this barber scene seems to consist in the fact that the bystanders immediately recognize that these two 'creatures' are not actually black people—they merely *look* like Africans. The ironic distance installed between white actors and their comic, racialized impersonations was one of the central ingredients for minstrelsy and a key strategy for white metropolitan audiences to give vent to their fascination with blackness while also oppressing it through ridicule.³⁶ To a certain extent, the same rationale may have been appropriate in Paramaribo, where the scene allowed white actors and spectators to degrade Afro-diasporic people by mocking them, thus hoping to reassert white dominance in the light of the increased and, in the eyes of colonists, worrisome social mobility of non-white people in the colony.

However, as Jill Lane has illustrated in the mid-nineteenth-century Cuban context, the performative pattern of stage blackness—realized through black masks or make up—was a highly complex and charged sign in the colonial theatre.³⁷ The simultaneous drawing up and traversing of racial boundaries may have had a much more powerful potential in the context of Suriname than in the Dutch metropole. The idea that skin colour could be painted on one's face and subsequently washed off implied that blackness and whiteness were indeed unstable and, more problematically for white colonists, negotiable categories. Harlequin comes to the fore as a hybrid figure that testified to the desires of the colonizer while simultaneously satirizing and subverting them.

Magic rebellions and spider Anansi

Harlequin thus possibly succeeded in unmasking binaries and presenting them as constructed and artificial. In a colonial context, his rebellion had the potential to be more radical still. The reason for this lies in

³⁵ Miriam Claude Meijer, *Race and Aesthetics in the Anthropology of Petrus Camper, 1722–1789* (Amsterdam: Atlanta, 1999), p. 59.

³⁶ Lott, *Love and Theft*, 6.

³⁷ Jill Lane, 'Blackface Nationalism, Cuba 1840–1868', *Theatre Journal*, 50.1 (1998), pp. 21–38. See also Julia Prest's essay on the complex and charged uses of blackface in Saint Domingue, 'The Familiar Other: Blackface Performance in Creole Works from 1780s Saint-Domingue', in Leichman and Bénac-Giroux, *Colonialism and Slavery*, pp. 41–63.

the supernatural powers that Harlequin uses to enact his protest. Magical resolutions had been a fundamental feature of the Italian commedia dell'arte, and Dutch metropolitan playwrights and ballet masters underscored the centrality of supernaturalism in the titles of their creations: *Fleur d'Epine, of de Triomf van Arlequin door Toverkunst* (1799) (*Fleur d'Epine, or the Triumph of Harlequin by Magic*), Rochefort's *Pantolon, Oost-Indisch planter, of Arlequin uit slaverny door toverkunst* (mentioned earlier) and *Arlequin op het toovereiland* (1839) (*Harlequin on the magical island*), to name but a few examples.³⁸ In all these productions, Harlequin is aided by supernatural forces to overcome his more powerful opponents.

If Harlequin's claim to magic was a mere convention in the Dutch metropole—and a very popular one—I believe it would have had a strikingly different undertone in Suriname, where Harlequin's magical tricks and enterprises may have reminded white planters in the audience of the traditions, belief systems and rituals that were taken to the Caribbean by African captives. Colonial accounts of the cultures of black people and *kleurlingen* in Suriname reveal sentiments of contempt, fear and fascination alike. The divine-healers, or *loekoemannen*, and their plantation ceremonies as part of *winti* in particular, receive much attention in these publications. A *loekoeman* possessed the power to cure all kinds of problems, from bad luck to physical maladies, and had the gift of prophecy.³⁹ In his description of Guyana and Suriname (1770), Jan Jacob Hartsinck, former president of the shareholders of the West Indian Company, admits that little is known about the 'Plegtigheden van Toveryën' (*Magic Ceremonies*) of these healers, as black people keep them 'voor de Blanken zeer bedekt; en niet dan door geheime navorschingen kan men daar iets van te weten krygen' (*well-hidden from the whites; and only by secret inquiry can one get access*).⁴⁰ Nonetheless, white authors had clear prejudices about the *loekoemannen*. Hartsinck called them false 'Tovenaars' (*sorcerers*) and 'vervleeschte Duivels' (*incarnations of the devil*). David Nassy, in his *Geschiedenis der kolonie van Suriname* (1791), wrote concerning the 'bovennatuurlyke' (supernatural) actions of Quassy, the most famous *loekoeman* of eighteenth-century Suriname, that they were nothing

³⁸ Richard Stocton Rande, 'The Young Lovers', in Chaffee and Cric (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell'Arte* [AQC3], 70–81 (75).

