‘Nothing about us, without us’

Constructing Women’s Historical Knowledge, a Case Study of Curacao

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When doing research from a gendered perspective in Curacao, the researcher is particularly burdened by the invisibility of women in the historical records, which hinders one's knowledge of the role that women have played in history. Besides the fact that for long the historiography was Eurocentric, it was also male-dominated: it was essentially a narrative about the Dutch male activities on this Caribbean island. The Eurocentric, male-oriented approach is clearly visible in the areas studied, the questions raised and the interpretations made. This can be understood as part of a 'coloniality of power' produced through race, class and gender domination.

The peripheral position of women in Curacaoan historiography has been explained by the Curacaoan historian Nolda Römer-Kenepa as resulting from the fact that women were less present in the public sphere of society and more present in the private sphere. Nowadays, the public/private dichotomy is under discussion. It is questioned whether this model is universal or a remnant of nineteenth-century Europe, hence culturally and historically determined. Applying this model to Curacaoan society, divided by race and class, overlooks the differences in power which dictated the social lives of men and women in the lower tiers of the hierarchical order and which might explain why their contributions to history have been undervalued or silenced.

In 1998, the Curacaoan gender specialist Sonia Cuales analysed the peripheral position of women in historiography from a more intersectional perspective by looking at how race and class intersected with gender in her article called ‘In Search of Memory: Gender in the Netherlands Antilles.’ She observed that at that time not much had been done to retrieve the history of in particular lower-class women of the Dutch Caribbean islands, to analytically and systematically document their lives, and to safeguard the information for posterity through publication.

The present essay is my personal reflection on the search for gender in the
historical records of Curaçao. I would like to argue that the marginalization of women in historiography, both in the official records (primary sources) and in historical research publications (secondary sources), requires that inventiveness and creativity be used to yet locate women in history. As Marlene Kadar, honoured during the symposium of the International Auto/Biography Association (IABA) in Toronto in May 2017, has pointed out: ‘archives are everywhere.’ In her methodological endeavour to find women’s voices, in particular those of ordinary women, she has coined the concept of ‘life writing’ and uses archives of a more private nature, such as unpublished diaries, letters, ethnographic documents and songs in addition to the more official archives. In this essay, I seek to address this invisibility of women by posing the question: What sources can one use to ‘reinsert’ Curaçaoan women into the historical narratives from which they have traditionally been omitted? I start by giving an overview of the studies that have dealt specifically with women in history and will look at the methodologies used to discover women in Curaçaoan history. I then give my reflections on archives, after which I look at how oral history can contribute to our knowledge of the role of women in history. Finally, I share my thoughts on some additional strategies for including women and gender in Curaçaoan historiography.

Some trends in the historiography of women in Curaçao

Toward the end of the twentieth century in Curaçao, the body of historical literature began to grow and shift steadily. There has been an expansion in the fields of studies focusing particularly on the history of the African-descended population segment. The interest of historians has also been directed toward women who, as a group, have not been recognized adequately in the historical writings. Local scholars have in a sense joined the feminist approach to history that has burgeoned worldwide, including in the Caribbean. Römer-Kenepa was one of the first scholars to examine the position of women during slavery times in Curaçao in her doctoral study titled Vrouwenleven op Curaçao: Laat achttiende eeuw en vroeg negentiende eeuw (Women's Lives in Curaçao: Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century). Römer-Kenepa tried to minimize the lack of documents (also because some were decaying) by using some published documents and literature, as well as residence reports and one diary to discuss the social lives of Curaçaoan women, both black and white, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In that way, she provided insight into the marginalized social position of women in general and she could also examine stratification among women, highlighting the double exploitation of enslaved women in terms of gender and colour. Annemie van der Veen continued on this track in her study of a particular labour activity of women: that of handweaving straw hats in both Curaçao and Bonaire. By also using oral history interviews with women who were instrumental in this profession, van der Veen's research provided valuable insight into women’s activities after Emancipation from slavery in 1863.

In Kòrsou su mhènan pionero (Curaçao’s Pioneering Women), historian Jeanne Henriquez presented auto/biographical sketches of women from both the past and the present and in that way used biography and autobiography as a methodology for engendering historiography. Oral history was also a very important component in historian Ann Philipps’ study Labour and Migration in the Caribbean: British West Indian Domestic Servants in Curacao, 1940-1960, which looked at another historically neglected group, namely migrant women. Philipps also described the ordeal of localizing archival data on this particular group. The Immigration Department possessed a collection of data on these foreign domestic servants dating back to the 1940s, but examination was hampered by the lack of a suitable repository. Also, the Department had discarded some data when moving to new office locations.

