

Acts of Equality

Writing Autonomy, Empathy and Community in an Indonesian Slave Narrative

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Introduction

Sometime in the nineteenth century, a formerly enslaved man from the Indonesian archipelago, Richard Heindrik Wange van Balie (1798–1869), wrote a memoir of his life as a slave in the Indian Ocean region.¹ The memoir begins with his birth, covers his early youth with his family on their small farm on the island of Magarij, his enslavement and that of his brothers when he was four or five years old, and his life as the domestic and field slave of different masters across the Indonesian archipelago up to 1810, when he was taken to the Netherlands by his last, Dutch owner and finally emancipated.² Living for the rest of his life in the city of Delft, Van Balie learned how to read and write Dutch, married, had seven children, and worked in a variety of occupations, including as a servant, a gardener and a porter.³ Fifty-nine handwritten pages of this unpublished document, currently in the possession of Van Balie's descendant, Ron Siteur, come from a twentieth-century copy of the original text—a handwritten notebook, now lost. As no other slave narratives from Indonesia are known, this is, in many ways, a unique document, the analysis of which is a direct response to the question phrased by the editors of the current volume in their introduction: “What did it mean for people to be caught in this Indian Ocean web of slavery?”

In this chapter, I will read the writing of this memoir as well as specific elements of its contents as what I term “acts of equality”: those acts through which subjects, no matter who they are, constitute themselves as equal to all other subjects. I will discuss how Van Balie establishes himself as equal to his white Dutch readers in three respects: as an individual human being he is morally autonomous; in terms of interpersonal relationality he writes

himself as capable of establishing an emotional bond, such as a friendship, through mutual empathy; and with regard to nationality he writes of his origin community as different from yet equal to the Netherlands. His acts of equality include seemingly modest deeds like reading the newspaper, feeling the love his father felt for him, and describing the work done on the farm of his family of origin. These acts have great implications for the moral autonomy, empathy and community of not just Van Balie himself, but also of other black and (formerly) enslaved people. Van Balie's acts of equality did not emerge out of nowhere; rather, his narrative can be seen as an appropriation of particular Enlightenment, Christian and nationalist discourses circulating in Europe at the time, which offered him the opportunity to write his equality against the many discourses of (racial) hierarchy he encountered and sometimes reproduced. Through an analysis of this memoir along these lines, this chapter makes two scholarly points: the first argues for a broadening of current thinking about equality in slave narratives and abolitionism, while the second proposes a correction to the rather bleak image of enslaved and black people in the nineteenth-century Dutch colonial archive.

At the same time, this chapter is a confirmation of some of the historical insights provided in the chapters in the first part of this volume, in particular Geelen et al.'s assertion that "for the Indian Ocean World, it is recognized that 'forms of status obligation, bondage, and temporary slavery (for debt, etc.) coexisted with forms of hereditary slavery similar to that in North America'"—Van Balie, namely, becomes a slave due to his late mother's debts, making his a liminal case in between debt and hereditary slavery. Lodewijk Wagenaar's remark that in an Indian Oceans context "it is nearly impossible to meet [enslaved and emancipated subjects] as individuals with personal identities" is both relativized and confirmed in this chapter, as on the one hand we have here a striking amount of autobiographical material, while on the other hand the writing of a self proves always to be subject to the genres and discourses that are available, pointing to the mediated nature of any encounter. Moreover, even when ego documents of formerly enslaved people are uncovered by historians, as in the case of Wange van Balie by Reggie Baay in his 2015 book on the history of slavery in the Dutch East Indies, Dutch public and literary attention is hardly grabbed, reflecting the general lack of interest in the Netherlands in texts written by Indonesians about the Dutch colonial past.⁴



Figure 7.1. Portrait of Wange Hendrijk Richard van Bali. Etching by Ernst Willem Bagelaar.

Source: Rijksmuseum, object number RP-P-BI-245.

Acts of equality

I develop the notion of an “act of equality” based on “acts of citizenship”, coined by Engin Isin and Greg Nielsen in the field of citizenship studies, and on philosopher Jacques Rancière’s concept of equality.⁵ Whereas these theories are primarily concerned with equality in a political sense, Van Balie’s acts can be more aptly described as establishing social equality. Nevertheless, I argue that these theories can inform the conceptualization of acts of political as well as social equality. Isin and Nielsen developed the concept of acts of citizenship to supplement studies on formal citizenship (membership of a nation-state) and substantive citizenship (actual ability to claim rights), and to shift the focus “from subjects as such to acts (or deeds) that produce such subjects”.⁶ Acts of citizenship, they hold, rupture social-historical patterns and “break with repetitions of the same and so anticipate rejoinders from imaginary but not fictional adversaries”.⁷ Van Balie may have encountered some of these very real adversaries in the daily newspaper he read, in which slaves and black people were regularly accused of being lazy and uncivilized (among other things); here I will read his memoir, in part, as a response to them. His acts of equality can be interpreted as interruptions of the many acts of inequality he faced.