³⁹ Natalie [AQC11] Zemon Davis, 'Judges, Masters, Diviners: Slaves' Experience of Criminal Justice in Colonial Suriname', *Law and History Review*, 29.4 (2011), pp. 925–84.

⁴⁰ Jan Jacob Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana, of de wilde kust in Zuid-America* (Amsterdam: Gerrit Tielenburg, 1770), p. 904.

more than 'lapzalvery' (*quackery*) and the special symbol of 'het bedrog der Negers' (*the delusion of black people*).⁴¹

Importantly, in a description of a *winti* ceremony with a *loekoeman*, captain John Gabriel Stedman pointed to the potential dangers of such gatherings. He noted that:

these meetings [are] exceedingly dangerous among the slaves, who are often told to murder their masters or desert to the woods, and on which account the excessiveness of this piece of fanaticism is forbidden in the Colony of Surinam[e], on pain of the most rigorous punishment. Yet it is often put in execution in private places.⁴²

Ceremonial gatherings, like collective dancing and singing, indeed worried colonials because they could be a vehicle for criticism and protest.⁴³ Hartsinck remarked that some individuals went to those gatherings with the intention of starting riots and to 'kwaade oogmerken smeeden, en dezelve ook aan de zulke, die daar van anders geen denkbeeld of gedachten hadden, inboezemden' (*forge evil purposes, and inspire those who otherwise had no idea or thoughts of [protesting]*).⁴⁴ The worst that could happen was indeed that participants would be excited to revolt against their masters. In Suriname the threat of rebellion was high. The planter class was well aware that black people outnumbered them many times over and they witnessed an incessant surge of rebellions.⁴⁵ Between 1750 and 1759, no fewer than fifteen uprisings took place in Suriname. Some years later, in 1763, a major revolt broke out in the neighbouring colony of Berbice and between the 1770s and 1790s the Aluku, in what have become known as the Boni Maroon Wars, successfully ambushed different plantations in the Cottica region.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Nassy, *Geschiedenis van de kolonie Suriname*, 55 and 66. For more on Granman Quassy, see Davis, 'Judges, Masters, Diviners'. Stedman's *Narrative* includes an engraving of Quassy, which can be consulted at <<http://www.slaveryimages.org/s/slaveryimages/item/1530>>, accessed 15 February 2023.

⁴² John Gabriel Stedman, *Stedman's Surinam: Life in an Eighteenth-Century Slave Society*, eds Richard Price and Sally Price (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 263.

⁴³ See also Julia Prest's article, 'Pale Imitations: White Performances of Slave Dance in the Public Theatres of Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue', *Atlantic Studies*, 16.4 (2018), pp. 502–20.

⁴⁴ Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, 908–09.

⁴⁵ In 1791 there were 45,000 plantation slaves in Suriname and 1,360 white plantation residents (a ratio of 33:1). For Suriname as a whole, the ratio was 16:1. Hoefte and Vrij, 'Free Black and Colored Women', 164.

⁴⁶ For the best discussion of the Boni/Aluku resistance, see Wim Hoogbergen,

Thereafter, the Haitian Revolution engulfed the wider Caribbean orbit with revolutionary sentiment. It inspired portions of the enslaved population in Suriname to escape. One of the measures taken by the Dutch colonial authorities, then, was to issue sharp ordinances to prevent religious and dance meetings, thus accentuating their profound anxiety about slave ceremonies and cultures.⁴⁷

