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Interview with Cynthia McLeod¹

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“Surinamese students went to Holland for studying; they were educated to be Dutch, but in Holland they realized that they were NOT Dutch and could never become Dutch because they had an own Surinamese identity”

Cynthia McLeod in Macapá, Brazil.



Photography by: Paulo Gustavo Pellegrino Correa

¹ Interview online given to Natali Fabiana da Costa e Silva and Paulo Gustavo Pellegrino Correa in February 2020.

Cynthia McLeod is one of the greatest writers in Suriname. Originally written in Dutch, her literary work became well known in the Guyana region especially after the translation into English of the novels *The cost of sugar* (2007), *The free negress Elisabeth: prisoner of color* (2004) and *Tutuba: the girl from the slaveship Leusden* (2013). It is worth remembering, however, that her debut as an author happened in 1987, the year of publication of *Hoe duur was de suiker* (*The cost of sugar*). In less than six weeks after the book launch, the novel became a best seller and, years later, it had a film adaptation under the direction of Jean van de Velde.

McLeod's plots take place in a little known country even among South Americans because South America was mostly colonized by Portuguese and Spanish settlers whereas Suriname was colonized by Holland. With just over 600 thousand inhabitants, Suriname is inserted in the so-called Transnational Amazon. Its cultural mosaic is composed of Amerindians, Afrodescendants – the Maroons or Bush-Negroes – Indians of Hindu and Muslim origin, Indonesians, Javanese, Chinese, English, Dutch, Brazilians and Mestizos.

One of the possible causes for her success lies in the poignant way McLeod narrates the lives of her characters. Through her novels, she exposes the entrails of the Surinamese colonial society. Eminently marked by a patriarchal and racist logic, for centuries this colonial society has silenced minority groups such as women, enslaved and black peoples. From these violent experiences, McLeod combines literary technique and historical facts in order to question gender, class and race paradigms. Black women, whether enslaved or not, gain prominence in her work, as it is from their perspective that social hypocrisy and mistreatment of marginalized peoples are undressed.

Revista Diálogos: What is the role of literature in consolidating Surinamese identity after independence?

Cynthia²: This is a real interesting issue. In fact this started long before independence. You must understand that we had an utterly Dutch education starting from right after slavery time in 1876. The education consisted nothing Surinamese. The education language was Dutch, we learned from Dutch text books about Dutch subjects. Whenever there was something about Suriname, like history or geography, this was also from the Dutch perspective. Everything that was not Dutch, was wrong! Every Surinamer had to become as Dutch as possible, because being Surinamese was inferior. At the end of the 40's, after WW II quite some Surinamese students went to Holland for

² All the answers were written by the author herself, for the interview was given by email.

studying; they were educated to be Dutch, but in Holland they realized that they were NOT Dutch and could never become Dutch because they had an own Surinamese identity. Some from the early 50's Surinamese students in Holland started to expose their Surinamese identity in music, in speech, in clothing, in literature. Many Surinamese music bands started in Holland. There was hardly any literature in Suriname because there were no publishers in this small society. But in Holland the Surinamese authors found publishers. So end fifties and in the sixties till independence (1975) quite an amount of books from Surinamese authors were published in Holland and found their way to Suriname. The majority of these books and novels was real identity literature where in the protagonist discovers his own identity and realizes that there is nothing wrong with being a Surinamer and becomes a proud Surinamer (Sranami Hai from Bea Vianen; Atman from Leo Ferrier; *Neem mij terug Suriname* from Astrid Roemer). The trend of publishing in Holland continued after independence; there are practically no publishers in Suriname. After independence, with the dictatorship in the 80's ,things really became bad in Suriname. Identity is not a problem anymore because all Surinamers know that they are Surinamers and our country was not on speaking terms with Holland. But we had big brain drain. At this moment (2020) there's hardly any literature production in Suriname. Surinamese literature is being produced in Holland and comes to Suriname. But the economical situation of all Surinamers is so bad, that people do read but people have no money to buy books. Books are a luxury product.