In Rancière’s work equality is the principle of politics, but it is not meant in the sense, as Todd May explains, of a “passive equality” that involves the distribution of rights and ensuring representation by institutions, but it refers to an “active equality”.⁸ In Rancière’s work, active equality or simply “politics” is an interruption of “the police”: “the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution”.⁹ Rancière writes:

Spectacular or otherwise, political activity [politics] is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogenous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.¹⁰

Van Balie introduces this “heterogeneous assumption”—the assumption of equality—in various ways; for instance, by writing an ego document and addressing his reader as a friend. What the theories of Isin and Nielsen and Rancière have in common is the conceptualization of equality not as

a position that is (eventually) facilitated by institutions or discourses propagated through one's newspaper, but as a mode of subjectivization which can be constituted through acts. Subjects are not the origins of speech, but speech constitutes subjects.¹¹

As I have already indicated, while both these theories were developed primarily for the political world of rights, citizenship and democratic equality, in his memoir Van Balie never explicitly claims rights or citizenship. The memoir does describe moments characteristic of conditions experienced by other slaves and some antagonism towards owners—Van Balie's brothers, for instance, made a plan to flee across the mountains to an uncle to escape enslavement, but never executed it—and can therefore be said to have traces of collective subjectivization that have the potential to be translated into political claims. Nowhere in this memoir, however, do these moments turn into acts of political equality in terms of actual claims to rights or citizenship. The equality that Van Balie forges emerges through his writing of his individual as well as natural family's moral autonomy, capacity to empathize, and ability to be part of a community equal to any other community, including that of the Dutch nation. It therefore lies in a realm different from the political: it can more accurately be characterized as social equality.

Nevertheless, the acts of social equality that Van Balie performs do have a strong connection to Isin and Nielsen's and Rancière's acts of equality in the political realm when seen in the light of Lynn Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights*. In this historical study, Hunt theorizes the relationship between social history and human rights at end of the eighteenth century, in particular the connection between being seen as an equal human being and claiming human rights. She connects social and political equality by showing that equality as a function of one's humanity is a basis for equal rights. According to Hunt, "[t]o have human rights, people had to be perceived as separate individuals who were capable of exercising independent moral judgment" and as "able to empathize with others".¹² In other words: to be deemed "ready" for rights one had to be seen as human, and being human means performing certain acts indicative of one's humanity and social equality. In this chapter, in addition to the individual and interpersonal levels of equality theorized by Hunt through moral autonomy and empathy respectively, I add a third level: the (national) community, which became increasingly important over the course of the nineteenth century.

When seen through the lens of Hunt's work, Van Balie's acts of social equality can be read as those humanizing acts which laid the groundwork

for political equality. His writing of an autonomous, empathetic self, born in a national community which was in many ways equal to Dutch society, and his conceptualization of himself as a man with a history and personal development who participated in Dutch national (print) culture through reading, writing and practising Christianity, put him on an equal social plane with the readers of his text. Hunt writes, “[i]n the eighteenth century (and indeed, right up to the present), all ‘people’ were not imagined as equally capable of moral autonomy [C]hildren, slaves, servants, the propertyless, and women lacked the required independence of status to be fully autonomous”, and were therefore not seen as fully human.¹³ Throughout the nineteenth century, these groups raised their voices, protesting their social and political situations through the abolitionist, labour, feminist and child labour movements. Van Balie’s memoir can be read as participating in these movements. Social equality does not automatically translate into political equality, but with Hunt’s work in mind we become aware of their historical connections.

Equality and abolitionism

Approaching this memoir through the lens of acts of equality allows for a twofold scholarly positioning: firstly, a broadening of the idea of equality in slave narratives and abolitionism; and, secondly, an act of repair in the historiography of abolitionism in the Dutch empire, about which the current consensus is—for good reason—too little, too late.

Although many publications focusing on abolitionism and slave narratives in the US mention equality, only a small number elaborate on this concept. In these studies, equality—in the sense of equal rights and citizenship—is conceptualized as the ultimate goal within certain abolitionist movements; it would be established within the framework of what Isin and Nielsen call “formal” and “substantive citizenship”, and forms an example of “passive equality”. In both James McPherson’s *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction* and Paul Goodman’s *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*, equality is seen as ultimately distributed by institutions. In other words, it is passive, not active.¹⁴ Similarly, the approach of Celeste Condit and John Lucaites, who analyse what they call the “rhetoric of equality” in American public discourse, particularly in relation to African-American history, does not provide the conceptual framework to see equality as a social or political

starting point, dependent not on institutions or public discourse, but on acts of subjectivisation by those whom Rancière describes as “those who have no part”.¹⁵ Through the concept of acts of equality, this chapter will show that when placed in the historical context of nineteenth-century Europe Van Balie’s appropriation of certain Enlightenment, Christian and nationalist discourses in the description of his life before, during and after slavery can be read as him positioning himself and his community of origin as human beings, equal to his white Dutch readers.

The second scholarly point concerns the current image of abolitionism in the Dutch empire, and the possibility that an analysis of Van Balie’s text can offer a correction by focusing on the acts—in this case of writing equality—of the (formerly) enslaved. This chapter contributes to a larger body of scholarship that focuses on the presence and resistance of colonized and enslaved subjects in the Dutch imperial world—for instance, by looking at slave uprisings in Suriname and the work of black intellectuals in the Netherlands.¹⁶ Van Balie’s text, in particular, can broaden our perspective on nineteenth-century thought about slavery in the Dutch world.

