Dutch Elements in the New York Contact Zone: Traces of the Dutch Language and Literature in Sojourner Truth’s *Slave Narrative* (1850)

Abstract

It is a little-known fact that the native language of Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), one of the icons of the American Civil Rights Movement, was Dutch. Growing up as a slave of Dutch-American families in the Central Hudson Valley, Truth only spoke Dutch as a child. While she later became fluent in English, Truth kept a Dutch accent all her life. Although Truth’s entire testimonial has been recorded in her second language, English, this article attempts to reawakening her Dutch legacy. It explores the way(s) in which the Dutch language and Dutch literature impacted Truth’s famous *Narrative* about her time in slavery, her rebirth as an evangelical Christian and her involvement in the abolitionist and feminist movements.

I. Introduction

“Oh, mijn God, mijn God” — “Oh my God, my God” — are Sojourner Truth’s only recorded words in her native Dutch. Usually misspelled in a German fashion as “mein Got, mein Got,” they were spoken at a meeting of the New York City Anti-Slavery Society in 1853.\(^1\) When Truth recalled her mother’s emotional reaction to the news that her daughter would be sold to another family, she slipped into her mother’s tongue.

Although she is an icon of the Civil Rights Movement and of African American evangelicalism, little is known about Truth’s early years in slavery. The provocative statement by Carleton Mabee that Truth “did not customarily focus on the objective truth when constructing her own past” seems appropriate when applied to her comments that “she never had any learning” during her life in

slavery, that she was not “allowed to hear the Bible” and that, until she moved to
New York City, she did not even know “that Jesus Christ was the Son of God.”

These surprising words of someone who grew up in the Hudson Valley among
families with a small number of slaves, who during the long winter months must
have performed many hours of domestic work side-by-side with the female fam-
ily members and who shared the families’ Dutch mother tongue have long been
misunderstood as a revelation of factual truth rather than a rhetorical strategy
to strengthen the importance of her rebirth as an evangelical Christian. As Nell
Painter has argued,

Truth was first and last an itinerant preacher … without doubt, it was Truth’s religious faith
that transformed her from Isabella, domestic servant, into Sojourner Truth.

To Truth, anything that had happened before Christ entered her life was
worthless.

Truth’s decision to downplay the importance of the first thirty years of her life
in a Dutch-American environment profoundly influenced the way scholars have
analyzed her legacy. For a long time, scholarship on Truth tended to pay scant
attention to the question how Dutch culture shaped her intellectual background.
Even serious academic studies repeated time and again the etymological fantasy
about the name of Truth’s father, Bomefree (a likely variant of the Scottish sur-
name Boomfree, Pomphray, Pomfrey or Pomfray), as a combination of the Dutch
word for tree, “boom” (often misspelled as “Baum” or “bome”), with the English
word “free.”

Such dubious assumptions were systematically repeated because
Dutch scholars never dedicated any academic attention to Truth’s important leg-
acy. As a revealing example of the blind spot for slavery in Dutch society, the most
famous Dutch-speaking American has remained to date completely unknown in
the Netherlands. Significantly, in the 1190-page long anthology Four Centuries
of Dutch-American Relations, prepared in the context of the 2009 celebrations to
commemorate the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson’s arrival on the American East Coast, not a single reference was made to Sojourner Truth.5

In that same year, however, historian Margaret Washington presented her groundbreaking study *Sojourner Truth’s America* in which the Dutch period in Truth’s life was thoroughly studied for the first time. Washington convincingly demonstrated that the years spent with the Dutch-American Hardenbergh, Schryver and Dumont families were not as inconsequential as Truth herself had willfully suggested. This article owes much to Washington’s pioneering work but tries to make further progress by adding new materials to the analysis. It aims at complementing Washington’s findings in two chapters that present new perspectives on the impact of Dutch culture on Truth’s formative years in the Hudson Valley. The first chapter focuses on language and shows the impact of Truth’s Dutch accent when speaking English on her rhetorical strategy. In the second chapter, the structure of her *Narrative* is analyzed and a hitherto unexplored connection to the literary genre of the exemplum is suggested.

II. Dutch Language

It might sound strange that Dutch was the first language of an American slave born around 1797, almost a century and a half after the demise of New Netherland under Peter Stuyvesant. The transition from Dutch to English rule in 1664 was, however, not the end of Dutch culture on the American East Coast. Most of the people who had settled in New Netherland remained and the Dutch language continued to be used in New York and New Jersey until the early nineteenth century. This was particularly the case in small villages in the Hudson Valley like Hurley, near Kingston, where Truth, then still called Isabel(la), was born.