As I demonstrated in answering before looking for and consolidating Surinamese Identity in Literature started in the early fifties and was real intense around the time of independence, late seventies. Suriname experienced a military coup in 1980 and a period of dictatorship from that point on till end 1987. We still remember the 80's as the most terrible period in our history; everything slid down, live became so difficult, our currency became worthless, lack of everything, long lines in front of stores, poverty, (like Venezuela now) In 1986 the situation was so difficult and the resistance against the military government was felt everywhere that they feared for their lives day by day. They made a political party and democracy was re-established and in November 1987 we had the first elections again. My novel *The Cost of Sugar* was written in 1985 and I had decided that it should be published in Suriname. Mind you, never before a novel of 250 pages was ever published in Suriname. But I found a publishing company who wanted to do this with me. The preparation took a long time , 18 months because of lack of whatever. But at last end 1987 the book was ready. It just so happened that it was published on October 30 and the first elections was on November 25. It was not a political book but somehow it became a political issue against this whole military government. Surinamers longed for freedom and democracy and this novel was also something that Surinamers had longed for; their own history from their own perspective. The book

became a hit, a hype , and is till today the nr 1 bestseller ever! (I became famous overnight!!) It was also the start of something new; Surinamese history from our own perspective. And it opened the door for more authors to write and publish in Suriname. Surinamese literature about all issues, political or not, produced in Suriname started to grow and flourished in the nineties and first decade of the 21th century. Now 2020, with this awful government, the president who was the coup military and murderer in the 80's, you can imagine how everything in Suriname is difficult again, it's like the 80's again and hardly any literature is produced in Suriname.

RD: Suriname is an Amazonian and South American country. However, it also understands itself as a Caribbean country. From a cultural point of view, in your opinion, what unites and separates Amazonian /South American Suriname from the Caribbean Suriname?

Cynthia: Suriname is an Amazonian and South American country but sees itself surely NOT as a Latin American country. In Brazil Portuguese is the language and in the rest of Latin America it's Spanish while we are Dutch! We are far more a Caribbean Country although among the Caribbean countries we're also separated because we are not British but Dutch. We share a mutual history with the Caribbean countries because we were all colonies, established to grow a few products for our European owner and to do so a large amount of Africans was imported. Slavery and the attitude of the slave owners with all their rules and laws really formed the society in these days in Suriname, Guyana and all the Caribbean islands. The enslaved community was far larger than the few white Europeans so when slavery was abolished the descendants from the enslaved were in the majority. As you know, the UK imported people from their largest colony India, to the Caribbean countries to take over the work of the former enslaved and in 1870 Holland made an agreement with England that these contract laborers could also come to Suriname. The majority stayed after their contract period and this is the shared history of all Caribbean counties. After slavery time, we got compulsory education and in Suriname the Dutch education system with Dutch books and in the Dutch language were introduced. Everybody had to become as Dutch as possible; we were completely focused on Holland "our motherland" (which was far more a stepmother than a mother). Till the time of World War II we were totally isolated. Travelling was almost impossible, strangers hardly came, so there was no influence what so ever from the neighboring countries. (Our neighbor Brazil could be as far as Russia) Only some Amazon Indian tribes in the South who did not know anything about borders were moving to and from, but they had no contact with cities in Brazil either. After independence (1975) the country started diplomatic relationships with the

neighboring countries and because of Suriname's political situation (military coup and dictatorship in the 80's) these relationships hardly developed. The fact that we are Not an Island but part of the Amazon region separates Suriname from the other Caribbean countries, but the fact that we do not belong to the Commonwealth and that English is Not our first language really separates us.

RD: In “The cost of sugar, Tutuba: the girl from the slaveship Leusden” and “The free negress Elisabeth: prisoner of color” we perceive the presence of female protagonists. What led to those choices? Was this intended to create a new perspective on history?

Cynthia: Female protagonists. Indeed, in all my novels (10) I have female protagonists. Since I'm a woman, I think it's easier for me to identify. But the name of Elisabeth Samson was mentioned in all the big volumes about Suriname's history and I was intrigued by that. I researched for more than 12 years and all the information I found was so in contrary with how she was mentioned by the Macho White history writers, that this fact contained a novel in itself.