Historians agree that, unlike Britain and the US, the Netherlands did not have an anti-slavery movement to speak of: Dutch abolition was late (1862) and Dutch abolitionism lacked mass appeal as it remained elitist and never became a mass movement.¹⁷ The only Dutch abolitionist publication that became somewhat of a bestseller, W.R. van Hoëvell’s 1854 text *Slaves and Free Men under Dutch Law*, argued for neither political nor social equality as it described black people as less “developed” than whites, yet somehow more so than Malays who, like Van Balie, came from the Indonesian archipelago.¹⁸ Racialization also played a key role in government argument against abolition. As the Dutch colonial secretary J.J. Rochussen put it in the early 1860s: “If the emancipated mass of negroes in Dutch Guiana [currently Suriname] is left to its own strength, or rather its own weakness, what else can one expect for the future than a decimation of its numbers by misery, leprosy and venereal diseases?”¹⁹ Finally, Marijke Huisman has shown that although Dutch publishers brought out translations of the slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, “slave autobiographies were not recognized as significant contributions to the discussion on slavery and emancipation”.²⁰

With Van Balie’s text we have a powerful and, as we will see, self-identified black indictment of slavery based on the assumption of equality, written in Dutch in the Netherlands. Unpublished, perhaps even unread,

this unique document nevertheless offers the opportunity for a correction to the historical image of Dutch thinking about slavery. It makes visible what has remained unseen in the Dutch world—protests against the experiences and effects of enslavement—and therefore forms a welcome intervention in a field that, until now, has mostly had access to white Dutch texts on slavery, which portrayed (formerly) enslaved people as either barbaric or pathetic, and never equal.

In what follows I will first elaborate upon discourses of equality and inequality in Europe at the time Van Balie lived there, using his own newspaper as an important source. I will then interpret his memoir as an act of equality to make visible how he appropriated and interrupted these discourses by focusing on three elements: the writing of the memoir itself and his father's role in it, acts that show Van Balie and his family's moral autonomy; his addressing of the reader as a friend, establishing Van Balie's capacity to empathize; and, finally, his attempt to demonstrate the similarities between Magarij and the Netherlands, indicating the equality of national cultures. Together, these acts of equality actively assume Van Balie's and his family's equality with the European society he was embedded in and add a critical voice to thought about slavery in the nineteenth-century Dutch empire.

Thinking racial (in)equality in nineteenth-century Europe

In *The Invention of Humanity*, Siep Stuurman maps the world-historical polyphony of discourses on common humanity and equality from ancient times to the present day.²¹ In Van Balie's memoir we find appropriations of three discourses that could be used to facilitate thinking equality: Enlightenment, Christian and nationalist. Enlightenment discourses on equality, which Stuurman calls "modern equality", are the most prominent sources for this memoir, made evident by how Van Balie writes of himself as a morally autonomous and empathetic subject. Christian equality can be found in his remark "we are all Adam's offspring, all have to appear before Christ".²² As Catherine Hall writes, the idea that all of humankind are Adam's children conveys a basic principle of evangelical liberal humanitarianism, of which slavery is a gross violation.²³ Finally, nationalist equality can be traced in Van Balie's description of Magarij as different from but equal to the Netherlands, a positioning that can be connected to Johan Gottfried von Herder's (1744–1803) both relativist and universalist thoughts on national culture and humanity.

However, all three discourses mentioned above also have the potential to engender inequality. Stuurman writes that drawing from the same European Enlightenment ideas, nineteenth-century Europe saw the widespread circulation of modern *inequality*, trickling down from eighteenth-century Europe in four variants, two of which are of special interest here: racial classification on the one hand and, on the other, and often overlapping with the former, the perceived authority of the enlightened few over the not (yet) enlightened many.²⁴ Racial classification came in several variants: while some in the nineteenth century did not essentialize race and saw all people as possessing a capacity for development, others viewed race as “coloured” rankings within a rigid hierarchy. In these latter systems, white was the “default setting of humanity”, while people of colour represented various degrees of degeneration.²⁵ We can recognize two temporalities here: a static model in which black people are considered irreparably lesser than white people, and a progressive model in which white people are thought to have “already” attained the modernity, civilization or Christian faith that black people can work towards. Van Balie engages with the first, static temporality by countering it—he shows that black people love their children, just as whites do theirs, and therefore have the capacity to empathize—and with the second, progressive one by showing that he is just as advanced as his white readers, for instance, in terms of adopting the Christian faith.

In her study on Dutch perspectives on the world in 1800—around when Van Balie arrived in the Netherlands—Angelie Sens writes that slaves were thought of either as victims, or as heathens who were uncivilized and inclined to behave in a beastly way.²⁶ Around the time Van Balie wrote his memoir in the mid-nineteenth century this view had not changed fundamentally, as we have already seen in the remarks by Van Hoëvell and Rochussen discussed above. Between 1830 and 1870, the *Rotterdam Newspaper* (*Rotterdamsche Courant*), which Van Balie mentions reading, had over 1,300 articles in which the word “slaves” appeared, mostly in the context of Dutch and American debates about slavery. In 1856, for instance, an anonymous writer claimed that liberating slaves was an act of love and a deed worthy of the Lord, but also that “a normal slave is not a civilized European”: “they’re not all Uncle Toms”. This respondent argued that with respect to slaves Europeans first needed to revive “the human being in the human being”, or else emancipation would only lead to laziness or lawlessness. Slaves should first be turned into Christians, and one way to achieve this was to take black children away from their parents at birth in order to offer them a Christian education.²⁷ In

other articles from the same newspaper, (formerly) enslaved people are called lazy, idle, barbaric, immoral, inclined to vagrancy, and not prone to domesticity, family life and obligations (in general, it seems).²⁸ Both temporalities mentioned above return in these articles, with some authors describing black people as stuck on a developmental time scale and others arguing for their education and conversion.