Precisely for this reason, Harlequin's magical rebellions may have struck the theatregoing audiences of Paramaribo as shocking. Reading from a Suriname perspective, van der Hoeven's script seems to capture their anxious sentiments quite explicitly. Pantaloon repeatedly refers to Harlequin as 'een doortrapte Tovenaar' (*a double-dyed Wizard*), 'de Duivel in specie' (*the materialization of the devil*) and 'een bedrieger' (*a fraud*)—thus fearing and slighting Harlequin at the same time, much like Hartsinck and Nassy in their accounts of the *loekoe-mannen*.⁴⁸ Capitano and Belloardo fall victim to Harlequin's magical arts repeatedly. The barber scene did not involve any witchcraft, but other scenes did. As noted, Harlequin had the capacity to make himself invisible in order to haunt the place and scare his antagonists to death—allusions to van der Hoeven's Harlequin being a 'spook' (*phantom*) are regularly made, and the title of the *De Chinese Schim* (mentioned earlier) suggests that there, too, Harlequin spooked around other characters.⁴⁹ Moreover, Harlequin's ability to transform himself and others into other characters and entities helped him to escape trouble and create new confusion. Belloardo, in scene VII, mutates into a tree:

BELLOARDO och! och! ik verander in een Eyk. Myn armen zyn al telgen, en myn voeten worden wortelen. Ik voel een Circes toverdrank door all' myn ad'ren bortelen. [...] Daar voel ik myn mond van een harde schors bedekken.⁵⁰

BELLOARDO *oh! oh! I am transforming into an oak tree. My arms have already changed into branches, and my feet are becoming roots. I feel Circe's potions in all of my veins [...] I feel my mouth being covered with hard bark.*

The Boni Maroon Wars in Suriname (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 1990).

⁴⁷ Julien Wolbers, *Geschiedenis van Suriname* (1861) (Amsterdam: S. Emmerling, facsimile 1970), p. 456.

⁴⁸ [van der Hoeven], *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier*, 9–11.

⁴⁹ [van der Hoeven], *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier*, 21 and 31.

⁵⁰ [van der Hoeven], *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier*, 21–22.

Using his creative mind and helped by supernatural forces, Harlequin thus moulded the situation according to his own views and controlled those who normally get to determine the rules. And *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* was not the only production in Suriname in which Harlequin triumphed through magic. Titles such as *Het standbeeld van Arlequin, of De magt der tovery* (1813) (Harlequin's Statue, or The power of magic) and *De componist Brombas, of Arlequin hersteld door toverkracht* (1819) (The Composer Brombas, or Harlequin reinstated by magic) suggest that the Paramaribo repertoire was saturated in Harlequin's magic and metamorphoses.

In her analysis of the harlequinade in Charleston, Dillon argues that burlesque shows created much political potential for black people in the colonies—both the harlequinade and slave-led revolution embody disorder, radicalism and subaltern knowledge.⁵¹ But did non-white people in Suriname get to see Harlequin's magical onstage rebellions? According to traditional historiography they did not. As I indicated earlier, most Suriname theatregoers would have been members of the white elite. Officially, only white people or those who passed as white—people born from a white father and a *gekleurde* mother, for instance—could enter the theatre buildings. People of colour, and captives in particular, were not allowed in the theatres of Suriname until the late nineteenth century. The *Surinaamsche Courant* of 1 April 1814, for instance, mentions that 'niemand zal barveoets worden toegelaten' (*no barefooted individuals will be allowed*). Announcing the performance of 'een aantal buiten gewoone Experimenten' (*some extraordinary experiments*) at the theatre of the Masonic lodge Concordia, the newspaper of 9 August 1822 reminded visitors that 'geen slaven worden toegelaten' (*no enslaved people will be admitted*).⁵² Taking such official announcements and accounts at face value, historians have concluded that enslaved people were indeed for a long time excluded from theatre attendance.⁵³ However, the very existence of such announcements gives us the impression that enslaved people did find their way into the theatres, at least from 1814. Why else would such reminders be necessary? From the 1830s onwards, then, messages trickle through that captives were sometimes admitted to some theatrical occasions,

⁵¹ Dillon, *New World Drama*, 164.

⁵² Both examples are cited in Van Kempen's unpublished repertoire list. Translations are mine.

