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1. Introduction

'Beyond the subject' is the central theme of this conference, but the call for papers made me wonder: what is actually the subject of auto/biographical writing? The organizers of this conference suggest that the subject is the human subject whose life is told, and their central question is to what extent new media contribute to new, non-linear, pluralistic and fragmentary conceptions of that human subject.[1]

Of course, we, scholars of life writing, are working in a field that is founded upon assumptions about some connection between life narratives and the human subject, but I think it is important to realize that auto/biographical texts can – and have been – read otherwise too. My own studies into the 19th-century marketing and reception of autobiographical texts for instance, showed that Dutch book publishers and critics tended to focus on the thematic contents of autobiographies – not on the autobiographer's subjectivity, in whatever form or shape.[2]

On another level, I question the call for papers in its underlying assumption that the subject of autobiographical discourse has been stable in the era before the ascent of new media. In that sense, I agree with Stephen Greenblatt, who posed that attention for the current demise of traditional assumptions about identity has reinforced the idea that the original condition was one of fixity and coherence.[3] He therefore called for research that focuses on cultural mobility and tracks multiple interpretations and appropriations of cultural products. I think this programme can be useful to move beyond the presupposed subject in the field of life writing too, and in this paper I will demonstrate this by tracing the readings of Anglo-American slave narratives in the Netherlands since the late 18th century.

2. Slave narratives in the Netherlands

Auto/biographical accounts of former and/or fugitive slaves were central to the protest repertoire of the abolitionist movements in Great Britain and North America. In order to mobilize the general, white public against slavery, numerous so-called 'slave narratives' have been published in the era before the end of American slavery in 1865.[4] Two of the most well-known examples are *Interesting narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by himself* – published in London in 1789 – and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave. Written by himself* – published in 1845 in Boston, and in 1846 in London and Dublin.

Interestingly, the first foreign translations of these slave narratives were published in the Netherlands – in 1790 and 1846 respectively.[5] This is somewhat surprising, because the Dutch are not particularly known for their abolitionism.[6] There was no organized anti-slavery movement until 1853, although some protestant and liberal abolitionists formed small, seperate groups in the 1840s. However, these groups had nothing to do with the Dutch translation of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*. The Dutch edition was published by a commercial publisher, as was the case with Equiano's narrative – and I think the commercial successes of these books in Great Britain explain the existence of the Dutch translations. Nonetheless, these slave narratives were present in the Netherlands – and my question is how these slave narratives 'worked' there.

In 1791, the one and only critic that paid attention to the *Interesting Narrative of Equiano* summarized the contents in such a way that the book seemed a travel journey only, and concluded by posing that it was a pleasurable means to pass time.[7] This non-political way of reading a slave narrative cannot be explained by the fact that slavery was not an issue in the Netherlands. Other types of books, such as essays and sermons, were read in the context of the larger debate about slavery and the equality of men.[8]

Over half a decade later, in 1846, the response to the *Narrative* of Frederick Douglass was somewhat ambiguous. Even though the narrative was reviewed in the journal of

the small group of liberal Dutch abolitionists, the book was not considered to be a useful contribution to the slavery debate.[9]

First, the Dutch abolitionists thought that Douglass's information about the practice of slavery was not new – hence not relevant. Furthermore, the Dutch abolitionists saw no surplus value in the fact that this narrative was written by a former slave himself. A reviewer of a non-abolitionist magazine agreed, and the central point of critique was the subjective nature of slave narratives.[10] According to Dutch critics, then, slave narrators took such a subjective – or in their terms: one-sided – stance that their narratives were useless for the political debate about the ending of slavery.

These responses to Equiano and Douglass led me to think that the autobiographical genre was a problem for Dutch contemporaries. This makes sense, when one takes into account the character of the slavery debate in the Netherlands. Already in the late 18th century, a political majority was convinced that slavery had to come to an end, but it took until 1863 before an answer was found to the question of how to finance emancipation.[11] In other words, the Dutch slavery debate was not so much a moral debate about the pros and cons of slavery, the humanity and/or equality of black people – but a governmental debate about how to pay for emancipation. And in this discussion, personal accounts of former slaves had very little use.