Most of these articles addressed African slavery in the US, the Caribbean and Suriname, as already in the eighteenth-century transatlantic slavery gained most attention at the expense of Indian Ocean slavery.²⁹ Most crucially, however, Van Balie himself self-identified as black (*zwart*): he talks about the community in which he was born and about his Indonesian owners as black, whereas he calls Dutch whites “white”, either using the Dutch word *blank* or the Malay word *orangpoetie*, meaning “white man”. He also does not try to distance himself from other slaves, except when he says that he only knows about people from the “southeast”, not those from “east”, “west” or “southwest”, “because I have never been there”.³⁰ I will therefore read Van Balie’s slave narrative as belonging to the same semantic field as these newspaper articles and interpret his thoughts on slavery as a reflection on its diverse set of practices as a whole. What the categories used to characterize slaves in the *Rotterdam Newspaper* essentially establish is a hierarchy, and by disrupting these categories Van Balie effectively subverts this inequality. It is against the background of these articles in his own newspaper that I will read Van Balie’s writing of himself as an empathetic, loving and loved, knowledgeable, conscientious and hard-working person, friend of the reader, child of Adam—before, during and after his enslavement—as acts which, against the opinions of his adversaries, produce him as equal to them.

Writing moral autonomy

Using the genre of the memoir, Van Balie shows how he developed from an innocent and in many ways pre-conscious child caught up in the system of slavery to a knowing and conscious adult—just like his father had been. In writing on the equality of black people, Van Balie makes clear that not only is he an adult himself, but also that those who raised him possessed what Hunt has identified as the two related but distinct qualities of moral autonomy: the ability to reason and the independence to decide for oneself.³¹ Crucial in the writing of his own moral autonomy is the fact that in the memoir, like in

any retrospective narrative with a first-person narrator, a “double I” is produced—in this case a narrator-I called Van Balie and a character-I called Naï, which was the name by which his family of origin called him. It was through the contrast between these two Is that Van Balie could draw attention to his personal development and growth—not, however, from a barbaric black to a civilised black, but from a child of responsible and loving black people to a morally autonomous adult.

The full title of his work is *The Memory of the Courses of Life of Naï from the Village of Leeot on The Island of Magarij Near Bima, Near the Island of Java, Now, Wange Heindrik Richard van Balie*. Extensive research has been done on ego documents from the nineteenth-century Netherlands, and an inventory of such documents from between 1814 and 1914 shows that both “memory” (*Herinnering*) and “course of life” (*Levensloop*) were widespread concepts used by the authors of this genre, making it likely that Van Balie somehow had access to at least one of these documents.³² However, what immediately sets Van Balie’s title apart from all these others, next to the meticulous indication of his place of birth—which obviously needed more explanation than the average Dutch town—is that his life is divided into two phases: one as Naï and one (“now”) as W.H.R. van Balie. This double I opens up in the text two different narrative worlds, each with its own characters, places, props and temporalities. The world of young Naï, which is discussed elaborately, is populated by his father, grandmother and brothers and, as he is taken away into slavery by his owners, their servants and other slaves. It is the world of colonial Indonesia with islands, boats, monkeys and farms, and it lies in the past. The narrator-I lives in the present-day Netherlands—then the nineteenth century—surrounded by Dutch people and a wholly different set of props, including newspapers, Bible passages and carriages. Though this world is less often referenced, it is nevertheless continually present, if only because the narrator lives in it and his perspective is shaped by it.

It is through the filtering perspective of narrator-I that the reader accesses the thoughts and feelings of the character-I Naï, which creates a sense of intimacy during the many heart-breaking moments that Van Balie’s young self experiences as he is separated from his family and seeks someone to offer him “sweet words of comfort”.³³ The text also creates an intimacy between the narrator and the adults in young Naï’s life, in particular his father, as the adult narrator Van Balie and the character of the father share the kind of life experience that the young Naï still lacks; both adults observe him in his childish ways. Throughout the first part of the text, when Naï is still living with

his family, it feels as if he has two fathers: his biological father, whose gaze is always mild, and a much more critical older self, the narrator, who often castigates him. It is in the contrasting reactions of these two men to the same situation that their moral autonomy becomes apparent—for instance, when Naï burns the house down after playing with fire, or when he fails to foresee the man-made disaster of enslavement that is about to strike his family. The two men have radically different responses—while the narrator calls Naï “naughty” and “naïve”, his father always responds with compassion and unconditional love. Van Balie offers a touching illustration of this difference in his interpretation of his father’s response after it had become clear that the three sons would soon be taken away from the family. In Van Balie’s words, Naï still went out to play with his friends as if nothing would change, “but my father knew and that is why he let me have my way, he probably thought: during the brief moment that remains, let pleasure do its work, it won’t be long”.³⁴ The memoir thus creates a group of adults around the young Naï that reflects on his behaviour and well-being. Of this group, the father and grandmother are loving without exception, while the narrator-I often lectures the young Naï, perhaps indicating that Van Balie blamed himself for his enslavement and the separation from his family. What all these black adults share is moral autonomy: they are able independently to observe and reflect on a situation and then decide for themselves its moral meaning. The fact that their personal autonomy was severely limited by the system of slavery does not alter this. When Naï, after arriving in the Netherlands, chose his Dutch names, one of them was that of his father: Wange.

