

Iron Gongs and Singing Birds:
Paths of Migration and Acoustic Assemblages of Alterity
in the Former Dutch Colonial Empire

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates the roles of nonhuman (object and animal) entities in auditory practices that construct selfhood, homeland, and memory for people in migration, in order to draw broader conclusions about the aural formation of subject-object relationships in colonial empires and in present-day Europe and the Caribbean. I focus on two sonic objects that have traveled with colonial and postcolonial migrants in the former Dutch colonial empire: (1) traditional Javanese gamelan (pitched percussion orchestra) instruments that traveled with indentured laborers and their descendants to Suriname and the Netherlands, and (2) Caribbean songbirds raised and trained for singing competitions held by Surinamese men in Suriname and the Netherlands. By attending ethnographically to historical and contemporary human encounters with these objects, I argue that individual sensory perception is shaped by historically formed societal paradigms of difference such as "ethnic plurality" in Suriname and "multiculturalism" in the Netherlands, and that such notions of difference perpetuate a colonial zoopolitics that in turn shapes contemporary relations between different groups of humans and between humans and the nonhuman world.

Chapter 1 is concerned with the notion of Javanese ethnicity in Suriname. Through historical inscriptions of colonial listening and ethnographic vignettes of contemporary Javanese performance in Suriname and the Netherlands, I investigate the formation and perpetuation of a sense of Javaneseness with origins in a migration of indentured laborers from the Dutch East

Indies to Suriname between 1890 and 1939. Chapter 2 recounts the development of gamelan music and Javanese-Surinamese culture during the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries by tracing specific sets of gamelan instruments in their circulations between Indonesia, Suriname, and the Netherlands. Chapter 3 provides a contrasting ethnographic exploration, namely of Caribbean songbirds who are bred, raised, and trained to compete in songbird competitions in Suriname and in Surinamese migrant communities in the Netherlands. Chapter 4 develops outwards from these ethnographic studies to pose larger questions about epistemologies of nature and culture that can be traced from Caribbean plantations to contemporary projects of cultural preservation and natural conservation and to discourses of resources, rights, (bio)diversity, sustainability, and environmental justice. Taken together, these chapters interrogate epistemologies and discourses that form culture and nature as separate realms, from the plantation colony to the present, from a perspective informed by aural and multisensory engagements with human and nonhuman difference.

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Chapter 3: *De Zangvogelwedstrijd* (The Songbird Competition)

In November 2016, ten Surinamese songbirds were intercepted at Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands, taped into toilet paper rolls with air holes poked into the sides (Hermans 2016; *Waterkant* 2016). In December 2013, also at Schiphol, six Surinamese songbirds—specifically, two types of finches known as *twatwas* and *pikolets*—were found in luggage, wrapped in tiny rectangular boxes to look like holiday gifts, with shiny red paper and sparkly ribbons and bows (NVWANatuur 2013). In 2012, three residents of The Hague were arrested for attempting to smuggle over twenty birds in a checked bag (*Omroepwest* 2012). There were three incidents that made it into the news in 2011. In June, twenty-five songbirds stuffed in a weekender bag were intercepted at Schiphol and returned to Suriname. In October, a smuggler was stopped at the Johan Adolf Pengel airport before he even left Suriname, with thirty-eight birds of ten different breeds in clear plastic bags. (These birds were either returned to the wild or given to the Paramaribo Zoo, which is how the zoo came into possession of its single exemplar of the very rare vibrant orange Guianan cock-of-the-rock). In November, fifty songbirds of a type known as the *rowti* were found at Schiphol, stuffed into two small wooden cages packed inside a checked bag, thirty-seven of them already dead (*NoSpang* 2011).

These events, covered in mainstream Dutch and Surinamese media, attest to the (in these cases failed) travels of birds by commercial flight from Suriname to the Netherlands. Not in the news are the presumably many more attempts at bird smuggling that do succeed. In this chapter, I am concerned with a few types of songbirds native to Suriname that travel this route, connecting the former colony to the European metropole, where they are sold to pet shops and breeders at high prices (selling just a few of them can cover the cost of the round trip flight). Eventually, many of these birds come to share the homes of human owners who have also

migrated from Suriname to settle in the Netherlands. Together, bird-human companions in both Suriname and the Netherlands enter into the intensely time-consuming, collaborative interspecies project of training for songbird competitions, which are the subject of this chapter.



Figure 30: A twatwa (left), pikolet (center), and rowti (right). Images: Chiang 2008.

The birds who compete are several types of finches native to the Guiana shield: the *rowti* (ruddy-breasted or chestnut-bellied seedeater), the *pikolet* (chestnut-bellied or lesser seed-finch), the *gelebek* (slate-colored seedeater), and the most prized of the bunch, the *twatwa* (large-billed seed-finch), known as the Rolls-Royce of Surinamese songbirds. These species are native to the swampy coastal region of Suriname as well as the savannas of the interior, and in the past could even be found in urban Paramaribo. Over the last several decades, the population of twatwas in particular has been depleted by excessive trapping for the caged-bird trade, and officially acquired endangered status in 2008. Catching twatwas in the wild is now illegal, and breeding songbirds has become more popular, with specialists breeding the various types of birds in both Suriname and the Netherlands. (For the other types of finches, trapping is currently still allowed

but restricted in number and season.) Nevertheless, trapping twatwas and other songbirds still occurs, as does smuggling them to the Netherlands.³⁵

The songbird competition is strictly and more or less exclusively a pastime of men.³⁶ The avian participants, as well, are exclusively male, since female birds do not sing competitively against one another; females of the types of birds involved in the competition sing "not at all, or badly" according to Chiang (2008: 24). Framing the human raising and training of birds as an exclusively male activity is in line with long held epistemologies that understand human culture as the domination of nature, and understand this to be the domain of the male (as outlined and critiqued, for example, by Sherry B. Ortner in her 1974 article "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?"). This epistemological schema can be traced back to representations of early explorations of the Americas, which depicted European men in a land of "virgin" nature ripe for conquest and feminized indigenous occupants unable to dominate and cultivate it themselves (Raffles 2002, Merchant 1990). Yet, as I explore in this chapter, if the raising and training of birds is understood as an ideologically masculine project of the human domination of nature, there are many moments—such as when a promising bird, for whatever unknowable reason, chooses to fall silent at the crucial moment of competition—when "nature" refuses to cooperate, exercising its subtle modes of resistance to domination. Such reminders of the agency,

³⁵ The Songbird Associations that organize the local competitions in the Netherlands officially discourage the smuggling of birds and other forms of illegal activity or mistreatment of animals, and promote the local breeding and ethical care of birds. (Once, however, when I asked where a particular bird in Amsterdam had come from, his owner replied, with a wink, "He flew here"; and in Suriname, when I mentioned a failed smuggling attempt in a conversation about transporting birds to the Netherlands, my interlocutor said, "They should have used my guy!")

³⁶ In Suriname, I observed one female participant who won a prize for a bird she brought to compete. (Her husband won an award for a different bird in the same competition cycle.) In the Netherlands, I have not seen nor heard about any female participants.

subjectivity, and unpredictableness of birds construct a relationship that is much more complex than merely the human (male) objectification and domination of nature.

In what follows, I locate the songbird competition within a broader history where notions both of Caribbean "nature" (such as birds) and sound (such as birdsong) were operative in sorting out modern hierarchies of the human and the nonhuman in Latin America and the Caribbean (Ochoa 2014). The bodies and sounds of birds have long been instrumental in processes of categorizing and understanding human life, in the colonial Caribbean and in modern Western science (Sobrevilla 2016, Mundy 2018). Today, in Suriname and the Netherlands, bird companionship helps men negotiate economic and other forms of precarity, the various demands of contemporary life, and the everyday challenges that face postcolonial "Others" living in Europe. In the analysis that follows, I explore discourses of sound, culture, and nature that arise in conversations about topics such as bird training, freedom, and life in Suriname and the Netherlands, and that are entangled with the male and masculine environment of bird raising, training, and competing. The Surinamese songbird competition is a social space for male Surinamese becoming, both avian and human, and, as I argue and explore below, through this interspecies, intersubjective becoming, particular images and discourses of Surinamese and Dutch nature and society emerge. At the songbird competitions, notions of the natural and the cultural are implicitly sorted out and reassembled into ideas and discourses of bird nature and human nature, such as in concepts of masculinity, freedom, and the wild that I scrutinize below.