Another factor that hindered an abolitionist reading of slave narratives, is the absence of a large movement. Moreover, the small groups of Dutch abolitionists that did exist, adopted a different strategy than their Anglo-American counterparts.[12] Dutch abolitionists did not focus on the general public, but on the government. According to them, and many contemporaries, the mass had no business in politics. Put differently, the abolitionists adhered to a political culture that conceived politics as the domain of a small elite of reasonable and objective men who tried to solve the technical problem of slavery. This political style also explains Dutch abolitionist's generic preference for – what they called – 'well-studied tracts'.[13] Slave narratives were considered too subjective to pass for such tracts, which made them even more useless for the technical debate about slavery.

Nonetheless, more slave narratives were published in the Netherlands. In 1850 the *Narrative of William Wells Brown, an American slave. Written by himself* was translated into Dutch, and others were to follow in the aftermath of the Dutch edition of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1853).[14]
As I said before, one explanation for the transfer of slave narratives to the Dutch context is the huge commercial success of these books in Great Britain.[15] But I think another explanation lies in the fact that abolitionist slave narratives could be appropriated for other purposes too.

One such purpose was to satisfy the reader's interest in horror stories, which contemporaries deemed characteristic for the expanding Dutch reading audience in the midst of the 19th century.[16] Slave narratives, which contained an abundance of scenes about whippings and other forms of violence, could easily be sold and read as horror books. Another purpose seems to be more specific to the Dutch situation, and shows from the fact that a small wave of slave narratives was published from April 1853 onwards.

In Dutch history, April 1853 marks the so-called April Movement, a massive protest movement of protestants who rejected the liberal government's decision to restore the Catholic Church in the Netherlands. According to the thousands of protesters, this measure would undermine the protestant character of the nation – and the April Movement turned out to be the start of a larger project to re-protestantize the nation – and the world at large.[17] Slave narratives were appropriated for this purpose, which can be illustrated though a new, abbreviated edition of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* – that was published in April 1853.

The book was introduced by J.A. Groen, who presented it as a factual and truthful appendix to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.[18] From his introduction, however, it shows that Groen was hardly interested in facts about slavery in North America – or the Dutch colonies for that matter. What he cared for, was the spread of the protestant version of the gospel. Groen therefore used Douglass's narrative to elaborate on the true meaning of freedom. According to him, true freedom was not to be found in civil and political rights, but in the conversion to the eternal truths of Jesus Christ. From his last

line, it shows that this message was addressed to a large audience that consisted of – and I quote – 'the hundreds of millions who still wark in darkness – whether they are known as Pagans or as Christians'.[19] Catholics, in other words, had no reason to rejoice in their new-found freedom of religion, because to Groen they were still 'slaves' in the spiritual meaning of the word.

Groen's protestant reading of a slave narrative was not unique, for his edition of Frederick Douglass's text was based on a version that was published in *Missions-Stunden. Neue Sammlung* (1851) – a collection of missionary reports of the Basel Mission that considered slavery and emancipation in spiritual, protestant terms too.[20] Evangelical revivalism was also a central feature of Anglo-American abolitionism, but British and American abolitionists managed to see slave narratives as tools to address real-life slavery in North America and the European colonies. This was quite different in the Netherlands, where these texts were not deemed relevant for the political debate about slavery. But they could make sense as either horror stories for leisure, or as narratives that supported the protestant mission to save heathens and so-called 'name-christians' from their slavery of sin and death.

