On 25 December 1653, Hendrik Haecxs, one of the members of the High Council, the senior administrative body that governed the colony of the Dutch West India Company (WIC) in northeastern Brazil, reported a frightful occurrence in his diary. Haecxs and the High Council were based in Recife, a port-city and the capital of Dutch Brazil. Ever since Haecxs had arrived in Recife, in late 1645, the city had been under siege by an army of Luso-Brazilian rebels. The WIC forces were barely able to hold out, largely because the rebels were unable to blockade the harbor. Five days before the strange event, however, a massive Portuguese fleet arrived, effectively closing the circle around Recife. During this Christmas Day, as the situation in Recife grew increasingly desperate, Haecxs noted that Henrik Harmans, a German soldier in service of the WIC, had seen how “the day before at midnight and again this morning at two an uncountable number of black and unknown birds had flown from the forest over Fort De Brune and from there back to the forest.” Haecxs ended the anecdote by stating that only God could know the meaning of the sudden appearance and disappearance of the flock of birds.1

This strange but ominous report makes sense when we realize that for seventeenth-century Europeans, unexplainable natural occurrences such as the sightings of unusual animals, comets, and solar eclipses, were seen as a warning that God was unhappy with the behavior of his people and that He was sending them a sign that something terrible would happen to them in the near future. Divine punishment could be manifested in the form of the outbreak of a disease or the outbreak of war.2 In this context it is likely that Haecxs, in reporting about the strange flock of birds, was dreading and anticipating a military victory of the rebels after the arrival of the Portuguese fleet. Indeed, in


late January 1654, one month after Haexcs had reported on the mysterious flock of birds, the demoralized wic government and army surrendered Recife to the Luso-Brazilian forces.3

This episode provides a rare and brief glimpse of the emotional world of colonial officials in Dutch Brazil. For the first half of the seventeenth century northeastern Brazil became a region heavily disputed between Portugal, Habsburg Spain, which claimed Brazil from 1580 to 1640, and the Dutch Republic. From 1624 until 1654, the wic invested great manpower and materiel in the conquest of the sugar-growing provinces of northeastern Brazil. The Dutch attempts to wrest control of Brazil from Portugal and Habsburg Spain generated constant warfare and diplomatic intrigue which only ended in 1662 when the Dutch Republic formally relinquished any claims to Brazil in return for monetary compensation from Portugal.

Historians such as Charles Boxer and Evaldo Cabral de Mello have written extensively about the military and diplomatic aspects of the struggle in the Brazilian northeast. Similarly, José Antonio Gonsalves de Mello and Frans Schalkwijk have documented social and religious life in the Dutch colony.4 One issue that has received little attention from historians of Dutch Brazil is that of emotions, in particular fear and its impact on society and politics. Only recently have historians of the Atlantic world utilized fear as a category of analysis.5 In this chapter I investigate how fear manifested itself in Dutch Brazil, from the time of the first wic invasion in 1624 until the Dutch surrender