⁵³ Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis* [AQC4], 98–99, 205–07.

albeit in low-ranking seats and on producing a furlough letter from their masters.⁵⁴

Let us assume that enslaved people and *kleurlingen* were able to enter the theatre buildings of Paramaribo, if only sporadically. What would they have made of the black-masked Harlequin and his subversions of reality? Was his undermining of authority understood as a metaphor for opposition by the colonized? Did such performances hold powerful potential, as Dillon suggests? Unfortunately, sources are lacking to answer such questions. What is certain, though, is that, for many members of the Afro-Surinamese population, Harlequin would not have been the first fictional figure onto whom they could project antislavery sentiments. Their own cultures, too, had narratives and beliefs in which enthralling personalities challenged the status quo and stamped out evil, often using spirit incarnations and metamorphoses.⁵⁵ One figure that instinctively comes to mind when thinking about Harlequin is Anansi. *Anansitori* or Anansi stories originated in the Asante culture and were brought to the Caribbean via the transatlantic voyage by enslaved Africans. Anansi is a trickster, most often assuming the form of a black spider, who uses his acute wit to outsmart stronger beings and to triumph in nearly every situation. The choice of a spider rather than another animal has been explained by the creativity, flexibility and adaptability of these arthropods, as well as their capacity to design their own realities—they can set up a new habitat wherever and whenever required.⁵⁶

During colonial times, Anansi was an empowering hero with whom enslaved people, black people and *kleurlingen* could identify. He was a very popular figure, and his influence—right up to the Anansi stories of the present day—should not be underestimated.⁵⁷ As burlesque genres often drew from vernacular offstage cultures and appeared

⁵⁴ For a circus production by a Demerarian troupe in the spring of 1831, enslaved people were allowed to sit in the fourth tier, next to the children, for f1.5[AQ26]. In the Spring of 1836, again for a circus production, they were allowed in on condition that they had a letter from their masters giving permission. Examples are taken from Van Kempen's repertoire list.

⁵⁵ Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, 903.

⁵⁶ Much has been written on Anansi. For an essay that excels in clarity, see Verona Spence-Adofo, 'Anansi the Spider: Trickster or Teacher?', *Folklore Thursday* online (25 June 2020) <<https://folklorethursday.com/regional-folklore/anansi-the-spider-trickster-or-teacher/>>, accessed 15 February 2023. For Anansi in a specific Suriname context, see Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis* II, 238–50.

⁵⁷ Van Kempen, *Een geschiedenis* II, 242.

as a colourful blend of influences, we might wonder whether these stories could have affected the colonial Harlequin whom I have mainly analysed with recourse to van der Hoeven's script. As an African and Afro-diasporic figure Anansi was well known among colonials. The spider was mentioned in Hartsinck's account of Suriname and Guyana as the creator of humankind.⁵⁸ However, Hartsinck was not the first Dutchman to report on Anansi. As early as 1704, Willem Bosman had noted in his work on the Guinea coast about Africans' belief in Anansi:

Sy gelooven dat de eerste menschen van den zelven gemaekt zyn; en niet tegenstaende eenige door ommegang met de Blanken anders geleerd hebbende, so zijn' er niet weinig, die by dat Geloof blyven, en welke waen haer niet uit 't hoofd is te praaten. Dit is voorwaer noch de grootste slegtigheid en onnooselheid, welke ik in de negers bespeurd heb.⁵⁹

They believe that the first men were made of [this spider]; and, although some have learned differently as they encountered Whites, there are many individuals who stick to this Faith and we will not be able to talk them out of it. It is indeed not the greatest illness and ignorance which I have seen in African people.

Bosman's evaluation of Anansi was not only taunting and disrespectful, it also grossly underestimated the subversive powers of this trickster figure. *Anansitori*, like many facets of African culture, were forbidden on Suriname plantations precisely because they represented protest against unrighteous oppression and imagined how seemingly helpless individuals could succeed in overthrowing the yokes imposed by more powerful beings. In Suriname, Anansi gradually became an icon of self-awareness and a hero of resistance to slavery and oppression.⁶⁰ The concrete relationship between harlequinades staged in Paramaribo and the vernacular cultures by which they were surrounded is difficult to research, but it is not impossible that there was an interaction between Afro-diasporic narratives and rituals, and theatrical events shaped by the planter class. De Verreezene Phoenix, for instance, certainly did

⁵⁸ Hartsinck, *Beschryving van Guiana*, 903.