In this chapter, I describe a number of histories and scenes of human-bird relations that build the multiple modes of entanglement entailed by the songbird competition and its constitutive interspecies practices of hearing, understanding, and acquiring birdsong. The songbird competition constitutes a form of interspecies companionship (Haraway 2003, 2008)

and creates a human-avian male social space that includes love, caretaking, and conviviality as well as strategy and contest. At the end of the chapter, I also include a scene where human femininity is negotiated and performed in another bird-related practice. This contrasting practice and my analysis of it highlight the ambiguities of interspecies relation and representation, suggesting ways of reframing intertwined conceptual dichotomies such as subject and object, male and female, human and nonhuman, and culture and nature.

Like the instruments of the Javanese-Surinamese gamelan, Surinamese birds who travel with human men within Suriname and to the Netherlands also encompass complex discourses and ambiguous histories embedded in their materialities (bodies) and timbres (songs). But there are also ways in which birds are not like musical instruments. Perhaps most significantly, while the gamelan instruments in Suriname are part of a "living" tradition that is also surrounded by anxious discourses expressing fear of its ailing or dying—and while individual instruments are sometimes left to decay and disappear—birds are *literally* alive, and die literal deaths (including as a byproduct of processes of trapping, smuggling, breeding, and other aspects of Surinamese songbird practice). While birds are paradigmatic objects of nature, they are also individual, living subjects with sonic lives imprinted by their experiences. This ambiguous status lends itself to the rethinking of the interrelated dichotomies of culture/nature, subject/object, and male/female more broadly.

3.1 The Songbird Competition in Suriname

In Paramaribo, the songbird competition takes place almost every Sunday morning, year round, on Independence Square, a grassy rectangle in front of the presidential palace in the center of town. Early in the morning, before the city at large begins to stir, cars and motorbikes line this central square, bringing men and birds. Each birdcage—a small, uniform rectangle,

handmade from wood—has its own wooden stake, which is hammered firmly into the soil; the cage, which has a built-in hook on top, is then hung on the stake, a few feet off the ground. Each stake is positioned a meter or two from its neighbors, giving each bird its own small domain. As men and birds arrive, a network of birdcages spreads across the landscape, and the chorus of intermittent birdsong builds into a polyphony of chirps and trills.

The official tournament occurs three times per year, in February, July, and October. The rounds of the tournament are spread over a few weekends, the brackets leading to the eventual declaration of a national champion, with elaborate bird-themed trophies handed out in multiple categories (such as best of species or most total points scored). Participants are on teams based on geographical location; teams come from nearby towns like Dijkveld and sometimes as far away as Nickerie. Following a schema of pre-determined brackets, pairs of birds of the same species sing against each other. Each bout eliminates one competitor and advances the other to the next round, which takes place the following week. In this knockout system, if a bird cracks under the pressure and falls silent at the crucial moment, he is out of the competition for the season, until the next tournament cycle.

The first bout begins promptly at seven a.m. Everyone gathers at a distance of at least four meters from the two competing birds, giving them space to focus on each other rather than the distractions of the gathered crowd. The owners of the birds hang their covered cages on stakes fifty centimeters apart and wait for the signal. When the timekeeper blows the whistle, the covers are removed and the singing begins. The birds' songs—called "*slagen*," or "hits"—are tallied by trained scorekeepers, one per bird, on small chalkboards on either side of the competing pair. For each song sung, a tally mark is struck with chalk for the whole audience to

see. After fifteen minutes, time is called, and the tallies are counted. The winner is announced, and the human owners of the competing birds shake hands.



Figure 31: A competition round in Paramaribo.

In between the cycles of the official, organized tournament, "training" takes place. On training Sundays, men and birds still gather, but no formal bouts occur; rather, the birds sing freely, spread over the square, while the men observe and socialize nearby. Every so often someone picks up the cage of one of their birds and, with the permission of its owner, approaches another bird's cage. He holds up his bird so the two cages are next to each other. Both owners are curious to see what happens: will one or both of the birds fall silent, intimidated, or will they sing aggressively, recognizing a competitor for mates and territory? If the former happens, the birds are not quite ready for competition, or perhaps lack a suitably aggressive personality and will never become competitive birds. If the birds do sing, they are potential competitors, ready to participate in the next tournament.

On tournament and training days alike, as the morning passes and the formal or informal bouts of the day have taken place, the attention turns from birds to human camaraderie. Men relax over Surinamese home cooking (on tournament days, a Javanese *warung* on wheels provides spicy, fragrant fried rice and noodles made to order) and shared liter bottles of the local lager, Parbo, poured into plastic cups. They catch up on bird news and human gossip, sharing jokes and laughs about everything from current political events to relationships and life philosophies, code switching frequently between Dutch and Sranan (Surinamese Creole), a second national *lingua franca* that is often found to be more conducive to casual, irreverent joking. On tournament days, winners are celebrated and losers gently teased. Some of these men have been pinning their hopes on a particularly promising bird for months, only to have the bird's debut fall short of his demonstrated potential. Sometimes a happy bird owner, pleased with a performance, brings out a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black Label, filling everyone's plastic cups with a more bracing round of scotch whiskey; those who have been disappointed by the day's results can drown their sorrows. Meanwhile, the surrounding city starts to wake up and tourists from the nearby strip of hotels pass by on their way to the waterfront, some stopping to take a gander at the happenings.

For most of the period I spent in Suriname in 2017 to 2018, the competition was temporarily relocated to the Cultuurtuin (Culture Garden), a more set-aside space near the zoo in North Paramaribo.³⁷ In the Cultuurtuin, where some locals go jogging in pairs or groups on weekend mornings, tourists only arrived at the songbird competition if they sought it out, traveling by taxi from Paramaribo's hotel strip. While the Cultuurtuin setting was less conducive

³⁷ This was officially due to grass replanting on the fenced-off Independence Square, though as the replanting dragged on and the square remained fenced, some speculated that it was actually closed in response to a large but peaceful demonstration against government corruption and increasing widespread poverty, which had taken place there in May 2017.

to being happened upon by non-participants, it provided a setting more conducive to leisurely socialization, with the participants sitting on a small set of bleachers, shielded from the sun, next to the large soccer field where the birdcages were hung on their stands. Especially after a tournament, the beer- and whiskey-drinking and camaraderie, accompanied by Javanese food from the portable *warung* or the occasional *roti* and *bara* (popular Hindustani fast foods) supplied by the competition organizers, would stretch out into the afternoon. On one such afternoon, as everyone sprawled across the bleachers finishing (and refilling) plastic cups of Black Label, one participant commented, "We're all going to leave here horizontal." For Surinamese men, these Sunday mornings provide a convivial space to take a break from life and relax with fellow bird-lovers, against the sonic backdrop of birds engaging and interacting in their own shared social space.



Figure 32: Birds and bleachers at the Cultuurtuin, Paramaribo.

3.2 Interspecies Male Companionship

"They say a bird is more important than a woman," a birdman tells my male friend and me at a Sunday morning training session.

"And do you experience it like that?" my friend asks. "Is it more complicated to be with a person than a bird?"

"A bird can't say anything back to you," he responds, after a thoughtful pause. "But a woman, she'll slap you, right?"