The Dutch identity of this area had been considerably strengthened in the aftermath of the Leisler Rebellion (1689–91). When the uprising against English rule by the militia captain Jacob Leisler, a former soldier of the Dutch West India Company, had failed, New York City witnessed an exodus of pro-Leislerian Dutchmen to the Hudson Valley and New Jersey, where they sought to rebuild their lives beyond the ken of anti-Leislerian politics.6 Those who had turned their back to the British rulers were naturally inclined to revive their Dutch identity. As the observations by Peter Kalm, a Swedish traveler who visited Albany in 1749, indicate, the attachment to the Dutch language by people in the Hudson Valley was remarkably strong:

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The inhabitants of Albany and its environs are almost all Dutchmen. They speak Dutch, have Dutch preachers, and divine service is performed in that language: their manners are likewise quite Dutch.\footnote{Peter Kalm, *Travels into North America, 1748–1749*, trans. John Reinhold Forster, Barre, MA: The Imprint Society, 1972, p. 332.}

Many of these Dutch-speaking families owned slaves. Slavery in the Hudson Valley was different, however, from that in the Southern states. Unlike in the South, there were no big plantations and families in the Hudson Valley rarely had more than a handful of slaves. The limited number of slaves and the harsh weather conditions during winter that forced people to spend more time at home than in the South naturally led to a close contact between master and slave. Hence the inevitable acculturation to Dutch customs and the adoption of the Dutch language as mother tongue.

Due to the limited size of the land in the Hudson Valley, children of slaves were usually sold away as soon as they were considered old enough to work. This was also the case of Isabel(la), who as a young teenager was sold to John Neely, an English immigrant in the Hudson Valley. To Neely’s surprise, Isabel(la) did not speak any English, which caused constant misunderstandings. In Truth’s *Narrative*, we read:

If they sent me for a frying-pan, not knowing what they meant, perhaps I carried them the pot-hooks and trammels. Then, oh! How angry mistress would be with me!\footnote{Truth, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, p. 15.}

Apparently, she did not learn much English during the short period she stayed with the Neelies because Gertrude Dumont, the daughter of John Dumont, who bought Isabel(la) around 1810, recalls that upon arrival “she could neither talk nor understand anything but low or Holland Dutch.”\footnote{H. Hendricks, ‘Sojourner Truth,’ *The National Magazine: A Monthly Journal of American History*, vol. 16. 6 (October 1892), p. 671.} And although she later became fluent in English, Isabel(la), who called herself Sojourner Truth after she embraced evangelical Christendom in the late 1820s, never lost her Dutch accent.

Truth’s different pronunciation of the English language has often been used to belittle her. Even authors who showed a genuine interest in this remarkable African American woman have deliberately reproduced her voice in a patronizing manner. A famous example is Harriet Beecher Stowe. In 1853, one year after the publication of Stowe’s groundbreaking novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Truth had visited the famous author to ask for a blurb in order to promote her book *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850). Ten years later, Stowe published an essay — “The Libyan Sybil” (1863) — about this encounter with Truth for the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which she highlighted a dispute between Truth and Frederic Douglas at an antislavery meeting in Salem, Ohio, in 1852. During that meeting, Douglas
became so agitated that he suggested the use of violence to finally put an end to slavery. Truth then interrupted Douglas and, although there exist different versions on the words she actually used, the most famous are “Frederic, is God dead?”

This expression of faith in divine providence to end slavery corresponded to Stowe’s convictions. Despite her engagement in the anti-slavery movement, it is well known that Stowe did not believe blacks had the same intellectual capabilities as whites and that she often characterized black people in a condescending way. This is not different in relation to Truth, where Stowe let Truth speak the stereotypical Southern “black speech” to mark an intellectual difference between her and the former slave.

Stowe’s text was published ten years after the actual meeting and gives no clear evidence as to the level that the Dutch language impacted Truth’s speech. As John Dumont’s daughter Gertrude argues, however, Truth never spoke like southern blacks but rather like unlettered white people in the Hudson Valley. Other reports of speeches by Truth indicate examples of code-switching between English and Dutch, which evidences that the Dutch language did, in fact, impact her speeches. An example is her speech at the New York City Anti-Slavery Society on September 4, 1853:

My poor mother would weep and say: ‘Oh! Mein Got, mein Got [sic], my children will be sold into slavery!’

There can, thus, be no doubt that Dutch had an influence on the language used by Truth in her speeches.