The protestant reading kept slave narratives relevant for a long period of time. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1863, slave narratives were published in the Netherlands – most often by orthodox-protestant publishers and introduced by Dutch Reformed ministers.[21] Over and again, they used 'slavery' as a metaphor for a non-converted state of being. In this respect, it is no coincidence that – in 1956 – the popular, protestant historian Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt chose the Biblical title of 'The people that walk in darkness' to narrate Afro-American history as part of a universal history towards emancipation and salvation.[22]

By the end of the 20th century, the spiritual conception of slavery gradually lost ground in the secularizing Netherlands.[23] From the 1970s, moreover, postcolonial migrants from the Caribbean parts of the Netherlands brought the colonial history of slavery 'home', as it were.[24] Their subsequent claims for public recognition have resulted in a reading of slave narratives that is highly influenced by Afro-American discourses and focuses on 'black experience' and 'agency'. This means that nowadays, slave narratives are primarily presented as tools to counter the white or

Eurocentric perspective in the Dutch dealings with slavery.[25] One of the aims of the NiNsee, the National Institute for the Study of Dutch Slavery and its Legacy (2003-2012) for instance, was to find autobiographical narratives by slaves from the Dutch colonies.[26] These are very hard to find, and a recent inventory of source materials pointed to Anglo-American slave narratives instead.[27]

3. Conclusion

In my paper, I have shown that Anglo-American slave narratives have been present in the Netherlands since the late 18th century. Until very recently, however, these narratives were not understood as texts that helped to reflect on colonial slavery and its legacy. This is not specifically Dutch, for Heike Paul argued that slave narratives were also read differently in the German language zone. Her conclusion was therefore that German readers were not 'really' interested in slavery and/or the agency of black people.[28] Even though I agree with her, I think this is no useful conclusion for a research that focuses on cultural mobility.

Paul seems to suggest that slave narratives have some sort of intrinsic meaning – which can be appropriated in the right or wrong way. My point is rather that texts have no fixed meaning, message or subject. Now we may think that slave narratives are relevant because they enable us to encounter a 'black perspective' to slavery, but this democratic stance toward the human subject is not the subject of these texts per se. Other people, in other places and times, have taken a different stance towards the subject – and I think it's worth to take these readings seriously in order to find out what has changed in thinking about the subject of autobiographical narratives.

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[1] Call for papers 'Beyond the subject. New developments in life writing', http://gtb.lbg.ac.at/de/IABA2013.

[2] Marijke Huisman, 'Selling the self. Autobiographical writing and publishing in the Netherlands, 19th century' in: Alfred Hornung ed., *Autobiography and Mediation* (Heidelberg: Winter Verlag, 2010) 117-128; Marijke Huisman, 'Autobiography and contemporary history. The Dutch reception of autobiographies, 1850-1918' in: Arianne Baggerman, Rudolf Dekker and Michael Mascuch eds., *Controlling time and shaping the self. Developments in Autobiographical Writing since the Sixteenth Century* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2011) 387-419; Marijke Huisman, 'Selves in Numbers. A Book Historical Perspective on Nineteenth-Century Autobiography in the Netherlands', *Lifewriting Annual*, forthcoming.

[3] Stephen Greenblatt, 'Cultural mobility: an introduction' in: Stephen Greenblatt et al, *Cultural mobility: a manifesto* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) 1-23, 3.

[4] Useful introductions to the slave narrative genre: William L. Andrews, *The first century of Afro-American autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana/Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1986); Marion W. Starling, *The slave narrative. Its place in American history* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1988 [1946]); Audrey Fisch ed., *The Cambridge companion to the African American slave*

narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). See also the introduction to the collection 'North American slave narratives' at the Documenting the AmericanSouth-website of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/.

[5] *Merkwaardige levensgevallen van Olaudah Equiano of Gustavus Vassa, den Afrikaan, door hemzelven beschreven* (Rotterdam: Pieter Holsteijn, 1790); *Levensverhaal van Frederik Douglass, een gewezen slaaf (Door hem zelven geschreven)* (Rotterdam: H.A. Kramers, 1846).