Birding, at large, is historically a male world.³⁸ Male perspectives and historical categories of gender and sexuality have shaped our human understandings of birds, in the popular imagination as well as in ornithology and other sciences (Mundy 2018). We have long understood male birds to be the producers of song as well as its perceiving listeners; only recently has bird science emphasized that female birds may have roles as listening (and, sometimes, sounding) agentive subjects as well (Prum 2017, Riebel et al. 2019, Holveck & Riebel 2014).

The masculine nature of the Surinamese caged-bird world is shaped in part through highly obvious sexual metaphors about bird behavior (Chiang 2008, Van der Grefte 2008). The competitive singing is framed in terms of sexual performance: the birds sing to compete with other males over territory and mates, and before a competition they are strategically aroused into

³⁸ This truism is perhaps best supported with evidence from the experiences of those who participate in this world from non-male or non-gender normative perspectives. For example, in her hawk-training memoir, the English author Helen Macdonald discusses the maleness of British falconry, and writes that by immersing herself in nineteenth-century falconry books, she entered "a world where English peregrines always outflew foreign hawks, whose landscapes were grouse moors and manor houses, where women didn't exist" (2014: 12). Recently, clubs in the U.S. such as the Feminist Bird Club, Queer Birders of North America, the Gay Birder's Club, and the Audubon Society's "Let's Go Birding Together (LGBT)!" series of queer-friendly bird walks all strive to combat the pervasive normative maleness of the prototypical birder and of the birding world.

fighting mode by brief exposure to a female bird, a process the trainers call "pricking." A powerful explosion of song after pre-competition arousal is likened to ejaculation, and a good performance is equated with sexual prowess of the bird and sometimes of its owner as well—altogether not dissimilar from the symbolic masculinity that Clifford Geertz found at the Balinese cockfight (Geertz 1973).

The songbird competition is a social space for human men, and a social space for birds, but it also brings together pairs of male-bird companions, many in deep interpersonal relationships built over years of everyday interaction and care. The training of birds occurs through a close relationship between males, human and avian, a years-long commitment during which bird owners are getting to know their birds through daily time spent together. The owner assesses the bird's personality and specifically whether it will be a good contender for competitions based on its proclivities, expressions, and desires. (A bird that sings a lot is not necessarily a good competitor; rather, birds who save their singing for competitive situations perform better than "aimless singers" who sing all day for no reason, and then clam up when another bird is present.) Around the second year of a bird's life, it accompanies its human companion everywhere, in order to be exposed to the outdoors, to the urban bustle, to animals and situations that would potentially cause stage fright. "*A fowru wani waka*," goes a saying in Sranan: "The bird wants to walk," meaning birds who accompany their male owners everywhere eventually perform better in competition (Chiang 2008: 24). Thus it is not uncommon to see birds in small rectangular cages accompanying men at work, on the sidelines of soccer games, traveling on motorbikes and boats, or just hanging out on the street, observing the urban bustle.

Other social rituals are observed. Men greet their birds each morning, by name if they have one (birds often earn their names through good performances, or by letting their individual

character be known through the training process), a mode of intersubjective, everyday "constant becoming" for both parties (see Haraway 2008: 26 on interspecies greetings). During training, new birds are introduced to each other with both owners' permission, to see how each will react to a stranger. Birds who are familiar with each other—for example, those raised by the same trainer—usually have no competitive reaction to one another. There are also interspecies communicative taboos. I have heard multiple times that birds are anxious and afraid in the presence of strangers, of women (even upon hearing the sound of a woman's voice), and of people with white skin. Thus Dutch tourists and other observers (including white American female ethnomusicologists) are sometimes warned to keep a certain distance from the birds, making the space immediately surrounding a bird's cage an intimate sphere for known and familiar-looking people. (In other cases, paradoxically, bird owners sometimes thrust cages into visitors' hands for a photo.)

Through daily time spent together, a bird becomes a friend and a member of the family, earning a name by performing well and letting his particular characteristics be known; the human man gains perspective into a bird point of view on the world, attempting to understand what will help the bird become a better singer and a better competitor. A champion bird is produced by an interspecies relationship that combines human and avian skills, desires, experiences, aesthetics, socialities, and perspectives. The result is a close interpersonal relationship between males. There are jokes and anecdotes about how birds are better friends than wives—for example, that given the chance to fly away, the bird, but not necessarily the wife, will always fly back home. There are also humorous stories told of birds ruining romantic and familial relationships by occupying all of a man's attention, time, and money; an extreme, but fictional, example of this occurs in the Surinamese author Don Walther Donner's tongue-in-cheek short story "De

Zangvogel" ("The Songbird"), in which a Caribbean migrant in Rotterdam murders his girlfriend in a rage after she sells his champion bird to buy food for their family. There are plenty of wives in Suriname and the Netherlands who vicariously come to cohabit with songbirds, to clean up after them, and to help with the caretaking. But discursively, ideologically, and socially, the world of the Surinamese songbird competition is consistently constructed as a world where women do not exist.

At the Balinese cockfight, Geertz found roosters to be, among other things, "surrogates for their owners' personalities" (and even, citing Bateson and Mead, "detachable, self-operating penises, ambulant genitals with a life of their own") playing out "a dramatization of status concerns" that reflects the role of prestige in Balinese society (1973: 436, 417). At the Surinamese songbird competition, the relations between men and their birds are ambiguous and multiple. There is certainly a joy in winning, and prestige in being awarded a bird-adorned trophy for one's efforts. But the sport also entails a much deeper sort of collaboration and companionship between individual men and their birds. While birds may, at some moments, temporarily take on the role of stand-in for human masculinity, they are also, perhaps primarily, individuals in loving, personal, everyday companionships with their men.



Figure 33: Trophies, Paramaribo.

3.3 History of the Songbird Competition

Songbird sport is not unique to Suriname. There are long traditions of songbird competitions in, for example, Turkey (with goldfinches and greenfinches), Belgium (chaffinches), the United States (canaries), Thailand (red-whiskered bulbuls), Singapore (zebra doves) and Indonesia (zebra doves, thrushes, and other species; there, alongside the cockfight, pigeons are also raced for speed). In neighboring Brazil, men also train and race chestnut-bellied seed finches, the birds known as pikolets in Suriname, which are called *curiós* in Brazil. Each of these forms of competition has its own history through which has evolved practices of training, competing, and judging, and standards for what types of birds, and what types of humans, are involved.

No one knows exactly how or where the Surinamese songbird competition originated. In his 2008 book, Surinamese bird breeder and trainer Fred Chiang suggests that keeping twatwas began in the city of Nickerie—Suriname's second city, located far to the west of the coastal strip,

where twatwas were once plentiful—and was popular as far back as the 1950s. Other evidence suggests that the practice of trapping and keeping songbirds was popular much earlier; ornithologists wrote as early as 1908 that the birds were treasured for their song, and, if caught, could be sold for a lot of money (Penard & Penard 1908, 1926; Haverschmidt 1968). The French-Surinamese Penard brothers poetically describe the various methods for trapping different types of Surinamese birds (using, for example, trap-cages, decoys, snares, birdlime, or straightforward nest robbing), including twatwas, in an article from 1926.³⁹ Additionally, I have seen archival home video from 1938 that briefly depicts a wealthy family's home aviary with twatwas.

According to Chiang, songbird owners began to come together informally at the market, pier, or cricket field to compare their birds, from which the formal singing competition emerged. "Twatwa rage" hit Paramaribo in the 1960s, with some men buying birds from Nickerie, others heading to the districts to trap their own themselves, and informal competitions sprouting up around the city, including on the central Independence Square. After airstrips were established in the vast interior district of Sipaliwini in the 1960s, birds caught in the jungle—even as far away as Poso Trio, Brazil—could be transported to Paramaribo via small planes. In the 1970s, the Zangvogelvereniging (Songbird Association) formed in Paramaribo to unite and organize birding activities in the city, formalizing the rules for an organized competition, which has been taking

³⁹ Thomas and Arthur Penard write, "The Twatwa is by far the best songster... [It] seems to be at its best when the wind blows and the leaves rustle. The bird must be quite tame before it will sing good [*sic*] in captivity. [...] Twatwas frequent fields, weedy pastures, and clearings, especially near the edges where they can take to the thickets. They are very shy and keep away from habitations. For that reason they are rare in the suburbs of Paramaribo, but at Liforno, in the Beneden Para district, they are common. In the Little Dry Season they appear to be more distributed than at other times" (1926: 559). The method that the Penards recommend for catching twatwas is a trap-cage, set early in the morning, baited with canary seed or native grass.

place ever since. (Nickerie still has its own local form of the competition, but has never formally organized an association to administrate it, and some Nickerians come to Paramaribo to compete.)