An important question is whether this impact of the Dutch language on Truth’s speeches should be considered a deficiency. In the case of Stowe, it is clear that by letting Truth speak deficient English, she places herself and her readers at an intellectually higher level. Through her rhetoric, Truth is reduced to a primitive being, to what Stowe calls the “wild, savage impersonation of the fervor of Ethiopia.” This depiction of Truth as a primitive person stands in sharp contrast to the following reference to her impressive rhetorical power at the occasion of a speech at the State Sabbath School Convention in Battle Creek, Michigan, in 1863:

Rev. T.W. Jones arose, and addressing the moderator, said that the speaker was Sojourner Truth. This was enough: five hundred persons were instantly on their feet, prepared to give the most earnest and respectful attention to her who was once but a slave. Had Henry Ward Beecher

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or any other such renowned man’s name been mentioned it is doubtful whether it would have produced the electrical effect on the audience that her name did.\textsuperscript{15}

Other accounts of Truth’s speeches indicate similar reactions. This shows that while Truth’s rhetoric was different from that of white abolitionists and feminists, her accent did not necessarily hamper her success. On the contrary, Truth’s impressive success as a speaker indicates that she was able to use language(s) in a creative way to develop a unique rhetoric that became her trademark.

It is important to realize that Truth as an illiterate black woman faced a skeptical and often even openly hostile crowd. It is, therefore, not by accident that she would begin her speeches with humor as part of a strategy to dispel tensions. Her accent certainly played a role in this and might have made the anecdote or joke she used to tell at the beginning of her speeches more exciting to listen to. As Fitch and Mandziuk have observed, Truth seemed to enjoy using her exotic Dutch accent to amuse her audiences.\textsuperscript{16} However, it should be stressed that this was part of a deliberate rhetorical strategy that prepared the ground for a message that was not humorous at all. In the course of her speeches, the comic tone would transform into a tongue of fire when Truth, as a vindictive prophet, announced the day when bloodhounds would tear up the slaveholders while slaves would wash their robes in the blood of the lamb.

Her famous speech at the Woman’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio in 1851 can serve as an example. Truth began this speech with an anecdote:

\begin{quote}
But what’s all dis here talkin’ ‘bout? Dat man ober dar say dat woman needs to be helped into carriages, and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place eberywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud-puddles, or gibs me any best place!\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Quickly however, the tone changed:

\begin{quote}
And a’n’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm!... I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And a’n’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man — when I could get it — and bear de lash as well! And a’n’t I a woman? I have borne thirteen chilern, and seen ‘em mos’ all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with a mother’s grief, none but Jesus heard — and a’n’t I a woman?\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

While the accent remained the same, the change in tone gave it a completely different dimension. The same accent that initially must have sounded amusing by now acquired almost apocalyptical dimensions as a voice of wrath. What followed was, indeed, a list of sharp accusations that culminated in the accusation:

\textsuperscript{15} Fitch and Mandziuk, \textit{Sojourner Truth as Orator}, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 105.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}
Den dat little man in black dar, he say women can’t have as much rights as men ‘cause Christ wan’t a woman. … What did your Christ come from? … From God and a woman! Man had nothin’ to do wid Him.¹⁹

As the report indicates, the impact of Truth’s rhetorical strategy was impressive:

Rolling thunder could not have stilled that crowd as did those deep, wonderful tones, as she stood there with outstretched arms and eyes of fire.²⁰

This impact was created not despite Truth’s accent but partly also thanks to it. Truth used her Dutch accent not just to entertain the audience but also to reinforce the accusatory message of her message. Her accent was, thus, part of a cleverly elaborated strategy to transmit a message that a person of her color and gender in normal circumstances would never have been able to pass.

III. Dutch Literature

Similar to what Anneke Mulder-Bakker has argued in relation to hagiographies, the Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1850) should, as a mixture of slave narrative and spiritual biography, be understood as a constructed and, hence, subjective story rather than a transparent text that asserts an objective truth.²¹ This statement should not be misunderstood as an attack on the authenticity of Truth’s story. Rather, it highlights the necessity of using an adequate methodology when analyzing the way in which Truth constructed the story of her life or, to say it in Mabee’s words, the way in which she used “images and parables … to convey symbolic truth … when interpreting her own life and the world at large.”²²

According to DoVeanna Minor and Reginald Pitts, every analysis of slave narratives requires — even in the case of oral narratives — first and foremost a reflection on the frameworks used by the author to transmit his or her personal story to the world.²³ The choice of these frameworks naturally reflects the way stories are told in the cultural context in which the author grew up. Following Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “polyglossia” — the coexistence of multiple languages in the same area — in combination with Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the “contact zone” — a social space where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power — one

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 105–106.
²⁰ Ibid.
²² Mabee, Sojourner Truth, p. 128.
could argue that Truth’s *Narrative* is not just the work of one language but rather of a combination of “contact languages” corresponding to the plurality of cultural frameworks that constitute the culturally diverse “contact zone” in which the text originated.24

