INNEKE PHAF–RHEINBERGER

Creole *tori*, the *Waterkant*, and the Ethics of a Nation
Cynthia McLeod and Astrid Roemer on Suriname

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE FORMER DUTCH GUYANA proclaimed the republic of Suriname on 25 November 1975. In Surinamese culture, meanwhile, the effort to create an independent public space was already conceived long before that date. Rudolph Van Lier, a sociologist born in Paramaribo, defines the urban Creole population as the founding fathers of the idea of self-supporting efficiency since the eighteenth century. Van Lier states that “plantation colonies sprang up on the frontiers of the European culture area. Ever since the discovery of the American continent the western frontier of European culture has lain there.”¹ The creoles were the first native urban group of people to participate actively in the dynamic of plantation society under the Dutch administration. There is much evidence of influential political negotiations on their part in the period before World War II and increasingly thereafter.


Van Lier’s emphasis on Creole activities was repeated over and over again in the essays included in the celebratory collection *Suriname: 25 Years Here and There.*² Oostindie mentions the expression “that creole thing” (*dat creoolse ding*), applied whenever the idea of Surinamese independence crops up.³ Ramsoedh and Hoogbergen, who wrote the opening essay for this special number of *Oso,* recall the role of the NVP (National Popular Party), in which Jopie Pengel and Henck Arron have been the most prominent Creole leaders.⁴ It is clear that the role of the urban creoles of Paramaribo can be conceived of as furnishing a continuum for political life in Suriname ever since the eighteenth century, and since the 1970s in the Netherlands as well.

I will argue in this essay that the discourse of this Creole group in Suriname is related to *tori-*telling, to the tradition of storytelling in Sranan. This tradition is analyzed in two novels by the well-known writers Cynthia McLeod and Astrid Roemer. I have selected the novels *How Dear Was the Sugar?* (1995) and *Life at Risk* (1996)⁵ because each of those works is the first volume in a fictional trilogy and thus sets up a narrative foundation crucial to further developments in the subsequent volumes.⁶ Moreover, both novels focus on nationhood, a theme of great relevance at the time the books appeared. For the first time in its history, Suriname had known a military dictatorship, during which period (from 1980 to 1987) a state of civil war obtained – for six years, from 1986 to 1992 – between the former Maroons and the government.⁷ A traumatic event occurred on 8 December 1982 when the military leader, Desi Bouterse, ordered the elimination of fifteen opposition politicians. Bouterse returned to power for a few months in 1990. In 1992, an agreement was signed between Suriname and the Netherlands re-establishing democratic conditions in order to release badly-needed devel-

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⁵ Cynthia McLeod, *Hoe duur was de suiker?* (Schoorl: Uitgeverij Conserve, 1995), and Astrid Roemer, *Gewaagd leven* (Amsterdam: Arbeiderspers, 1996).