[6] Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, 'The Dutch case of antislavery. Late and elitist' in: Gert Oostindie ed., *Fifty years later. Antislavery, capitalism and modernity in the Dutch orbit* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 1995) 67-88; Seymour Drescher, 'The long goodbye. Dutch capitalism and antislavery in comparative perspective' in: Oostindie ed., *Fifty years later*, 25-66; Maartje Janse, *De afschaffers. Publieke opinie, organisatie en politiek in Nederland, 1840-1880* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2007).

[7] Anonymous, Review, *Vaderlandsche bibliotheek van Wetenschap, Kunst en Smaak* (1791) 123-129, 129.

[8] For instance, Dutch critics read the Dutch translation of B.J. Frossard, *La cause des esclaves nègres et des habitans de la Guinée ...* (1789) as part of a Dutch and European debate on slavery. See reviews in *Boekzaal der geleerde wareld* (1790) 59, 607 and *Algemeene Vaderlandsche Letter-Oefeningen* (1791) 601-602. On the Dutch slavery debate in the late eighteenth century: A.N. Paasman, *Reinhart: Nederlandse literatuur en slavernij ten tijde van de Verlichting* (Leiden: Nijhoff, 1984); Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, 'Nederland en de mensenrechten, 1795-1995' in: Maarten Kuitenbrouwer and Marij Leenders eds., *Geschiedenis van de mensenrechten. Bouwstenen voor een interdisciplinaire benadering* (Hilversum: Verloren, 1996) 156-201; Angelie Sens, *'Mensaap, heiden, slaaf'. Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800* (Den Haag: SDU, 2001), chapter 4: 'Slavernij en vrijheid. Het maatschappelijk debat'.

[9] Editors, 'Letterkundige Berigten', *Bijdragen tot de kennis der Nederlandsche en vreemde koloniën, bijzonder betrekkelijk de vrijlating der slaven* (1847) 102-109.

[10] Anonymous, Review, *De Recensent, ook der recensenten* (1847) 306-307.

[11] Kuitenbrouwer, 'Nederland en de mensenrechten, 1795-1995', 163-164; Kwame Nimako & Glenn Willemsen, *The Dutch Atlantic. Slavery, abolition and emancipation* (London: Pluto Press, 2011) 87-122.

[12] Janse, *De afschaffers*, 31-32.

[13] Janse, *De afschaffers*, 82.

[14] *Levensgeschiedenis van den Amerikaanschen slaaf W. Wells Brown, Amerikaansch afgevaardigde bij het Vredescongres te Parijs, 1849, door hem zelven beschreven* (Zwolle: W.E.J. Tjeenk Willink, 1850); *Een slavenleven; of korte levensbeschrijving van eenen Amerikaanschen slaaf, door hem zelven medegedeeld. Toegift op Harriet Beecher Stowe's belangrijk werk: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Leiden: J.H. Zitman, 1853); John Passmore Edwards ed., *De lotgenooten van Oom Tom, of waarheid erger dan verdichting, treffende tooneelen uit het leven van beroemde gevluchte slaven* (Middelburg: J.C. & W. Altorffer, 1854); L.A. Chamerovzow ed., *Slavenleven in Georgië, een verhaal van het leven, lijden en ontkomen van John Brown, een' gevluchten slaaf, nu in Engeland* (Amsterdam: H.A. van Helden, 1856).

[15] Nine different editions of Equiano's narrative were published between 1789 and 1794 in Great Britain, whereas Douglass's *Narrative* sold over 30,000 copies – both in the United States and Great Brittain. James Green, 'The publishing history of Olaudah Equiano's interesting narrative', *Slavery & Abolition* 16:3 (1995) 362-375; Vincent Carretta, *Equiano, the African. Biography of a self-made man* (New York: Penguin, 2006) xii-xiv; Charles H. Nichols, 'Who read the slave narratives', *The Phylon Quarterly* 20:2 (1959) 149-162, 150; William L. Andrews ed., *The Oxford Frederick Douglass Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) 8, 21.