One of the “contact languages” of essential importance to understanding the *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* is Dutch. Despite the fact that Truth published her story when she had already been living for twenty years in an almost exclusively Anglo-Saxon cultural environment and that the *Narrative* was written down by her amanuensis Olive Gilbert who structured and complemented it according to her Anglo-Saxon cultural conceptions, the Dutch language remains important in view of the fact that it was Truth’s mother tongue and that she spent the first thirty years of her life (ca. 1797–1827) in a predominantly Dutch-speaking environment. The recurrent observation by scholars that Truth’s work represents an exceptional voice in the context of the broader American slave narrative could, as such, partly be explained with reference to the singular cultural framework that she used to tell her story to the world.25 As Truth grew up in a Dutch cultural environment, her framework was naturally shaped by Dutch stories, legends, songs, jokes, religious concepts, moral concerns, social views, cultural traditions, and so forth. The Anglo-Saxon framework used by Gilbert when writing down the *Narrative* was only partly shared by Truth. Underneath the dominant Anglo-Saxon layer, the *Narrative* hides traces of a Dutch framework that are still waiting to be uncovered.

James Tackach pointed out that the most profound influences on the form and content of the American slave narrative came from the captivity narrative, as created by Mary Rowlandson, and the American success narrative, as formulated by Benjamin Franklin.26 Both these narratives highlight the hero’s perseverance and trust in God in order to successfully overcome the terrible ordeal of captivity or poverty. Especially in the former case, the narrative is characterized by suspense and, when applied to slavery, includes a frank description of brutality, torture and heroic escape. Although not altogether absent, these characteristics cannot be considered the dominant features of Truth’s *Narrative*. Her life story includes few examples of brutality, has little suspense and clearly privileges a spiritual dimension over personal success.

Living for thirty years with the Dutch-speaking Hardenbergh, Schryver and Dumont families, Truth must have become familiar with Dutch stories that may account for the exceptionality of her *Narrative*. As Washington confirms, “sto-


and recitations were most likely guides for Elizabeth’s and Bell’s religious instruction.”27 We do not know what Dutch stories Truth may have been familiar with. The remarkable tendency in Truth’s stories to blur the borders between knowledge and ignorance allows, however, a link to a specific genre in Dutch story-telling. While Mabee has claimed that Truth’s provocative attachment to her illiteracy — “I can’t read a book, but I can read the people,” “I don’t read such small stuff as letters, I read men and nations,” “I know and do what is right better than many big men who read,” etc. — should be understood as a defense strategy to hide a possible dyslectic deficiency, the assumption that a purely rational approach to the divine is futile because a true understanding of God requires supra-rational forms of knowledge that cannot be learned from books is a typical feature of a genre in Dutch literature known as the exemplum.28

The genre became highly popular in the Low Countries in the fifteenth century. Despite losing popularity in the sixteenth century, exempla survived in Dutch oral literature and are likely to have existed in New Netherland. In her study on Beverwijck, the later Albany, Janny Venema highlighted how almanacs, in particular, contributed to the dissemination of such traditional Dutch anecdotes and stories in the Hudson area.29 In fact, despite its profoundly Catholic roots, the exemplum functioned as an important source of inspiration for the Calvinist literature that circulated in print among Dutch settlers on the American East Coast. As Cornelis de Vooys has shown in his classical study Middelnederlandse legenden en exempelen (Middle Dutch Legends and Exempla, 1926), the Reformation fiercely rejected the Catholic background of the genre but many of the stories survived in an adapted, Calvinist fashion, most notably in the popular emblems by the Pietistic poet Jacob Cats.30 Willem Frijhoff even used the term “Protestant exemplum” when highlighting the continuous popularity of the genre in the Netherlands after the Reformation.31

Similar to the anecdotes Truth would often tell at the beginning of her speeches, the exempla had a double goal: due to their entertaining, sometimes even humorous, character they strengthened the rhetorical arguments of the speaker while at the same time they also appealed to the common sense of the audience.32 Truth’s talent in transmitting a deep, thought-provoking message when starting from the anecdotal is a typical characteristic of the exemplum. Another feature of the exemplum is the sympathy in a picaresque tradition for the weaker in society

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27 Margaret Washington, Sojourner Truth’s America, p. 21.
28 Mabee, Sojourner Truth, p. 63.
32 Fitch and Mandziuk, Sojourner Truth as Orator, pp. 31–95.
(the children, the poor, the elderly, the women, the illiterate, etc.) which reflected itself in a tendency to turn traditional power relations upside down, similar to what Erlene Stetson and Linda David have called Truth’s “topsy-turvy argumentation” in placing the weak on top and the powerful at the bottom. This reversal of power relations in the exemplum often happened in unexpected, miraculous ways. Frits van Oostrom indicated, however, that despite the propensity to include astonishing and almost incredible occurrences, it was of essential importance that the central story of the exemplum remained veracious. If people would have the impression that the story was completely fake, the exemplum would immediately lose its probative value. Therefore, authors tended to add rationalizing elements to the plot in order to legitimize the veracity of their story.