Van Balie’s acquisition of moral autonomy and his capacity independently to distinguish good from evil also come to the fore clearly with respect to the practice of slavery. Unlike the young Naï before his enslavement—whom he describes as living “like a fish in the water”, a Dutch expression for a feeling of wholeness with one’s surroundings—the older narrator sees “dark clouds” looming over the family, symbolizing the men who would take him and his brothers away, never to return.³⁵ He repeatedly emphasizes the devastating effect of his enslavement; for instance, he recalls the last time he passed his family’s village without being allowed to enter it as “the saddest of all days of my youth”.³⁶ Reflecting on the different ways in which his owners treated the child slave Naï, Van Balie writes, “What makes one human being different from another? The first master kept me as her own child, and here [in a later master’s house] they did not even speak to me, though I had food and drink enough, I did not lack bacon and meat, but I lacked help and comforting

words to comfort my bitterly saddened heart”.³⁷ In this passage, Van Balie not only passes a moral verdict on the treatment slaves received from different owners, but also offers his inner child what he seems to have lacked most: recognition and validation of his feelings—in short, empathy.

Writing empathy

According to Hunt, in her writing about the late eighteenth century, “[t]o be autonomous, a person [had] to be legitimately separate and protected in his or her separation; but to have rights go along with that bodily separation a person’s selfhood [had to] be appreciated in some more emotional fashion”. This emotional fashion was empathy or, in Hunt’s words, “the recognition that others feel and think as we do”.³⁸ In Van Balie’s memoir empathy is a core theme, and while some of his owners are indifferent to young Nai’s sadness, his family of origin, certain other owners, and, if he is not behaving like a critical parent, even the narrator-I often try to understand and mirror his feelings of sorrow and fear. Here, I will focus on another empathetic relation found throughout the text, namely, the one between the narrator and the narratee, who is addressed as “reader”, “friend”, and sometimes, in one word, as “friendreader”.

Van Balie addresses his reader(s) around twenty times as “friend” or “friends”. In almost every instance he invokes the friendship of his readers when he returns to the central trauma of this text: the separation from his father, grandmother and brothers. The word “friend” is never far away from words such as “grimness”, “melancholic”, “sad” and “sorrowful”, as in this typical instance: “yes my friend, I will stop telling you about this grimness, because my heart is becoming small and became melancholic [weemoedig], yes my friends and reader, who of you would not become sad in your hearts to read about such a household and hear that their children were taken away before their eyes”.³⁹ How did Van Balie’s text’s conception of friendship fit into and depart from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concepts and practices of this type of relationship? Crucial for him, I argue, was equality, which was forged through the production of intimacy and the sharing of inner experiences.⁴⁰

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Britain and France, philosophers devised strict criteria for what qualified as friendship, as for most of them friendship could exist only with equality.⁴¹ A majority of philosophers,

following Aristotle, held that “true” friendships were based on virtue and mutual respect and concern, whereas “lesser” friendships were based on need and self-interest, or else merely the pleasure of company. In everyday usage, difference in rank did not disqualify a relationship from being considered a friendship, leading to the nineteenth-century usage of the word to characterize a broader range of relations than philosophy and literature reflected, including those between family members, people who formed ties through business or socializing, and even patrons and clients. According to the philosophers, the patron-client relationship in particular “involved benevolence and protection but not the equality that mutual friendship implied”.⁴² One example of a patron-client friendship is in the work of Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1705–1775), published in 1772 and considered the first slave narrative in English. Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797), whose slave narrative was published in 1789, also writes about a white American he met and befriended, although here the inequality was also apparent.⁴³

Van Balie’s usage of the word “friend” does not imply the kind of hierarchies found in the writings of Gronniosaw and Equiano. When writing about people with whom he has a vertical relationship, in particular his various owners, he employs a different vocabulary, referring to them as “masters” and himself as a slave. This hierarchical relationship between owner and slave is replaced by one of horizontal empathy in those moments when Van Balie addresses his reader as friend. He asks them to imagine his situation, for instance when his family had just heard that the three children would be taken away into slavery: “Well my reader, what do you think of this family, is this not a sad situation for us my friend and reader, where have joy and cheerful days gone?”⁴⁴ Conversely, he imagines how his readers will feel—for instance, when he supposes they will be sad in their hearts to read his memoir.

Historians of friendship have analysed not only conditions for friendship, but also processes of exclusion: which people are deemed capable of entertaining an equal relationship? Several philosophers of that time claimed that true friendship was not possible among the “common people”; they believed that the difficult conditions in their lives had hardened their hearts and prevented disinterestedness. True friendship, in the eyes of Adam Smith and David Hume, also distinguished savages from (civilized) Europeans. In the words of Hume, “Asiatic manners are as destructive to friendship as to love”.⁴⁵ This tendency to exclude people of colour from notions of friendship became stronger in the course of the nineteenth century. With respect to the eighteenth century, Garrioch could still discuss the Enlightenment-inspired ideal of

being “a friend to all humanity”.⁴⁶ Nineteenth-century nationalism, however, with its ideals of cultural, linguistic and racial unity, made it more difficult for friendships to cross differences.⁴⁷ Literature in the nineteenth century warned readers of the limits of friendship, in particular with respect to religion and race, for instance in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847).⁴⁸ In the context of empire in the nineteenth century, various models of friendship were circulating, many also characterized by distance and hierarchy, such as the idea of befriending colonial subjects to “uplift” them, as in various civilizing projects like the Dutch “ethical policy”, which can be traced to the publication of the 1860 novel *Max Havelaar* by Multatuli, well within Van Balie’s lifetime.