With mass migrations of Surinamers to the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s came, also, Surinamese birds. Formal songbird competitions with twatwas, pikolets, rowtis, and gelebeks have taken place in the Netherlands since the 1990s, though informal bird raising and competing may have occurred earlier. Competitions take place in cities with large Surinamese migrant populations: Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and The Hague. The chairman of the Amsterdam Songbird Association, Suniel Cheddie, estimates that there are 600 active members of songbird associations in Dutch cities, who have, on average, six birds each, and around 2,000 Surinamese birds owned by non-members. This puts the total population of Surinamese birds in the Netherlands, by this estimate, at around 5,600. The human members of the Songbird Associations are almost exclusively of Surinamese origin as well (*NoSpang* 2011).

In both Suriname and the Netherlands, there are people who keep birds without participating in competitions. In Dutch cities during the summer, groups of Surinamese men sit to enjoy the warm weather outside, often bringing one or two birds in rectangular cages; sometimes these are other types of songbirds imported from southern Europe or elsewhere, not eligible for competition. In Suriname, some people enjoy trapping small songbirds of any type, and many keep songbirds, parrots, and other kinds of birds in the home or garden for the pleasure of their song. (For several months during my stay in Suriname, I was awoken early each morning by the loud cries of a neighbor's caged parrots, prominently displayed outside their home as a visual and aural sign of socioeconomic status that permeated the neighborhood's soundspace.) In this sense, keeping birds in general is a common Surinamese practice, and a sign of

Surinameseness in the Netherlands. Raising particular birds for competition demands a greater investment of time and, especially, money. In the Netherlands, twatwas, pikolets, and rowtis can sell for 500 to 750 euros each, and birds who have proven their success as competitive singers can go for thousands.

The songbird competition has, over time, been adapted into some of the dominant discourses that organize Surinamese society. This includes two prevalent, sometimes conflicting discourses—namely those of a unifying nationalism and of "plural" ethnic difference. In 1990, the songbird competition was the subject of a short documentary produced and broadcast by the government-owned television channel STVS. *Pikin Fowru: Zangvogels in Suriname (Small Birds: Songbirds in Suriname)* shows footage of men gathering with their birds on Independence Square to practice this "beloved, typically Surinamese sport" (Breeveld 1990). The video zooms in on the faces of various bird owners, showing participants who visually represent Suriname's various *bevolkingsgroepen* (ethnic groups) with the voiceover explaining that the birders come from "all levels of society," thus conflating ethnicity and class without explicitly naming either one. The message of this short government-sponsored documentary—that the songbird sport unites all types of (male) Surinamers in an inclusive national practice—is in line with the politics of the time. In 1990, Suriname was struggling to regain unity after a military coup (1980-88), political assassinations (the December Murders of 1982), and an ongoing civil war (1986-1992). A message of unity was an uplifting and necessary myth for the young nation struggling to move forward.

However, despite the discourse of the Surinamese songbird sport as a nation-unifying, egalitarian pastime and as the rare activity that unites Surinamers of all types, there are ways in which the sport has also adapted to discourses of ethnic difference that shape basically all

domains of life in Suriname. The different types of birds involved in the competitions, which have accrued different economic and social value, are associated with different groups of Surinamers based on ethnicity and the (often stereotypical) respective socioeconomic status of each ethnic group. The majority of participants—especially in the Netherlands—are Hindustani Surinamers, an ethnic group associated with economic success in business and entrepreneurship, who have the capital to invest in twatwas, the most expensive birds.⁴⁰ Chinese Surinamers, similarly associated with success in business, might also have twatwas. Pikolets, a somewhat less expensive and less valued type of bird, are associated with Javanese participants.⁴¹ Rowtis and other types of less expensive birds are more associated with Afro-Surinamers. Of course, these alignments between types of birds and human ethnic groups are constantly negated in actual practice; birders who specialize in a particular type often say they are drawn to that type of bird's particular sound, and this often crosses the particular ethnic alignments outlined above. But these stereotypical associations demonstrate the entanglements of ethnicity, class, and social status, and the ways in which these human categories permeate even a domain of Surinamese life that is purported to be equalizing and unifying.

Thus, taxonomies based on human histories of difference come to organize the domain of birds through notions of the nation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic class. In the next section, in contrast, I visit other taxonomies—modes of understanding song and sound that entangle, necessarily, human and avian forms of voicing, listening, and sonically interpreting difference.

⁴⁰ Perhaps for this reason, the songbird competition as a whole is sometimes seen as an ethnically Hindustani pastime; for example, a special songbird competition was held as a component of cultural activities to celebrate the 135th anniversary of Hindustani migration to Suriname in 2008, marking the practice as, despite its portrayal as "typically Surinamese," also falling under the specific domain of Hindustani culture.

⁴¹ It is also seen as "very Javanese" to have lots of non-competition songbirds of any type, especially hung in cages in a colorful, flowering garden; this is common to see in established Javanese neighborhoods like Blauwgrond or in Commewijne District.

3.4 Taxonomies of Birdsong

The label of the "Wild Coast"—the Atlantic coastal region of northeastern South America between the Orinoco and Amazon River deltas, including the three Guianas as well as parts of Venezuela and Brazil—dates back to at least the late sixteenth century. Early European explorers inscribed their perceptions of a profoundly different landscape of sparse occupants, thick jungle, and tropical diseases, appearing undominatable and brutally uncivilized. Maps and descriptions from early explorations of the region reflect European perceptions of its wildness, through actual experience and observation and through legends and imaginings. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, English, Irish, Dutch, French, Portuguese, and Spanish powers attempted to establish footholds in the region and claims to its abundant natural resources, which promised wealth but simultaneously made it difficult to dominate or "tame" (Raffles 2002: 76, 101). Sir Walter Raleigh's 1596 *The Discoverie of the Large, Rich, and Bewtiful Empire of Guiana* described green coastline, interior indigenous settlements, and an abundance of "unsettling yet alluring" nature (Raffles 2002: 77). A French map from 1654 labeled "Guiana, or the Wild Coast" (Figure 34) shows, beyond carefully drawn and labeled coastal river deltas, the mythical El Dorado located at the edge of (also mythical) Lake Parime (Harcourt [1613] 1926; Raffles 2002: 75). Maps and travelogues from the time also depict figures between the human and nonhuman that convey the sensorily overwhelming potentials of Amazonian nature, such as the "ewaipanoma," the no-headed man whose face is instead located on his upper chest, alongside the figure of the indigenous cannibal, two characters who seemed equally possible in the sixteenth-century European imagination (Raffles 2002: 100).

modest, melodious songbirds (Warren 1667; Sloane 1707-25; Buffon 1770; Stedman [1790] 1988). Iris Montero Sobrevilla recounts a related eighteenth-century debate about the alleged "torpor" (prolonged state of hibernation) of hummingbirds—a type of bird found all over (but only in) the Americas—which European scientists used as evidence of the "lethargic animals and sluggish civilization" (Gerbi 1972) that they claimed characterized the New World (Sobrevilla 2016). (In response, *criollo* scholars pointed out that not only do European animals hibernate as well, but also that hummingbird torpor actually did not exist in the first place and was rather a handed-down myth based on the mistaken observations of sixteenth-century explorers.) In short, perceptions and evaluations of the sounds, bodies, and behaviors of birds and other animals were used by colonial scientists to make claims about the respective humanity of various groups of humans in the Americas and in the world.