In the context of this growing awareness of women's histories, the collection Mundu yama sinta mira (1992) should also be mentioned, as it contains abridged versions of studies on Curaçaoan women's history. This collection was written for the Third Conference of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers (now known as the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars), which took place in Curaçao in 1992, with the late Joceline Clemencia presiding over the local organizing committee. A few of the articles in this volume highlight history from a gendered perspective and deal with under-researched topics, including ‘Amerindian Women of the Caribbean’ by archaeologist Jay Haviser and ‘A Paragraph in the Unwritten History of Lesbian Love in the Caribbean: Amor di kambrada’ by Aart Broek. The second article is based on the book E no por kasa (She Cannot Get Married) written by Willem Kroon, published in 1930, on lesbian relationships in Curaçao. Kroon, a devoted Catholic, condemned the kambrada erotic relationship and gave a description of the ways in which it was practised at that time in Curaçao. My own article in this publication, ‘Women’s Role in Migrant/Emigrant Labour: Curaçao Labour Migration to Cuba during the First Two Decades of the 20th Century,’ explores the ways in which working-class Curaçaoan women participated in the migration movement to Cuba, displaying a pattern that differed from the migration of Curaçaoan men.

A more recent study, The Girls They Left Behind: Curacao's Jewish Women in the 19th Century, published by Josette Capriles Goldish as a working paper in 2003, discusses how ethnicity and gender closely intertwine. Her paper deals with Sephardic Jewish women whose male contemporaries were mostly traders. Young males in particular would emigrate permanently when the local economy deteriorated, leaving young women behind with very few potential marriage partners to choose from. Ethnicity and gender also surface in my study Di ki manera: A Social History of Afro-Curacaoans, 1863-1917 (2007), in which I use oral history to uncover the gendered world of the black working class in Curaçao’s post-slavery society.

One of the most recent studies on gender placed within a historical dimension is the dissertation of Adaly Rodríguez, The Rise of Women’s Rights in Curaçao: The Potential of the Women’s Convention to the Empowerment and Equal Rights of Women in Curaçao (2015). Rodríguez sustains Cuales’ (1998) complaint about the lack of systematic and analytic documentation of the development and history of the women’s movement in the Dutch Caribbean societies, including Curaçao. Rodríguez’s study shows that this
has not changed in the twenty-first century. Today, there is still a lack of information and documentation regarding gender and women's issues in Curacao covering the past twenty-five years. According to Rodriguez, this is the result of a lack of proper documentation of events and decisions and a traditional policy of overlooking gender and sexuality.\(^1\) I would add that it is also due to the lack of centralizing these materials on gender, which remain scattered over the offices and homes of members of women's organisations, without safeguarding for posterity.

From this overview of the historiography of women in Curacao, one may deduce that there are still some gaps in the literature. An example of one such neglected topic is sexuality. Fortunately, this seems to be changing. Chelsea Schiels' PhD dissertation, *Closer Ties: The Dutch Caribbean and the Aftermath of Empire, 1914-2012*, looks at how sexuality has been approached in the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^2\) Another promising project is the NWO programme 2017-2022, 'Cultural Practices of Citizenship under Conditions of Fragmented Sovereignty: Gendered and Sexual Citizenship in Curacao and Bonaire' - a partnership between the University of Amsterdam and the University of Curacao that examines gender and sexuality of sexual minorities in the present as well as historically.\(^3\)

**Women in archives**

In order to obtain archival data on women, one may consult the National Archives of Curacao which were established in 1969. They have the task to manage all government information that is over 20 years old (a publicity period of 20 years applies). The National Archives harbour principally public records but also some private records of Curacao as well as the other Dutch Caribbean islands. The Archives consist of public documents of which the oldest dates from 1687, private archives, newspapers, photographs and negatives, audio-visual material from circa 1928 and an extensive collection of historical maps and drawings.\(^4\)

One may find entries about women in the public records of the National Archives by carefully examining the registries. One may also approach the archivists, who are very knowledgeable about the collections and quite helpful. Finding sources about women in the public records requires imagining where women may have been in contact with the public system. Elite women in particular could be present in the public records about the work of women in politics or their role in charity, such as their connection to the welfare and education of children, the poor, the disabled, the elderly and other marginalized groups. Enslaved and working-class women are usually present in situations in which they resisted the authorities in one way or another.