Through the production of intimacy and the sharing of inner experiences, Van Balie summons what Hunt calls “the notion of a community based on autonomous, empathetic individuals who could relate beyond their immediate families, religious affiliations, or even nations to greater universal values”.⁴⁹ It has become apparent that sentimentality was part of Van Balie’s interpellations, as was the case with many of his contemporaries. Garrioch traces the rise of the perceived importance of sentiment in friendship in the Romantic period, particularly in novels such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and Germaine de Staël’s *Corinne* (1807), but also in various forms of “intimate writing” such as letters, journals and autobiographies which often contained an “intensely emotional language to describe friendship”.⁵⁰ The nineteenth-century US saw the emergence of a “culture of affective individualism, becoming mutually introspective, self-disclosive, affectionate and emotionally expressive”.⁵¹ The sentimentality surrounding friendship from the mid-eighteenth century onwards can be read as a claim to social equality: “a man of feeling did not necessarily have distinguished ancestors but he was worthy of consideration nevertheless”.⁵²

Drawing on these ideas, Van Balie makes a powerful argument that he and other black people also have feelings of empathy, especially in terms of friendship, love and other forms of intimacy. At several points in his text he recounts the good times he enjoyed with his playmates, and even describes one of their games elaborately. In another passage, he argues against the apparently widespread idea in the Netherlands at the time that “in the East” parents sold their own children.⁵³ The most fundamental act of equality in terms of empathy, however, was his addressing of the reader as a friend, precisely because most potential readers were likely to be found across racialized boundaries. In a kind of Althusserian counter-interpellation, by choosing to address the narratee in this way Van Balie positions himself as equal to his white reader.

Writing community

After exploring how Van Balie established himself as a morally autonomous human being with the capacity to form empathetic bonds and, having moved from individual to interpersonal relations, in this last section I discuss how he wrote of himself as part of larger (imagined) communities. Operating in two narrative worlds—colonial Indonesia and the Netherlands—Van Balie writes of himself as part of both. The way he positions himself as part of nineteenth-century Netherlands comes closest to what we can call, in Isin and Nielsen's terms, an act of citizenship, for he actively participates in national print and religious culture. Building on the work of Benedict Anderson, we can see Van Balie's various actions—reading a Dutch newspaper, producing an ego document, and quoting various Bible passages—as acts that allowed him not only to imagine, but also to assert himself as part of the nation of the Netherlands.⁵⁴ Here, however, I will focus on his description of his home community of Magarij in relation to the Netherlands.

In the previous paragraph I discussed nationalism as an exclusionary and hierarchizing discourse that poses an obstacle to the cultivation of empathy and friendship across racial boundaries. Nationalist discourses could have affected Van Balie's social equality in two ways—one, the supposedly less civilized nature of an Asian community like the one on the island of Magarij; and, two, his exclusion from the imagined community of the Netherlands because of racialization and differentiation in terms of culture and language. However, when analysing how Van Balie writes about his community of origin, we find hardly any indications that he saw Magarij as the lesser of the two countries. On the contrary, he conceived of his home and new community as different in cultural expression but equal with respect to their participation in humanity. It is therefore fruitful to view Van Balie's perspective on the relationship between his old and new communities in the light of German philosopher J.G. Herder's writing on national cultures and humanity. He is considered "one of the first modern writers to recognize the need to protect cultural diversity and to foster the plurality of cultures".⁵⁵

According to Sonia Sikka, "in his accounts of language, climate, and religion, of the variability of human happiness, the nature of reason and the unfolding of history, Herder charts a complex course navigating between the poles of particularism and universalism".⁵⁶ Engaging throughout with the problem of cultural relativism, Herder's thinking "examines how universal expressions of human life are always restricted by the cultural context in

which they are produced; but it also pursues the universal quality at the heart of culturally determined forms of expression".⁵⁷ According to Herder, nations were separated "not only by woods and mountains, seas and deserts, rivers and climates, but more particularly by languages, inclinations, and characters",⁵⁸ but phrases like these did not preclude him from thinking about the nature of "humanity" as a universalist notion.⁵⁹ Even as he establishes himself and his family as equals in terms of their humanity, Van Balie also elaborately describes the specific forms of cultural expression that can be found in Magarij, and especially how it contrasts with practices in the Netherlands; therefore, he also can be analysed as balancing universalism and relativism, just like Herder.

Van Balie elaborates on many aspects of life on the island of Magarij. He discusses, among other things, the division of labour between the different family members, the composition of the family's livestock—two pigs, some chickens and roosters, and two dogs for protection against monkeys and other wild animals—the kind of produce their farm yields, the cooperative system they had developed with their neighbours to farm land, trade with seafarers, the production of clothing, housing construction and the beauty of the local landscape. Early in the memoir, Van Balie describes daily life in his home community, and how he and his brothers helped their father work on the family farm: "[e]arly in the morning we went to the field to do our daily work and at night we came home with rest and peace to find grandmother having done her household tasks, orderly and clean, and our diner ready, and that is how we lived from one day to another".⁶⁰ His father, he writes, was poor, and their lives were simple, but all in all the picture he paints is idyllic and his descriptions are often infused with nostalgia.