In recent years, there have been a number of scientific studies that explicitly ask whether birdsong qualifies as music.⁴² Alongside various modes of analysis and speculation about the form and function of birdsong, these debates raise implicit questions about how to pinpoint and objectify the fuzzy boundary between music and sound—in other words, between human culture and animal nature. Understood in the context of this historical "zoopolitics of the voice" that played out in the Caribbean and Latin America, asking whether birds have music raises longstanding, unresolved, and politically and ideologically charged questions about what constitutes "music" and who has historically been understood to "have" it. This history has involved contested and racialized distinctions among cultivated, learned, "natural," and mimetic

⁴² See, for example, Hollis Taylor, *Is Birdsong Music? Outback Encounters with an Australian Songbird* (2007); Marcelo Araya-Salas, "Is Birdsong Music? Evaluating Harmonic Intervals in the Songs of a Neotropical Songbird" (2012); Patricia Gray, Bernie Krause, et al., "The Music of Nature and the Nature of Music" (2001) and Donald Kroodsma's response (Kroodsma 2005); and Henkjan Honing, *The Evolving Animal Orchestra: In Search of What Makes Us Musical* (2019).

vocalizations; definitions of clear and measurable pitch; and notions of language, communication, and "proper" elocution (Ochoa 2014).

These themes are entangled in the question of how humans hear, make sense of, and represent the utterances of birds.⁴³ In 1926, Thomas and Arthur Penard described the vocalizations of the twatwa: "Its song varies, but may be expressed roughly as *cheep cheep cheepee cheeah cheeah chopee cheeah cheeah*. [...] Its call note is *chee*, or *tshok*, or a sound like a kiss. From the call it passes to the song with a sharp note or a short *tee tee chewee*" (Penard & Penard 1926: 559). In Fred Chiang's bird-raising manual, he similarly transcribes the call (a single, sharp species-specific sonic signifier) of the different types of birds thusly: a twatwa calls "*wiet wiet*," a pikolet calls "*plieuw*," a rowti "*tjiep*," and a gelebek "*tjekek*" (2008: 24-26). In these cases, the conventions of human language makes bird sounds audible, and thus able to be categorized into taxonomies of sound and song.

At the songbird competition, a call does not earn any points; the rules state that a bird must produce a song, which is constituted by a combination of tones followed by a short pause. In contrast to many local traditions of songbird sport around the world, the Surinamese competition does not take into account the beauty of a bird's song; the winner is simply the bird who sings the most times in the allotted period. Surinamese participants pride themselves in their

⁴³ Early works on birdsong, such as Charles Witchell's *The Evolution of Bird-Song* (1896) and F. Schuyler Mathews's *Field Book of Wild Birds and their Music* (1904), used Western musical notation to isolate, objectify, and inscribe the songs of birds in order to analyze and compare different types of songs from different birds in different places. Methodologies of transcription were subsequently debated in the *The Auk* journal of the American Ornithological Society: were phonetic syllables, musical notation, or other forms of graphic notation most appropriate for objectively documenting and scientifically studying the sounds of birds? (see articles by Saunders 1915; Allen 1923; and Brand 1932, 1935). These discussions intensified around the development of new sound recording technologies in the twentieth century, which in some cases, like the spectrograph, did not require a human listener to interpret and transcribe (Bruyninckx 2018, 2011; Mundy 2018; Marler 2004).

unique ability to achieve an explosive and plentiful output, developing techniques and strategies to get their birds to rapidly produce many short songs in the crucial moment of competition.

This is where the idea of a learned or "cultivated" (*gecultiveerde*) song comes into play. In addition to the distinct calls transcribed above, each species has a prototypical "bush song" or song they sing in the wild. In competition, the birds can use either cultivated or bush songs. While bush songs are often found to be beautiful (and can even identify a bird as coming from a particular region of the country; for example, a "sipa song" identifies a twatwa from Sipaliwini District), cultivated songs are strategic for the competition. Trainers aim to teach their birds short, clear songs, with a little introductory flourish that distinctly marks a new iteration (and thus scores a point).

For the twatwas, pikolets, rowtis, and gelebeks who are bred and raised to participate in the competition, the acquisition of a cultivated song begins at a young age. As early as four months, before the gender of the bird is clear, it is taken out of the breeding cage, and once in its own cage begins to let its voice be heard. To learn a particular song, the young bird is at this point exposed exclusively to an adult male selected as a teacher, or to a recording of an appropriate learned song for its species. After a month, if it has not taken up the song, it is likely either a female or a less readily teachable male; if the latter, more attempts can be made. By the end of the first year most birds will have taken on the song of their teacher, and by two years old its song is stable, so it no longer has to be protected from exposure to "bad" singers. The most important factor in teaching a bird to sing, though, is the bird's proclivities and personality: the bird must have a predisposition to sing a particular song, and some birds will stubbornly continue to sing their own song, no matter how long they are taught, even by a good bird teacher with other successful students. This is emphasized in Chiang's bird-raising manual and came up in

countless conversations I had with birders in Suriname and the Netherlands: ultimately, the biggest factor in a bird's performance is its own personality, whims, and desires.

The cultivated song of the twatwa is perhaps the most discussed and theorized element of Surinamese bird training. The practice has developed over the years, and involves various classifications of songs and strategies. A type of song known as the "ring song" capitalizes on the element of the twatwa's natural song that "rolls" or trills; in a cultivated ring song, twatwas are taught to sing a short series of repeating rolling tones. More recently, over the last couple decades, the "kiaauw song" developed. "Kiaauw" onomatopoeically describes a single, distinct tone that starts high in pitch and then descends. The kiaauw song is comprised of two to three iterations of this distinct, descending note—"kiaauw, kiaauw"—usually followed by a few trills. This characteristic onomatopoeic introduction makes the kiaauw song easy to recognize and to score, and multiple iterations can be produced in quick succession. The kiaauw song, which comes out a little differently depending on the trainer and the bird, is also thought to be quite aesthetically pleasing. The "kiaauw" sound is not produced by twatwas in the wild; I once heard that this idea came about by teaching twatwas to imitate the song of another species of bird (though this is not documented and the exact origins remain murky).

Teaching songs to twatwas is a much-discussed art. Videos of nicely singing twatwas circulate widely via WhatsApp, Facebook, and Youtube. Browsing this genre on Youtube, it is quickly apparent that the results can vary widely, and are sometimes contested; commenters, sometimes quite heatedly, question whether the poster of a video really knows what a "kiaauw song" should sound like, sometimes claiming that a bird's song may *sound like* a kiaauw, but is actually a sipa song or something else. The bush songs of the other types of finches are generally thought to be less beautiful than that of the twatwa, though again, it depends on the listener, and

some men are drawn to a particular type of bird because they find its song to be especially striking. The pikolet's natural song is comprised of whistling tones that Chiang transcribes, "*fliu fliu fliu*," and its cultivated song goes "*pijee pijee pijee*." Pikolets from Coronie District are valued because they are thought to be more naturally adept at learning this song. The rowti sings a bright "*wieeet wieeet wieeet*." The gelebek produces a sharp, penetrating "*sjie sjie sjio sjie*," which, depending on the individual bird, can be sung fast, or can come out a slow "*swaai swaai swaai*." The slow version of the gelebek's song is considered beautiful and has drawn some into specializing in this generally less popular species (Chiang 2008: 24-26).