The National Archives also house the documents of Female Jaycees Curacao as well as the Union di Muhé Antiano (UMA), a women's organisation that existed from the 1970s until the early 1990s. However, there is still a need for more systematic collection, documentation and preservation of information regarding gender-related themes.

The problematic nature of archival research becomes more poignant when - as recognized by scholars mentioned in the previous paragraphs - one is dealing with the activities of marginalized people, such as non-elite, African-descended women, immigrants, and members of sexual minorities.\(^5\) When studying gender roles and identities in the colonial Curacaoan historiography, one must deal with the larger issue of inequality. It is here that one can clearly see how colonialism, race, class and religion intersect with gender and sexuality. Patriarchy is a system that has historically relegated women to an inferior status in society and the consequent disadvantages have affected women of all races and classes. Feminist scholarly research therefore recognizes power as a central factor in the lives of the research objects. Gender, along with sexuality, race and class, is an important aspect of the differential power relations that determine what the dominant groups in societies want people to remember and forget. The search for women in the archives is complicated, as women in colonial society belonged to both the enslaved and slave-owning groups, to the oppressed and the oppressors, to the colonized and the colonizers. A critical analysis of archival data should keep this in mind.

A study worth mentioning here is Linda M. Rupert's *Waters of Faith, Currents of Freedom: Gender, Religion and Ethnicity in Inter-Imperial Trade Between Curacao and Tierra Firme* (2007), in which she used archival documents to examine how enslaved men but also women made use of the limited freedom that the society granted them to participate in contraband trade between Curacao and Venezuela alongside free people. By networking with people on the South American mainland, they sometimes managed to escape from the Dutch island to the Spanish-ruled mainland.\(^6\) Rupert selected and collected different types of archival sources, both locally and in archives in Venezuela and Spain. This means that she utilized documents that transcended the geographical borders and linguistic boundaries set by the colonial powers.

Transcending the traditional colonial male gaze in the archives requires reading the documents 'against the grain' and looking at the question of power to explore the particular experiences of women who had little power at that time.\(^7\) A beginning of a reconstruction in that direction is the article by historian Jeanne Henriquez, 'Forsa di un nashon ta depende di forsa di su famianan' (The Strength of a Nation Depends on the Strength of its Families), in which she read the primary sources 'against the grain' and encountered resistance in the documents.\(^8\) Her study provides new insights and new interpretations of family lives among the enslaved and freed people. She questioned, for instance, an observation made by M.D. Teenstra who wrote in his nineteenth-century travel account, *Nederlandsch West-Indische eilanden, in derzelver tegenwoordige toestand* (The Dutch West-Indian Islands in Their Present Situation) that enslaved mothers did not show any feelings when their children were sold elsewhere and would even cheer upon their departures.\(^9\) Teenstra visited the Dutch islands and Suriname in 1828-1829 and 1833-1834. Henriquez argues that Teenstra knew insufficient Papiamentu (the local creole language) to understand what the enslaved mothers meant by their expressions. Furthermore, by cross-checking with other data, Henriquez concluded that the enslaved mothers would have known that when their enslaved children went to St. Thomas and Puerto Rico, they would be released after a few years.

In this way, Henriquez followed in the footsteps of Jamaican historian Mathurin
Mair, who argued in her 1974 dissertation that historians should revisit the archival records in order to open up ‘new emphases and new interpretations relating to the black Jamaican woman, and to decode the real world of enslaved and free women so as, eventually, to shift the parameters of traditional historiography’.24 ‘Reading against the grain’ is also necessary when powerless women and men share public spaces and both hold leadership positions in an historical event. An example is enslaved women’s participation in the 1795 slave revolt in Curacao – one of the largest slave revolts in the history of the Dutch-governed islands of the Caribbean. This revolt had been spearheaded in a bid to highlight the necessity of improving the social conditions of the enslaved in the Curacaoan society. While women played an important role in this struggle, they are still not sufficiently or objectively disclosed in the existing historiography. In the available documents, it is mostly the men who speak, while the women are kept out of the public view.