That Van Balie sees his home community as different from yet equal to the Netherlands becomes apparent in how he compares the two communities. Placing the two narrative worlds he engages in side by side, he distinguishes between how things are done "in this country" (the Netherlands) and how things are done "according to our way" (that is, the way of the community in Magarij). For example, about the produce they harvest from the fields he writes, "Our foods from the field consisted of rice, millet, Turkish grain and potatoes, not like the ones in this country, but larger and elongated, this type of potatoes we call petatas".⁶¹ A recurring theme in Van Balie's comparisons concerns objects or skills present in the Netherlands, but not in Magarij. Yet, he is always quick to point out that these should not be seen as lacking, but as things that are unnecessary, certainly to the people of Magarij. Manuring "like here in Holland" is not needed, he holds, because there is plenty of

land, and that despite the fact that in Magarij there is no knowledge of breeding there is always plenty of fresh bacon and meat available.⁶² If Van Balie sometimes touts the qualities of one community over another, it is in subtle ways: when speaking of Magarij; he says people may not wear “fine or fashionable costumes like in this country”, but are also not “proud”.⁶³

Both Van Balie’s emphases, in this last example, on modesty as opposed to pride, as well as his general attention to the rural aspects of his home community, were significant aspects of European and specifically Dutch nationalism. As Gert-Jan Johannes has shown, nineteenth-century Dutch nationalism, seeking to distinguish itself from the bigger nations it was surrounded by, in particular France and Britain, focused on the country’s smallness.⁶⁴ In the context of imperialism, Dutch authors embraced what was seen as the Dutch small scale and imagined their community as one that did not participate in the international power games of big nations, a conception that survived into the twenty-first century. More generally, this praise of modesty led to a glorification of mediocrity: what made the Netherlands great was precisely its averageness. Van Balie seems to suggest Magarij sometimes outdid the Dutch in terms of its Dutchness. With respect to rural living, the Netherlands, influenced by nineteenth-century nationalism, subscribed to a national identity that idolized the countryside as “the true, timeless soul of the nation”.⁶⁵ In a tendency which would culminate in the second half of the nineteenth century with, among other things, the opening of a museum focused on rural life and architecture (*Openluchtmuseum*), Dutch rural culture became an increasing part of the national consciousness from the beginning of the century onwards, with a particular focus on traditional costumes worn by farmers and fishermen who were supposed to embody the “original” Dutch population and were expected to wear “indigenous” clothing, deemed “uncorrupted by international fashion”.⁶⁶ If indeed the heart of a nation could be found in the modesty of its rural inhabitants, there was no community with more heart than Magarij, Van Balie seems to suggest. His writing of Magarij and the Netherlands as different yet equal is an act of equality for his community of origin as a whole.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of a slave narrative, written in Dutch in the Netherlands by a man born in late eighteenth-century Indonesia, this chapter has sought to change thinking about equality in slave narratives in general and Dutch

abolitionism in particular. By writing of himself as a morally autonomous and empathetic subject, born in a community at least equal to the imagined community of the Dutch nation, Wange van Balie did not wait for the acknowledgement of his status as an equal and a human being, but instead assumed his and his community of origin's place as an equal part of humanity, despite important elements in public discourse—Dutch abolitionism as well as anti-abolitionism and his newspaper—telling him otherwise. I introduced the concept of an act of equality to make visible how, in his case, the acts preceded the subject, who did not wait for institutions or public discourse to grant him social equality but constituted it himself. By writing of himself and his black Indonesian family, he interrupted discourses of racial hierarchy and inequality and deftly appropriated the politics of equality circulating through particular constellations of Enlightenment, Christian and nationalist thought. His narrative shows that equality can be read to be actively assumed in slave narratives, and that it is possible to think about (former) slaves and black people in the Dutch empire not as either backward or pathetic, but as equal.

Notes

1. Wange van Balie, "De Herinnering van Levens Loopen van Nai op het Dorp leet op het Eiland Magarij na bij Bima, bij Eiland Java Nu Wange Heindrik Richard van Balie" (unpublished manuscript), private collection of Ron Siteur. Several of the themes in this chapter were already explored in Sarie Hertgers, "'O! mijn vriendleezer het is droef gedag der dagen dat ik nooit zal vergeten': Over vriendschap, herinnering en moraliteit in het egodocument van Wange Heindrik Richard van Balie, voormalig slaaf uit Nederlands-Indië" (master's thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2017). Hertgers also made a transcription of the manuscript.
2. Van Balie writes about his island of birth as "Magarij", which is currently the name of the western part of the island of Flores, part of the Republic of Indonesia. In Indonesian this regency is called Manggarai.
3. Ron Siteur, "Beschrijving van de levensgeschiedenis van Wange van Bali," last modified September 2009, <http://www.wangevanbali.nl/>.
4. Reggie Baay, *Daar werd wat gruwelijks verricht: Slavernij in Nederlands-Indië*, 153-60. Amsterdam: Athenaeum, 2015.
5. Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, "Introduction: Acts of Citizenship," in *Acts of Citizenship*, edited by Engin F. Isin and Greg M. Nielsen, 1-12. London: Zed