⁵⁹ Willem Bosman, *Nauwkeurige beschryving van de Guinese goud-tand- en slave-kust* (Utrecht: Anthony Schouten, 1704), p. 101.

⁶⁰ Theo Meder, 'Anansi: een verhaal van migratie. Verslag van het symposium gehouden op 15 juni 2007 op het Meertens Instituut te Amsterdam', *Vertel eens*, 2.3 (2007), pp. 40–59.

take inspiration from vernacular performance traditions, as one ballet production revealingly titled *De tovery der Indianen* (The Magic of the Indians) (1806) illustrates.

I began this chapter with a reference to Gloria Wekker's concern with how scholarship on Dutch imperialism tends to separate the metropole from its colonies and vice versa. Turning to Willem van der Hoeven's popular *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* (1730), my contribution subsequently attempted to analyse the dynamics between theatrical culture and colonial power in the contingent but shared spaces of the Netherlands and colonial Suriname. As a method, I have found it useful not only to compare the representation and reception of van der Hoeven's farce in those two different locations, but also to concentrate on the ways in which discourses of metropole and colony, of colonizer and colonized, focused in its protagonist: the black-masked and rebellious Harlequin. This combined approach to the harlequinade in the metropole and the colony has helped us to understand each separate context better, while also making sense of those two zones as inextricably connected.

In the Netherlands, van der Hoeven's Harlequin could have been easily racialized by the Amsterdam spectators, who witnessed in their city a growing Afro-Atlantic community that testified to the relation of blackness and servitude. The harlequinade's racialized ridicule—in the comic staging of Harlequin himself as much as in the blackface barber scene—capitalized on and magnified white metropolitans' fascination with, and contempt for, black individuals and was a laboratory for the minstrel shows that gradually replaced other colonial burlesque genres. *Arlequin, tovenaar en barbier* may have had similar purviews and effects in Suriname to a certain extent. However, the context in which van der Hoeven's farce took the stage drastically changed. In Suriname, the relation between whiteness, blackness and subjection was more complicated as its plantation society was increasingly confronted with slave-led opposition and (what was understood as) miscegenation. Harlequin's racialized presence and rebellions thus inevitably accumulated meaning when he traversed the Atlantic. The mere convention of wearing a black mask, like the act of putting on and washing off black face paint, could challenge the supposed fixity of complexion and the status and worth that were tied to it. Moreover, Harlequin's opposition to those in power possibly symbolized the social mobility of the growing group of free black people in Paramaribo. Such subversive manoeuvres and interpretations would have been unthinkable in the metropole.

While Harlequin has long been understood as a thoroughly European figure, his presence on the metropolitan and colonial stages was in fact double-voiced: his transgressive performances subscribed to colonial powers and anticolonial resistance alike. Harlequin defended the interests of metropolitans, who depended on a system of dehumanization for their wealth and prowess, but he also expressed critiques of that system. These were established through Harlequin's magical rebellions, which could have been a ghostly reminder of how white colonials failed to get a grip on Afro-Suriname cultures, and an example of how these cultures potentially left a mark on white elite productions.

The oscillating meanings of Harlequin's presence on the stages of the Dutch Atlantic—capturing both pain and pride, abuse and agency—make him a paragon of hybridity. Conceptualizing him as such can help us to make more sense of colonial theatre in general: as a cultural domain that is never univocal or pure. This chapter can be a starting point for researchers to explore the colonial repertoire in a more integrated way that testifies to the complexities of the colonial relation. In addition, and precisely because performance culture is so receptive to 'external' influences, I hope that it stimulates research on Harlequin's meanings and mobility in the Atlantic more generally.⁶¹ To fully grasp his complexity, however, further dialogue is needed.

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⁶¹ For Harlequin in an Anglo-American context see, among others, Jenna M. Gibbs, *Performing the Temple of Liberty: Slavery, Theater and Popular Culture in London and Philadelphia, 1760–1850* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), pp. 52–86 and Dillon, *New World Drama*, 131–64. For Harlequin (or, rather, Arlequin) in Saint-Domingue, including a locally-produced Arlequin pantomime, see Julia Prest, *Public Theatre and the Enslaved People of Colonial Saint-Domingue* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 'Mitigated Portrayals' chapter.

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