Unheard voices: Nothing about us, without us

Archival documents tend to represent the official colonial view or other dominant views, in most cases defined by European men.23 Alternative views such as those of black, working-class women are ‘silenced’ in the sense of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s Silencing the Past (1995).24 There exists this coloniality in the production of information: colonial, racial, patriarchal and other hegemonic forms of producing data erase certain events and experiences as Grossfoguel has stated.25 As for the interrelationship between gender and historiography, Joan W. Scott examines how historical knowledge, meanings and truth are created in her article ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.’ She argues that knowledge shows how social organization functions, but it also creates the organization of society through mechanisms of power. For Scott, historiography does not reflect the knowledge about the past, but produces knowledge of the past.24 A feminist approach to gender history should be conscious of the mechanisms of power that help to produce knowledge. It requires us to re-imagine different approaches to voice, language and narrative in a gender-inclusive way by also giving a voice to oppressed, marginalized, excluded, silenced or ‘hidden’ groups of people. This is stressed by Cuales (1998) who emphasized that beside archival sources that reveal parts of women’s history, one should use additional sources that enable one to submerge into the memories of women.25

The search for women’s experiences is a matter of patience and perseverance. In some cases, the so-called bottom-up approach offers great potential for the reconstruction of history by giving voice to those whom historiography has rendered voiceless. Oral history has been defined as the testimonies and personal recollections of people who have experienced certain events first-hand or who were sufficiently close to those events to remember them. As a research practice, oral history is also called biographical research, because when narrators recall their personal past, they engage in a review of their life story. In addition to its emphasis on factual statements to provide historical data, oral history is also a vehicle of auto/biographical memories, expressions of meaning, and representations of culture. Here, oral history is not primarily concerned with the accuracy of an individual’s recollection but with the manner in which and the reasons why people remember what they do. Oral history can be instrumental in revealing, contesting, challenging and reversing the aforementioned coloniality of knowledge, framed by class, race and gender. It can be used to foreground the testimony of those normally excluded from hegemonic discourse production: those who might be spoken about, but not spoken with.26 What makes oral history so interesting to researchers is that it can often lead to new interpretations of history. This is evident in the work of Paul Brenneker and Elis Juliana who, beginning in 1958, were able to document a large amount of data passed orally from generation to generation in Curacao.27 This included data from people who were born during the final years of slavery. Their oldest informant was born around 1853, which was ten years before the Abolition of slavery.

But oral history is not without its own problems. The most discussed problem is memory. How do people continue to remember events and issues often occurring in the early parts of their life or in that of their ancestors, and how have they been able to transmit this information to younger generations? There are also gender issues to consider in a methodology of oral history. In my own oral history research, which started in the 1980s,28 it struck me that during interviews, women in particular were at first less likely to cooperate. Especially women born at the end of the nineteenth or beginning of the twentieth century would initially disqualify themselves for having lived a life that supposedly was not worth writing about. These women in a sense silenced themselves because historically their social lives were not considered important. And when I did eventually obtain their willingness to be interviewed, they would still prefer not to talk about intimate aspects of their life. In other words, I had to break through several cultural walls behind which they positioned themselves.

Scholars of African American social life have called this phenomenon the ‘culture of dissemblance.’ It is visible particularly among African American women who have in the course of time learned to hide and mask their feelings, secrets and private lives from the prying and judgmental eyes of the dominant classes.29 Darlene Clark Hine sees dissemblance as a kind of protection shield adopted in particular by black women who, while creating an appearance of openness and disclosure, actually shield the truth of their inner selves from the oppressor.30 According to her, one of the characteristics of the culture of dissemblance is that African American women remain silent about much of what they endure in their lives. They would rather not tell the whole story of their experience so as not to be judged according to the demeaning stereotypes to which they have long been subjected.31 According to Francis White, this behaviour became a habit transmitted inter-generationally; painful narratives would not be talked about or would be presented as mere fragments within stories that are more heroic and less painful.32

Attention to body language becomes important when silence is exhibited in relation to inner experiences. Informants can also use humour to camouflage certain feelings. Despite the various challenges, oral narratives have enabled me to submerge myself in a deeper journey into the lives of informants and to bring forward meaning-
ful information that usually does not get mentioned, perhaps not even in conversation with their own relatives. Once trust is gained, oral history interviews give women in particular a space to comment upon issues in their life that are relevant to them, to pinpoint values, and to condemn what they see as wrong. Their narratives explain how women understand, negotiate and sometimes challenge the dominant societal ideals. It is their oral histories that allow them to redefine themselves by voicing their life testimonials and in that way (re)construct their selfhood and identity. These women have also immersed me, as a local researcher, in the ways in which ethnicity, race, gender, class and religion intersect and influence people's life.