- Books, 2008; Jacques Rancière, *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose, Minneapolis MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
6. Isin and Nielsen, "Introduction," 2.
 7. *Ibid.*, 2.
 8. Todd May, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008.
 9. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 28.
 10. *Ibid.*, 30.
 11. Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, trans. Julie Rose. Cambridge: Polity, 2006.
 12. Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History*, 27. New York: Norton, 2007.
 13. Hunt, *Inventing*, 28.
 14. James McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality: Abolitionists and the Negro in the Civil War and Reconstruction*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964; Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1998.
 15. Rancière, *Dis-agreement*, 30; Celeste Condit and John Lucaites (eds.), *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word*. Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
 16. These intellectuals included the Ashanti Prince Aquasie Boachi and the Java-
nese clerk Sastrâ-tâmâ who were both in Delft in the 1840s when Van Balie
was living in that city. On Boachi see Allison Blakely, *Blacks in the Dutch World:
The Evolution of Racial Imagery in a Modern Society*, 257. Bloomington IN: Indi-
ana University Press, 2000. On Sastrâ-tâmâ see Cees van Dijk, "1600–1898:
Gezanten, slaven, een schilder en enkele scholieren," in *In het land van de
overheerser: Indonesiërs in Nederland 1600-1950*, edited by Harry A. Poeze, 15.
Dordrecht: Floris, 1986.
 17. Maarten Kuitenbrouwer, "The Dutch Case of Anti-Slavery: Late Abolitions and
Elitist Abolitionism," in *Fifty Years Later: Antislavery, Capitalism and Modernity
in the Dutch Orbit*, edited by Gert Oostindie. Pittsburgh PA: University of Pitts-
burgh Press, 1995.
 18. W.R. van Hoëvell, *Slaven en vrijen onder de Nederlandsche wet Zaltbommel:*
Noman, 1855.
 19. Quoted in Kuitenbrouwer, "Dutch Case of Anti-Slavery," 76.
 20. Marijke Huisman, *Verhalen van vrijheid: autobiografieën van slaven in transnatio-
naal perspectief, 1789–2013*, 188. Hilversum: Verloren, 2015.
 21. Siep Stuurman, *The Invention of Humanity*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University
Press, 2017.

22. Van Balie, "De Herinnering," 50.
23. Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002.
24. The other two forms of modern inequality identified by Stuurman are political economy ("a new science that justified social inequality in terms of utility and productivity") and biological and psychological theories of sexual difference. See Stuurman, *Inventing*, 24.
25. *Ibid.*, 344.
26. Angelie Sens, *'Mensaaap, heiden, slaaf': Nederlandse visies op de wereld rond 1800*, 112. The Hague: Sdu, 2001.
27. "Emancipatie der slaven," *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 4 July 1856, <https://www.delpher.nl/>.
28. *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 23 November 1855, 2, <https://www.delpher.nl/>; *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 18 September 1856, 2, <https://www.delpher.nl/>; *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 6 August 1857, 1, <https://www.delpher.nl/>; *Rotterdamsche Courant*, 7 April 1864, 2, <https://www.delpher.nl/>.
29. Sens, "Mensaaap," 98.
30. Van Balie, "De Herinnering," 10.
31. Hunt, *Inventing*, 28.
32. See for instance Emanuel Francis's (1798–1880) *Herinneringen uit den levensloop van een "Indisch ambtenaar van 1815 tot 1851, medegedeeld in brieven*. Batavia: H.M. van Dorp, 1859. The inventory mentioned is Arianne Baggerman et al., "Egodocumenten 1814–1914 (repertorium)," Onderzoeksinstituut egodocumenten en geschiedenis, accessed 29 March 2018, <http://www.egodocument.net/repertorium.html>.
33. Van Balie, "De Herinnering," 25.
34. *Ibid.*, 15.
35. *Ibid.*, 9, 1.
36. *Ibid.*, 42.
37. *Ibid.*, 40.
38. Hunt, *Inventing*, 29.
39. Van Balie, "De Herinnering," 10.
40. Stacey Olikier, "The Modernization of Friendship: Individualism, Intimacy and Gender in the 19th Century," in *Placing Friendship in Context*, edited by Rebecca G. Adams and Graham Allan, 18–42, 20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
41. David Garrioch, "From Christian Friendship to Secular Sentimentality: Enlightenment Re-evaluations," in *Friendship: A History*, edited by Barbara Caine,

- 165-214. London: Routledge, 2009. All information in this paragraph is derived from this chapter.
42. Garrioch, "From Christian," 186.
 43. Ibid., 188.
 44. Van Balie, "De Herinnering," 14.
 45. Garrioch, "From Christian," 200.
 46. Ibid., 167.
 47. Marc Brodie and Barbara Caine, "Class, Sex, and Friendship: The Long Nineteenth Century," in *Friendship: A History*, edited by Barbara Caine, 223-278, 224-25. London: Routledge, 2009.
 48. Brodie and Caine, "Class, Sex," 237.
 49. Hunt, *Inventing*, 32.
 50. Garrioch, "From Christian," 199.
 51. Oliker, "The Modernization," 24.
 52. Garrioch, "From Christian," 199.
 53. Van Balie, "De Herinnering," 10.
 54. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.
 55. John K. Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism*, 4. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015.
 56. Sonia Sikka, *Herder of Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism*, 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
 57. Noyes, *Herder*, 8.
 58. Quoted in Noyes, *Herder*, 212.
 59. Sikka, *Herder*, 5.
 60. Van Balie, "De Herinnering," 9.
 61. Ibid., 2.
 62. Ibid., 3, 38.
 63. Ibid., 4.
 64. Gert-Jan Johannes, *De lof der aalbessen: over (Noord-)Nederlandse literatuurtheorie, literatuur en de consequenties van kleinschaligheid 1770-1830*. The Hague: Sdu, 1997.
 65. Arno Neele, *De ontdekking van het Zeeuwse platteland: Culturele verhoudingen tussen stad en platteland in Zeeland 1750-1850*, 153. Utrecht: Waanders, 2011.
 66. Neele, *Ontdekking*, 153.