Translating Anton de Kom's We Slaves of Suriname

A genius of the heart

David McKay – 29 June 2021

I live and work in Bezuidenhout, a mainly residential area of The Hague to the south of a large wooded park, the Haagse Bos. During World War II, this park was used by the German occupying forces as cover for the V2 rockets fired at English cities. On March 3, 1945, the Royal Air Force tried to bomb the Haagse Bos, but the pilots were given the wrong coordinates. This human error led to the tragic destruction of much of Bezuidenhout by Allied aircraft.

The five-story complex where I live and work stands in this once-devastated zone, surrounded by other postwar structures. But from my office window on the top floor, I can make out the roofs of some surviving prewar buildings.

In one such building, less than a ten-minute walk away, is Johannes Camphuysstraat 296. The Surinamese author and political activist Anton de Kom lived at that address with his wife and children for many years, until August 7, 1944, when he was arrested for his activities in the Dutch resistance and taken away, never to return. The small apartment still looks very much the same from the outside as when he lived there, and more than once while working on my translation of De Kom's book, I walked over to it to peer up the stairs at his front door—perhaps hoping to hear some echo of his voice, a response to my little questions and doubts about the translation.

We Slaves of Suriname, originally published in Dutch in 1934, is lush with descriptions of Surinamese wildlife and vivid plant and animal names from Sranantongo and Surinamese Dutch. In the opening paragraphs, De Kom uses the Surinamese Dutch terms *groenhart* and *bruinhart*. These refer to the yellow lapacho and wacapou trees, but the literal translations of the Dutch names are more revealing: "greenheart" and "brownheart." De Kom's heart is always with the green landscape of his country and the proud history of its unbowed "brown" people. His book celebrates what historian Daina Ramey Berry has recently called soul values, the spiritual resilience and internal fortitude that enable enslaved people to survive and resist.

De Kom was not a professional historian, but a political activist and a writer. Despite its apparatus of footnotes and its illuminating accounts of Surinamese history, *We Slaves of Suriname* is not mainly a work of scholarship but a manifesto written by a poet. Its combination of lyricism and powerful anti-establishment rhetoric places it in a Dutch and Surinamese literary tradition; De Kom often invokes earlier writers such as Multatuli and Albert Helman, and his stirring eloquence and scathing irony demonstrate his indebtedness to them. Yet he also has his own irrepressible style, in which outbursts of poetic prose express heartfelt joy and pain. The book's opening paragraphs are a case in point:

> From 2 to 6 degrees south latitude, from 54 to 58 degrees west longitude, spanning from the blue of the Atlantic to the inaccessible Tumuc-Humac Mountains, which form the watershed with the Amazon Basin, between the broad expanses of the Corentyne and Maroni Rivers, which separate us from British and French Guiana, rich in immense forests, where the greenheart, the barklaki, the kankantri, and the prized brownheart grow, rich in wide rivers, where the heron, ibis, flamingo, and wiswisi nest, rich in natural

> treasures, in gold and bauxite, in rubber, sugar, plantains, and coffee… poor in humankind, poorer still in human kindness…
> Sranan—our fatherland.
> Suriname, as the Dutch call it.
> Their country's twelfth and richest, no, their country's poorest province.

But his poetry breaks through at other moments too. For instance, the hidden rhymes in the following sentence of the translation mirror those in the original Dutch: "With their weapons in hand, they forced their way into the hinterland, and wherever opposition was found, the whites used bloodhounds, whose names have gone down in history."

At other moments, De Kom casts off not only political and historical rhetoric but even poetic devices, speaking with disarming directness and simplicity, as in the key passage below, from the book's final section. While on the ship to Suriname to see his mother, De Kom receives word that she has died. Upon arrival, he learns that the colonial regime sees him as a dangerous communist and has assigned detectives to keep watch over him.

> In the still of the night comes a knocking at the windows. It's the detectives; they want to make sure I'm at home. It's as though someone has suddenly knocked at my heart: What will you do to ease your people's suffering? In the velvet darkness of the night I hear soft steps.
> Mother, what can I do to help? My comrades are waiting. I have only just returned. So much has changed.
> It seems as if my mother leans in to kiss me, the way she did when I was little, the way she listened to my complaints and my sorrow ebbed away because someone was willing to listen.

Here, De Kom gives us the naked voice of a vulnerable human being, and the distinctly un-literary repetition of "listen" in the final sentence echoes the book's central theme: that by listening with compassion to stories of suffering, we discover our shared humanity, opening the way to a solidarity that can heal the horrors of the past. As Dr. Duco van Oostrum points out in his introduction, *this* was the radical act that led to De Kom's unlawful confinement and exile: he listened. And when he listened, the story he heard was his country's and his own, handed down from generation to generation. The book is full of references to mothers and fathers, grandmothers and forefathers, mother countries and fatherlands—nurturing landscapes and traditions of resistance that De Kom hoped would foster a new, independent national identity.

Fundamental to this new identity is that the green heart of Sranan and the brown hearts of its maroon warriors are not the private property of any one group or community. This train of thought is developed slowly but irresistibly in the course of the book. First, De Kom shows that the story of slavery and resistance to slavery does not end when slavery by that name is abolished, but continues in new forms. Then he teaches us that Suriname's other communities – the indentured workers brought there to replace slave labor and undermine the economic power of the newly liberated plantation workers – are also caught up in these new forms of slavery and engaged in their own forms of resistance. They too may count themselves among "we slaves of Suriname," De Kom seems to say. And finally, in the closing section of the book, he extends his hand to workers regardless of color.

> High in the stays and shrouds of the *Rensselaer* blows the wind of freedom. On the deck below me, a stoker emerges—white, but blacker than I am with soot from his fire—and hurries toward his stuffy quarters. Halfway along the forecastle, he waves at me and the children. In the black of his face, the whites of his eyes and his pearly teeth are smiling.

> That too is the same everywhere, and beautiful everywhere: the fellowship among proletarians and their love of liberty.

The soot on the stoker's face and the white of his eyes and teeth as he smiles are the opposite of divisive blackface; they reveal a truth that goes deeper than skin, the potential to make common cause across the boundaries of race. There is work to be done, for whoever cares to take it up.

This invitation is so profoundly generous that it could not be demanded or expected of anyone. It shows the same genius of heart that made De Kom one of the tiny minority who struggled for freedom and against oppression in the occupied Netherlands. After peace returned, new buildings filled the gaps left by the war, but De Kom's death in a satellite camp of Neuengamme left an enduring absence. Standing in front of Johannes Camphuysstraat 296, I heard only silence.

Yet De Kom's words do live on in his extraordinary book, which I translated in the early months of 2021. Immersing myself in his legacy was a humbling experience. Giving him a voice in the English-speaking world was a daunting, sometimes even nerve-wracking job, especially amid fervent debates about translation and inclusivity. I was happy and grateful to take up this project, which had remained unfinished for so many decades. At the same time, De Kom's generosity is a potent reminder that those of us with some status in the publishing industry—even those with as modest a role in decision-making as literary translators—can reach out our own hands in solidarity, to make international literature in English a lush, diverse landscape of voices and experiences.

Polity Press will publish We Slaves of Suriname around 28-Jan-2022 in the UK and 25-Mar-2022 in the US. The ebook editions are currently scheduled to be published around 28-Jan-2022.

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