**Conclusion and recommendations**

In order to look at women's social role in history, in particular that of black, working-class women, it is necessary to read the official historical documents against the grain, countering the ways they were primarily designed and intended. Reading against the grain and looking at, for instance, the gendered historical language that was used in a given period of history gives us interesting information about the ideas and social lives of women neglected by history. Another approach is using documents that transcend the geographical borders and linguistic boundaries set by the colonial powers.

Oral history is yet another way of locating gender outside the official discourse. Transcending the traditional male gaze requires expanding the idea of the information archive. The use of oral history interviews as auto/biographies allows people who would have been less likely to write about their lives on their own initiative to voice their life testimonials and facilitates understanding of how they see themselves as subjects on their own terms. The utilization of oral history can help to better illustrate the complex and varied ways in which marginalized/excluded/silenced/hidden people understand and interpret their own lives. It is precisely the expressive dialogue between document archives and oral history that produces the richness of human experience and in our case re-inserts that of women.

Studying history from a gender perspective is not an easy endeavour and requires looking at the problematic of data documentation and preservation. With the growing demand for information about women, whether for media, research, policy, empowerment, education or action, the need for a specialized documentation centre on women is an urgent matter for Curaçao. It could be part of the National Archives, as they already have the facilities for studies and are governed by the Archives Ordinance guaranteeing (free) accessibility, openness, sustainable conservation and promotion of historical data on women.

A women's documentation centre would support scholarship on gender and women's lives, retrieving what has been lost, hidden or excluded from the historical records and safeguarding it for posterity. At the same time, such as centre could be empowering and should therefore be made accessible to all women irrespective of their socioeconomic and educational status. The use of new technologies, too, can create fresh possibilities and establish new horizons for researchers and activists seeking historical data on women.

**Notes**

1 Curacao is a Dutch island of 444 square kilometers in the southern Caribbean, near the coast of Venezuela. Together with Bonaire and Aruba, it is part of the Dutch Leeward Islands or the ABC Islands.

2 ‘Coloniality of power’ is a concept developed by members of the decolonial school, such as Anibal Quijano, Ramon Grosfoguel, Walter Mignolo and Nelson Maldonado-Torres. See e.g. Maldonado-Torres, ‘On the Coloniality of Being’, in: Cultural Studies 21 (2007) 2, 240-270.


8 Römer-Kenepa, Vrouwenleven op Curaçao; Nolda Römer-Kenepa, ‘Curaçaoanse vrouwen in de slavenmaatschappij’.


10 Jeanne Henriquez, Kòrsou su muhénan pionero (Curaçao: Archivo Nashonal di Antia Hulandes, 2002).


In addition to the projects of Schields and the NWO, the present author is busy with a manuscript tentatively titled: *Cultural Politics of Respectability and the Making of Citizenship: The British Caribbean Female Migrants in Twentieth Century Colonial Curaçao*.

http://www.nationalarchives.cw/eld/520 (Accessed 1 May 2017); e-mail communication with the Director of the National Archives.


Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz and Mary Elizabeth Perry (eds.), *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois, 2010).


The songs and short stories collected by Juliana and Brenneker are stored among others in what is called the Zikinzá collection, which belongs to the Zikinzá Foundation, founded in 1973. It contains a corpus of approximately 1,410 songs recorded from the mouths of 266 persons.

The Institute of Archeology and Anthropology of the Netherlands Antilles (AIAINA) was instrumental, through Rose Mary Allen and Eric La Croes (music), in doing research on the oral traditions and oral history of the six islands of the Netherlands Antilles.

Michelle LaKisha Simmons, “‘To Lay Aside All Moral’: Respectability, Sexual and Black College Students in the United States in the 1930s”, *Gender and History* 24 (2012) 2, 431-455.


Clark Hine, ‘Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West’.