While there are distinctions drawn between "cultivated" and "bush" song, these realms are not as strictly divided or opposed as they may first appear. Both are considered aesthetically pleasing and desirable for different purposes and according to different human tastes (and different bird tastes, as a bird might have a proclivity to draw more from one or the other in its individual song). Ultimately, a bird raised in captivity is influenced by the birdsong he hears in infancy, and typically retains some elements of its bush song as well. The product of training each individual bird is an individual song, understood to be influenced by all sorts of external stimuli and internal proclivities. These tiny, individual degrees of variation are something that systematic, taxonomic ways of listening (to birdsong, and to other forms of sonic difference) fail to account for.

3.5 The Songbird Competition in Amsterdam

In the Netherlands, outdoor training sessions are limited to summer weekends between May and September, on those Sundays when it is warm and dry enough for the birds to be outside. Each summer, one tournament cycle narrows down the competing birds to an annual national champion over the course of several weeks in July and August. The local Songbird

Associations of Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and The Hague each organize their own activities, with over fifty members each in Amsterdam and Rotterdam (the community in The Hague is a bit smaller); towards the end of the summer the local tournaments take turns hosting each other, pitting champion birds from each city against each other to declare a national champion.

While smuggling occurs, rumor has it that Dutch-bred birds sing more bountifully and score more points than Surinamese ones anyway, though no one knows exactly why. It could be because they get to rest all winter and are only put to the test for three to four months of the year, some speculate. I have also heard the theory that Dutch birds do not know the dangers of life in the wild in Suriname, such as snakes and birds of prey, so they sing bountifully with a naïve innocence, impervious to the predators that their sounds could, in theory, draw out from jungle surroundings. (However, I have seen a whole field of Dutch-bred twatwas and pikolets fall simultaneously silent as a European bird of prey passed overhead, so it seems that certain "wild" instincts do still exist.)

In Suriname, the songbird competition takes place in the central square of Paramaribo, where passersby, both residents and tourists, can stop to take a look; the Association has recently been promoting the activity to tourists through flyers distributed at nearby hotels and travel agencies. (Even President Bouterse is said to be a fan, though his public appearances are limited these days.) In Amsterdam, on the other hand, the Sunday morning gatherings take place near the Bijlmermeer (or Bijlmer), a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city that was built in the 1960s, intended to be a Le Corbusian "city of the future" that ended up an isolated high-rise ghetto for Surinamese and other migrants who moved into the unsold apartments starting in the 1970s. The participants congregate in an overgrown parking lot they rent annually from the municipality, coming from all over the Amsterdam area, including the immediate urban surroundings that

house many working-class migrants, as well as from wealthy suburbs of Amsterdam such as Almere. The competitions in Rotterdam and The Hague likewise take place in grassy fields on the outskirts of those cities.



Figure 35: A training bout in the Bijlmer, Amsterdam.

While the songbird competition in "ethnically plural" Suriname has been framed as a cross-ethnic, nationally unifying sport as I discuss above, the paradigm of "multiculturalism" that is currently widely used to explain and understand human difference in the postcolonial contemporary Netherlands frames the Surinamese songbird sport as a migrant "cultural" practice, a manifestation of a minority Surinamese identity in a white Dutch world, and a curiosity for outsiders.⁴⁴ To its practitioners, it is not a "cultural" activity performed for an audience, but a hobby, an everyday domestic activity and an excuse to relax with friends on a warm summer morning. When a few joggers enter the field from a nearby running path, they are viewed with

⁴⁴ For critiques of Dutch multiculturalism and the construction of ethnic minorities in the Netherlands, see Essed 1986; Essed & Hoving 2014; Wekker 2016; Weiner & Báez 2018.

suspicion, briefly disrupting the happenings until it is clear that they will maintain their distance. This gathering is not a display for others.

Like in Paramaribo, homemade Surinamese food is sold; here, it is typical Surinamese sandwiches filled with curried chicken or a salty and spicy dried fish called *bakkeljauw*, topped with homemade pickles and *sambel* (hot sauce). One of the participants sells these out of a cooler in his car; on busier tournament days, the food is prepared and sold by a couple from a local Surinamese eatery. Another participant supplies eye-wateringly spicy homemade ginger beer. The birds eat special grasses and seeds imported from Suriname if they have performed well. On this side of the field are the twatwas, on that side the pikolets, in between are the human participants, and all around are the sounds of the chattering of birds and men, the latter in a mix of Dutch and Surinamese Creole. On an unusually warm summer day, this out-of-the-way field in the Bijlmer feels like a little outpost of Suriname in the Netherlands (though a version of Suriname where no women are present).

Sometimes, in the masculine social space of the songbird competition in Amsterdam, conversation turns to life in the Netherlands and memories of Suriname. These conversations reveal a kind of nostalgia invested in a particular concept of freedom, a word that often recurs in casual reminiscing about Suriname. Compared to Suriname, everyone says, in the Netherlands "*alles is geregeld*" ("everything is arranged/regulated"): you get fined for fishing without a permit, for urinating in public, for littering—"Well, I suppose you could better put your trash in a garbage can," one man tells me, but still, in Suriname there are no hundred-euro fines should you fail to do so. In Suriname there is less time spent working regular hours at an office, social engagements are spontaneous rather than scheduled, and if city life becomes too stressful, there is always the option of escaping for a fishing trip into the rural districts or the jungle. This sort of

freedom is what male migrants in the Netherlands miss, and are reminded of at the songbird competitions. In the out-of-the-way park in the Bijlmer, drinking beer and whiskey among Surinamese friends and the chorus of the birds, a man feels a certain freedom that contrasts with the general image of thoroughly regulated life in the Netherlands.

There is a contrasting discourse among women in Suriname, I have noticed. Women tend to talk more about the effects of the recent economic crisis such as increasing poverty and crime, reminiscing less about freedom than about when they used to feel safe driving in Suriname alone at night. The lack of regulations and enforcement in Suriname, tied to government corruption, overspending, and failure to plan ahead for drops in the global market for bauxite, oil, and gold, when filtered through the lens of female experience, do not seem to result in the same feelings of freedom that pervade casual conversation at the songbird competitions; they certainly do not produce the same discourses. Rather, for women, safety is a form of freedom, a form that is increasingly lacking as Suriname faces greater inflation and deeper economic depression.

The idea of freedom is linked to bird training in other realms—for example, in the training of American singer canaries, "freedom" refers to the desire or predisposition to sing which results in a plentifully-singing bird, the first element in judging the quality of song in canary competitions in the United States. The American singer breed of canary, first developed in the 1930s as an ideal pet for the home, has been bred over the course of decades to increase "freedom," variety, and melodiousness of song (American Singer Canary 2019; Chin 1998). And, of course, birds have the freedom that flight allows, for which they have long been symbols of the value of freedom in nation-state iconography, corporate logos, and tattoos. The wings of Surinamese songbirds, incidentally, are never clipped, so in theory the birds could return to a life in the wild.

The politics and aesthetics of "freedom" echo through the Caribbean, including sonically, for example as Paul Gilroy describes regarding Bob Marley's double afterlife as the memory of an actual person involved in radical politics around a specific political struggle and as a commodified figure for international consumption, his music received as a neutralized, universalized aesthetic of freedom that blurs the politically free with the Caribbean carefree (Gilroy 2005). In Suriname, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, freedom is a very real concern of politics, power, and daily life, entering into discourses that range from the politically radical to the nationalistic to the mundane, and affecting everyday life at levels that range from the abstractly ideological to the very practical negotiation of safety and mobility (where the ability to move freely intersects with gender, economic resources, local and national infrastructure, and other forms of social positionality). Simultaneously, freedom is a form of aesthetics, sensory affect, and organization of time and space: Bob Marley's music, the songs of birds, and other elements of Caribbean life resonate with senses of the free, the relaxed, the sublimely beautiful, the never-ending present. The perspective of a bird in the world symbolizes and encapsulates the possibility of being present, living in the moment, and enjoying the freedom of a Sunday morning with friends, an afternoon away from mundane worries stretching out ahead.