[16] Audrey Fisch, 'Uncle Tom and Harriet Beecher Stowe in England' in: Cindy Weinstein ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Harriet Beecher Stowe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 96-112, 98. Dutch publisher A.C. Kruseman observed a flood of 'sensational book' from the 1840s onwards in his *Bouwstoffen voor een geschiedenis van den Nederlandschen boekhandel, gedurende de halve eeuw 1830-1880* (Amsterdam: P.N. van Kampen, 1886-1887) volume I, 215-216. In the preface to *Narrative of James Williams an American slave, who was for several years a driver on a cotton plantation in Alabama* (Boston: Isaac Knapp, 1838), moreover, abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier already pointed to the attraction of slave narratives to readers 'who feel a morbid satisfaction in dwelling upon the history of outrage and cruelty' (xx).

[17] Annemarie Houkes, *Christelijke vaderlanders. Godsdienst, burgerschap en de Nederlandse natie, 1850-1900* (Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek, 2009)

[18] *Een slavenleven; of korte levensbeschrijving van eenen Amerikaanschen slaaf, door hem zelven medegedeeld. Toegift op Harriet Beecher Stowe's belangrijk werk: Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Leiden: J.H. Zitman, 1853).
[19] *Een slavenleven*, 20.
[20] 'Ein Sklavenleben' in: L.F.W. Hoffmann, *Missions-Studenten. Neue Sammlung* (Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1851) 18-36.
[21] *Oom Tom's levensgeschiedenis van 1789 tot 1877, beschreven door hemzelven* (Amsterdam: Evangelisch Verbond / A. van Oosterzee, 1877); F.W. Ziethe, *Koning Zamba* (Utrecht: J.H. van Peursem, 1887); *Uit slavernij in vrijheid. Autobiographie van Booker T. Washington* (Gorinchem: P.M. Wink, 1902).
[22] Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, *Het volk dat in duisternis wandelt: de geschiedenis van de negers in Amerika* (Arnhem: Van Loghum Slaterus, 1956). The English translation was published as: *The people that walk in darkness* (London: Burke, 1960 / New York: Ballantine Books, 1960).
[23] See the 1977-edition of Olaudah Equiano's narrative in Dutch, edited and introduced by the socialist radio journalist Karel Roskam. *Equiano's reizen. De autobiografie van een negerslaaf* (Haarlem: Van Dishoeck, 1977).
[24] Gert Oostindie, 'History brought home: Postcolonial migrations and the Dutch rediscovery of slavery' in: Wim Klooster (ed.), *Migration, trade, and slavery in an expanding world* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2009) 305-327.
[25] An early example is the introduction by the Surinamese anthropologist and feminist Philomena Essed to the Dutch edition of *Incidents in the life of a slave girl* (1861), which was published in Dutch in 1983. Linda Brent, *In slavernij* (Amsterdam: Feministische uitgeverij Sara, 1983).
[26] Website NiNsee, http://www.ninsee.nl/Projecten, 29 november 2011. See also: Frank Dragtenstein, *Alles voor de vrede. De brieven van Bostoen Band tussen 1757 en 1673* (Amsterdam/Den Haag: NiNsee/Amrit, 2009); Stephen Small & James Walvin, 'African resistance to enslavement' in: Marten van Schalkwijk & Stephen Small eds., *New perspectives on slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean* (Den Haag: Amrit/NiNsee, 2012) 92-115; Carl Haarnack, 'Schrijvende (ex-)slaven', *De Boekenwereld* 20:4 (2013) 30-35.
[27] Alex van Stipriaan, Waldo Heilbron, Aspha Bijnaar & Valika Smeulders, *Op zoek naar de stilte. Sporen van het slavernijverleden in Nederland* (Leiden/Amsterdam: KITLV Uitgeverij/NiNsee, 2007) 42, 126.
[28] Heike Paul, 'Cultural mobility between Boston and Berlin: how Germans have read and reread narratives of American slavery' in: Greenblatt et al, *Cultural mobility*, 122-171, 162-163.