Karwan Fatah-Black, *Eigendomsstrijd: De geschiedenis van slavernij en emancipatie in Suriname*. Amsterdam: Ambo/Anthos, 2018. 224 pp. (Paper €20.00)

Property struggle: The history of slavery and emancipation in Suriname would be the title in English of this rich study by one of the upcoming young Dutch historians of slavery. Karwan Fatah-Black rightfully claims that until now most studies of slavery in Suriname have focused on plantation slavery, slave trade, and marronage, without including developments in the colony's capital, Paramaribo, or the free non-white inhabitants, as he calls them. This accessibly written book fills that gap, based on a large quantity of legal wills, endowments, inventories, and other notarial sources. Fatah-Black makes an effort to portray the process in which Afro-Surinamers, by more or less adjusting to the colonizer, obtained their freedom in various ways, and how they could then acquire a piece of land in the city, build a house, and create a new life for themselves and their descendants. It is, in his view, the success of this less visible self-emancipating group that laid the foundation for the Afro-Surinamese population, and started to determine the image of Paramaribo after slavery. That is intriguing, though he does not explain why this group in particular dominated the city's image.

Fatah-Black's reconstruction of the long road to freedom begins on the plantation. He illustrates the paradoxes of slavery by telling the story of a white man who angrily has his black concubine killed, but later has a new concubine and their children manumitted and endowed with a yearly pension, after which each of their two daughters married a rich plantation owner. Following this demonstration of black women using their sexuality to "buy" their and/or their children's freedom, the book's focus shifts to Paramaribo, via chapters about the lively waterfront with its hustle and bustle of sailors, marketpeople, free, unfree, fugitives, and criminals; the Saramaccastraat with its small shops, crafts workshops, and (smuggling) bars; and especially the neighborhood of *Friman-gron* (Free Man's Land), where plots of land were given out to free Blacks. This structure reflects Fatah-Black's microhistory approach which gives him ample room to present the wealth of material he managed to collect. This in itself makes a welcome book. The pitfall of the approach, however, is somewhat less analysis than one might wish.

An interesting case, for example, concerns the creation in the 1770s of a regiment of black soldiers who were manumitted expressly for this purpose; they were called the *Redi Musu*, a name referring to their red caps. To this day that term is used by Surinamers for a traitor or defector. However, Fatah-Black argues that when enslaved men were chosen for the black military corps and faithfully served their white officers, this was actually an active strategy for

freedom. Just as with black women who used their sexuality to become free, there was a paradoxical situation for the *Redi Musu* who, in order to break free from slavery, also had to break away from their loved ones and their culture (a liberated slave had to become a Christian) and, says Fatah-Black (without really explaining how), even from their own skin color. Whether this breaking away was really that radical does not seem certain, because many free people of color did buy their kinfolk or loved ones in order to grant them freedom. Furthermore, despite Christianization it is particularly in neighborhoods like Frimangron where a distinctive Afro-Surinamese culture has survived until today. Unfortunately Fatah-Black provides no clue about that culture.

Gradually Paramaribo changed from a white colonial city with enslaved African servants into a colored city with a white elite and a (higher) middle class of color; apart from the expanding group of enslaved, it was home to a growing group of black and colored craftsmen, retired soldiers, peasants and a variety odd-jobbers. After slavery, a kind of lower-middle class gradually emerged through education. The book then concludes with an epilogue about one of the main streets of Frimangron, and its most famous son, Anton de Kom. Born around the turn of the twentieth century, De Kom did not try to please the colonial masters in order to achieve more freedom within a racist colonial system. On the contrary, he fought against them, becoming an important labor leader and communist activist. His parental home, now dilapidated, still stands in the Pontewerfstraat, which has been renamed after him. Once the beating heart of Frimangron, it stands as an icon of the paradoxes of slavery.

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