Birds are simultaneously domesticated friends and wild animals, whom human men can adopt into their homes but not fully dominate, who can be taught but who may choose not to listen, who are in some ways comparable to humans as they use vision and sound to navigate their worlds—but in other ways are not fully comprehensible by human modes of thought and perception. By training and spending time with birds, by in some ways limiting their freedom, keeping them in cages and attempting to teach them how and when to sing, the original, fundamental freedom that is attached to a human idea of birdness is highlighted. And in turn, by

drawing out human-like aspects of the birds—by spending time with them and attempting to know their personalities and name them appropriately—their male owners find something birdlike and free within themselves, even while navigating their responsibilities and modes of survival in economically depressed Suriname, or their thoroughly regulated lives in the Netherlands. They are able to see the world from a bird's perspective.

3.6 The Wild

The notion of Suriname as a "wild coast" lingers into the present, perpetuated by notions of "pure" nature (an asset both for Suriname's international tourist industry and for extraction) and corrupt politics (for which Suriname has also gained an international reputation). In the Netherlands, white Dutch people have typically only encountered the country through the developing ecotourism industry that takes primarily Dutch-speaking tourists to Maroon and indigenous settlements in the jungle, or through news articles about how its current president, Bouterse, has been convicted of drug smuggling in international courts and has yet to be tried for political assassinations that took place during the military coup he led in the 1980s. In media and in direct encounter, Suriname is portrayed as a place of lawlessness, rampant corruption, economic downward spiraling, a "failed state" according to Dutch Foreign Minister Stef Blok whose words were leaked to the press last year (Van Ast 2018; *Telegraaf* 2018); and, on the other hand, dense, pure, impenetrable jungle nature. Imaginaries of the "wild coast" also persist in popular literary representation: for example, a recent travelogue by the British travel writer John Gimlette (2011), called *Wild Coast: Travels on South America's Untamed Edge*, emphasizes the untroddenness of Gimlette's path through the three Guianas as well as the "ancient, African lives" of the Afrodescendant inhabitants of Suriname's interior. Gimlette's book is one of the only recent widely circulating English-language popular monographs on the region.

Some of the best competition birds come from this "wild," trapped close to the border with Brazil despite dwindling populations and increased governmental protections and sold privately or through pet shops in the city, some of them then illegally smuggled on commercial flights to the Netherlands. These birds use their native "bush songs" in competition, which some owners find more aesthetically pleasing. This aesthetic appeal seems to be constituted, in part, by a bird's very resistance to learning, its inseparability from its own wild nature.

On a Saturday in March 2017, during the off-season between rounds of the official songbird competition, my friend and I spent the afternoon at the home of Humphrey, a longtime bird breeder who often served as a competition timekeeper. To say that Humphrey's home was full of birds would be an understatement. Humphrey's garage held large aviaries of female and young birds that were not being groomed for competition. The male birds, each in their own uniform cage, lined the walls and ceilings of his hallways and kitchen, hung at an angle with a small plank of wood between each pair of birds to separate them, the cages crammed as closely together as possible. Another small room, behind the kitchen, contained only birds, the floor covered in sawdust and birdseed. There were hooks for birdcages (unoccupied, but there if necessary) in the bathroom. Humphrey's spacious backyard housed, in addition to more individual birdcages (and one tied-up dog), a number of large walk-in breeding aviaries, which held a few nests with eggs. Humphrey knew exactly how many days old each egg was, as well as the age of each young bird, whether it had yet emitted a peep, if it was likely male or female, and how much time it had before training would begin. Some of them already seemed to have good competitive instincts.

On the driveway in front of his open garage, surrounded by birds and birdsong, we enjoyed a leisurely afternoon sitting with Humphrey and two other prominent Paramaribo

birders, Sjaam and Ruben. Among the three of them, over the years, many bird-adorned trophies had been accumulated. Sharing Coca-Colas, Parbo beers, and whiskey and eventually picking up chicken roti from a nearby take-out spot, the afternoon was spent chitchatting and reminiscing about birds, and sometimes just listening to them. A couple of Humphrey's best birds were hung nearby, from hooks on the front of the house, to get some extra outdoor air and sunlight, and every so often one of them would emit a bold, impressive song, momentarily demanding everyone's attention.

After some prompting, Ruben told the story of Diesel, a champion bird he owned quite a few years ago, a twatwa whose name is known widely among birders in both Suriname and the Netherlands. Diesel reigned as recurring champion of the twatwas for a streak in the 1990s. He was known for using his bush song, so his sonic presence was inseparable from the fact that he was born and raised in the wild. His style of starting slow and nonchalant, and then revving up to an almost unbelievable pace of song production, like a diesel engine, earned him his name. In a legendary bout, Diesel achieved his career high, racking up 197 hits in fifteen minutes. Diesel's owner, Ruben, was offered incredible sums of Dutch guilders for the sale of Diesel, but he always turned the offers down. Diesel was a real man of a bird: caged but not tamed, he retained the roughness of the wild, refused to learn a given song, but performed ferociously, pulling out all the stops to defeat opponent after opponent with his displays of masculine prowess.

Diesel may well have had symbolic and economic value, but Diesel was also an individual, a companion, a friend, a being from Suriname's wild jungle, caged and brought into a human world, his wildness perhaps, in a sense, harnessed but never erased. Surinamese birds are trapped, smuggled, bought and sold, but, ultimately, are named, lived with, and loved. To be in an everyday caretaking, social, familial, sounding relationship with an actual bird puts a human

self in relation with the messy ways in which notions of nature, the animal, and the human are relationally formed. And actual birds, unlike symbols within established networks of conventional meaning, are unpredictable. A good performance at the songbird competition is hoped for, but never expected; the best a bird trainer can do is to set up the conditions of its possibility by understanding a bird's needs, desires, and preferences, knowing also that one can invest in the most expensive bird, but if some aspect of the collaborative training relationship fails, the bird may fall silent at the crucial moment of competition.

Because the birds in question are not mere symbols, but actual, living birds, encounters can yield ambiguous meanings. Diesel met his poetically ironic end when, still in the prime of his career, he was pecked to death by a female twatwa in a breeding attempt gone awry. The laughter with which the birders, including Diesel's owner himself, recount this tragic and expensive loss, offers evidence of the element of humility required of men who endeavor to domesticate nature, who attempt to train living birds to adhere to the will of humans—a task that can never be accomplished completely.

3.7 The Peacock Dance

The *tari merak*, or Sundanese⁴⁵ "peacock dance," is, in contrast to the Surinamese songbird sport, a thoroughly culturalized and feminized dance that performs the embodied aesthetics of Javanese femininity through the stylized movements of a peacock. According to Henry Spiller, *tari merak* is a modern invention from the 1950s in the style of the traditional courtly genre of *bedaya* dance, in which a group of exclusively female performers dance in

⁴⁵ Sundanese designates a cultural/ethnic designation of a group of people native to West Java; though they share an island with Javanese people, they speak a different language and practice a number of distinct cultural traditions, including musical. People who migrated from the Dutch East Indies to Suriname, though known as "Javanese," also included a significant number of Sundanese people from West Java, and elements of Sundanese aesthetic practices have been incorporated into Javanese-Surinamese musical and cultural traditions, such as the gamelan.

unison. It quickly became canonized as a new tradition during a post-independence period when regional forms of dance in Indonesia were being isolated from ritual and ceremonial practice and brought to the national stage of the young country (Spiller 2010: 199; Hughes-Freeland 2008). Spiller contrasts the highly disciplined bodily control performed in *tari merak* and other forms of female dance to male genres of dance in West Java such as *jaipongan*, in which bursts of unrestrained, improvisatory movement take place within the rules of the dance, embodying and staging male freedom, an essential component in the expression and negotiation of Sundanese masculinity.⁴⁶ Felicia Hughes-Freeland, describing courtly female dance traditions in Central Java, similarly writes that the only sense in which female performers are allowed to "lose themselves" is to escape individual identity and social rank in favor of tightly choreographed collective action (Hughes-Freeland 2008: 188-189). According to both Spiller and Hughes-Freeland, control is central to the aesthetic of refined female dance. Feminine ideals based on figures from Javanese history and mythology inform the Javanese female bodily aesthetic: refined, polite, quiet, sweet, and dedicated to the social roles of wife and mother. Refined court-style dance trains Javanese women to embody these ideals, both on and off the stage (Hughes-Freeland 2008; Sunardi 2015).