Despite such rationalizing elements, however, the exemplum remained an essentially religious genre with a transcendental message about the eternal struggle between good and evil. Van Oostrom aptly characterized exempla as attempts to perceive the divine in human dimensions. Exempla display, indeed, a tendency to transmit a perception of the divine through visions, miracles and other manifestations of the supernatural that can be captured with human senses. The ultimate strength of the exemplum lies in transmitting an impression of a direct confrontation with the divine, which in normal circumstances is only supposed to take place in heaven. In the exemplum, the godly becomes tangible, albeit only through words.

Similar to the exemplum, the main concern in Truth’s *Narrative* is not so much the escape from earthly suffering but rather the preparation for afterlife in heaven. The decisive “escape” is not that of slavery but that from an ungodly life and the ultimate victory is not the defeat of the slave master but the reunion with a new Lord, Jesus Christ. Significantly, the *Narrative* does not end with indictment but with the Christian forgiveness of her master.

If read in the tradition of the exemplum, Truth’s account of her mystic encounter with Christ can be considered the central passage of the *Narrative*. Although the Biblical story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus and the many miraculous visionary transformations in Wesleyan Primitive Methodism might have been Truth’s dominant semantic pattern, the reproduction of her mystic experience might also have been influenced by the strong mystic tradition in Dutch culture. The fact that Truth’s mystic vision occurred during Pentecost, the Christian Feast of the Holy Spirit, corresponds to a long tradition in Dutch culture. The fascination for the possession of the Holy Spirit in the mystic

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encounter with Christ, the *unio mystica*, did not disappear in Dutch culture with the Reformation. Dutch Pietists, in particular, had mystic inclinations. According to Washington,

Isabella’s American-born mother, Elizabeth, identified with the Pietist’s simple faith, expressive spirituality, and teachings of universal salvation. … Isabella’s birth among rural Dutch Pietists connected her with a Protestant religious legacy, particularly through female culture.37

Washington’s reference to “female culture” as a link between Truth and Dutch Pietistic mysticism relates most likely to Dina Van Bergh, who was married to Jacob Rutsen Hardenbergh, the younger brother of Johannes Hardenbergh, Truth’s first master.38 Van Bergh’s diary reveals clear traces of Pietistic mysticism.39 Not without reason, thus, Washington referred to Truth as “the Afro Dutch mystic.”40

IV. Conclusion

Combining Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the “contact zone” with that of Mikhail Bakhtin’s “polyglossia,” this article suggested a broadening of the traditional Anglo-centric perspective on Sojourner Truth by including a new “contact language” in the analysis of her life and legacy: Dutch. When interpreting this legacy from a specifically Dutch perspective, it became clear that Truth’s repetitive remarks about the unimportance of her formative years in a Dutch-American cultural environment should not be taken at face value. While it is understandable that, to Truth herself, life changed so dramatically after her “rebirth” as Christian that anything which happened before seemed unimportant, scholarship mistakenly used the same line of reasoning for far too long.

Thanks to a Dutch perspective on Truth’s work and legacy, new lines of thought could be presented that opened up a series of unexplored pathways in the analysis of one of the most remarkable women in American history. There is certainly more to be said about the people, the stories, the prayers, the songs, the books and the traditions that impacted Truth when she was living with the Dutch-American Hardenbergh, Schryver and Dumont families. Moreover, other “contact languages” besides Dutch are still waiting to be included in scholarship on Truth. Washington’s reference to the possible Luso-African roots of Truth’s mother cries for further investigation using Portuguese sources following Linda

37 Washington, *Sojourner Truth’s America*, p. 16.
Heywood and John Thornton’s groundbreaking research on “Atlantic Creoles” and the importance of Luso-African, Catholic traditions for America’s Charter Generation in New York.41 The same applies to materials in native African languages such as the possible influence of Anansi-stories on her Narrative in order to push the investigation of Truth’s often mentioned but never seriously investigated African identity to a higher academic level. In view of the importance of her complex and multidimensional legacy, perhaps more than any other icon in American history, Sojourner Truth deserves such a trans-national, multi-lingual and truly diverse approach.

References