⁴⁶ "In the company of other men," men dance to "explore the limits of their own freedom and the boundaries of conformity" (Spiller 2010: 197). Spiller writes, "A sense of freedom for men to dance from the heart and the enjoyment of watching men express their illusory freedom within the powerful constraints of drumming form the essence of Sundanese dance. Contexts that enable this sort of dancing are always participatory, and they always involve a reference to a third party—a *ronggeng* [female dancer]—who acts as an object of desire to enable the illusion. In a nutshell, the erotic triangle of Sundanese dance is composed of men who are empowered to dance by the presence of inspiring drumming and a female object of desire" (ibid.: 207).

I saw the Sundanese peacock dance performed by a group of young Javanese women at a large, public celebration of Chinese New Year in Paramaribo in 2018.⁴⁷ After a performance by a Hindustani group—an all-female Bollywood-style dance choreographed to a recent hit from a popular Hindustani-Surinamese artist—the Javanese dancers, from the local sociocultural organization Indra Maju, took the stage. Alongside a small repertoire of other female group dances and one male solo dance performed by the Indra Maju dance teacher, the *tari merak* is performed with an accompaniment of recorded gamelan music from West Java. The three dancers perform a stylized mimesis of the courtship rituals of a strutting peacock. Dressed in shiny metallic aqua-green and gold dresses and shimmering gold jewelry, the women extend their arms holding the tips of their *karembong* (scarves) so that they spread and flow like wings, "peck" their heads from side to side, and strut daintily in their turquoise-and-gold costumes across the stage, their legs restrained by the tightly-wrapped skirts of their *kebayas*. As is typical of refined Javanese court-style dance in the feminine mode, the movements are in unison and highly controlled, from the tilt of the head to the positions of the fingertips and the direction of the gaze.

⁴⁷ This festival brought together local Chinese cultural organizations, visiting artists from China (performing, for example, solo *erhu* music, Sichuan opera, *tai chi*, and acrobatics), and an array of "Performances of Various Ethnic Groups" of Suriname, as the program stated. The latter was comprised of performances by one Afro-Surinamese sociocultural organization, one indigenous organization, one Javanese organization, and one Hindustani dance school. These groups performed in counterpoint with the Chinese and Chinese-Surinamese groups and artists, as a form of cultural ambassadorship and the promotion of a shared cultural sphere, where a cultural event necessarily becomes a multicultural event, a collective celebration of Surinamese ethnic plurality. This also constructs ethnic performance as always existing in relation to otherness; Chineseness in Suriname is given its meaning not only by the performance of what is Chinese, but also by the performance of what is other-than-Chinese—in line with my analysis of ethnic performance in Suriname in the other chapters of this dissertation.



Figure 36: *Tari merak* peacock dance, Temple Fair, Paramaribo.

The *tari merak* presented at the Temple Fair is a culturalized and feminized object: framed by a stage, bookended by the performances of other ethnic traditions, these dancers perform their ethnic identity through the stylized movements of the ideal, refined, sensual but not sexualized female Javanese body. They perform, simultaneously, a mimesis of the aesthetic beauty of the peacock as well as a mimesis of cultural tradition that evokes a sense of an "ancient" Java inherited through the lines of ethnicity. Spiller analyzes this dance and related genres of tightly choreographed and controlled group female dance as a form of "objectification" of Javanese female bodies; in *tari merak* (and other dances that represent animals, such as the *tari kupu-kupu* or butterfly dance), according to Spiller, the objectification of women is "masked... only slightly by casting them as animals" (Spiller 2010: 200).

But, I argue, Spiller's analysis—that the embodied performance of gender in West Javanese dance produces males as subjects with freedom and women as controlled objects—aligns suspiciously with other epistemological dichotomies that separate culture (as the domain of human subjectivity) and nature (as object of human control). While ethnic performance in

Suriname might be seen as a mode of objectifying both female bodies and culture/ethnic identity, I argue that the performance of Javanese peacocks by Javanese women in Suriname is also, simultaneously, a form of intersubjective interspecies relation, one that involves negotiating the dancer's individual self with the point of view of a bird. In this sense, rather than seeing *tari merak* as doubly objectifying (objectifying the peacock through representation; objectifying the female bodies through discipline and control) and male trance dances like *jaran kepeng* as the opposite (animal spirits are subjects who occupy and control the bodies of human men; dancers perform the out-of-body, explosive improvisatory freedom that male subjects are bestowed), I posit that these two forms of dance both constitute practices where different groups of humans similarly negotiate the simultaneous processes of representing animals and embodying their own human subjective viewpoints.

Tari merak might also be seen, then, as a parallel practice to men raising, owning, or even *listening* to Surinamese birds in Suriname and the Netherlands. While the peacock dance has been framed as feminine and cultural and the labor of trapping and training birds is discursively constructed as a masculine engagement with nature, both of these forms of interactions with birds are engagements that theorize the human self and, simultaneously, the boundary of the human and the nonhuman. These practices both construct a notion of what sort of beings humans are, and what sort of humans these particular selves—Javanese women in Suriname, Surinamese men in the Netherlands—are.

Further, both of these practices theorize not only the boundary between the human and the nonhuman, but also the entanglements of aesthetics, gender, ethnicity, and other forms of difference that are similarly enacted and theorized through human practice at the boundary of what is understood as culture and what is understood as nature. Avian beauty, visual and aural, is

disciplined through young women learning the movements of an inherited cultural tradition of dance and through men teaching their birds particular songs. In one case, the sweet songs of tiny birds are equated with the sexual prowess of human males; in the other, the beauty of a peacock's feathers is represented as a feminine ideal, despite the fact that, of course, the actual peacocks that are mimicked, the ones with the beautiful plumage, are males. These seeming contradictions are demonstrative of the ambiguities at the division between nature and culture and the ways that actual human engagements with animals freely permeate such epistemological boundaries. Ambiguity yields the grounds for the construction of seemingly firm epistemological categories, such as "nature" and "culture," but simultaneously provides the grounds for dismantling these categories by imagining another way of understanding the self and its relations in the world. For both the dancers of the tari merak and for men who train birds, these activities help participants shape and become their individual selves that circulate in the world beyond the stage or the competition ring.

Other objects that are not living animals—including seemingly paradigmatic objects of "culture," like the instruments of the gamelan—contain similar ambiguities. The distinct timbre of a Surinamese gamelan, like the song of a bird, contains the tensions of multiple histories, collective and individual, often ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. As materiality intertwines with discourse, things *are*, but are not always what their properties suggest. In both the Surinamese songbird sport and the Javanese-Surinamese gamelan tradition, instances arise of sounds that sound like *this*, but are actually *that*: what sounds like a "kiaauw" song is actually a "sipa" song; what sounds Javanese actually belongs to a more complex history of labor migration; what sounds "authentic" is born of recent innovation. The categories that link materiality, sound, hearing, and knowledge are not always clear cut; the sounds that participants

and knowers of tradition describe and systematize are not necessarily as strict as they are represented in words. In both cases, I am less interested in the "truth" of tradition—the strict taxonomy of bush songs versus cultivated songs or the systematic classification of differences between Surinamese plantation and Central Javanese court styles of gamelan—than in the discourses of doing and knowing that constitute meaning for participants and experts in these realms of sonic practice. As Caribbean songbirds and iron gamelan instruments travel, they pass through worlds of social meaning that accumulate, containing seeming contradictions and tensions comfortably or uncomfortably, some of which fall away over time and some which never resolve.