



Frances Gouda

The Unbearable Lightness of Memory

Fragmentations of Cultural Memory and Recycling the Dutch Colonial Past

De geschiedschrijving van het koloniale verleden ligt altijd gevoelig, vanwege conflicterende herinneringen en ervaringen. In dit artikel schrijft Frances Gouda op een vergelijkende manier over culturele en collectieve herinnering, met een specifieke focus op het koloniale verleden in Nederlands-Indië.

'I told you the truth (...) Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. Memory selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.'¹

In a book of essays, entitled *Imaginary Homelands. Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Salman Rushdie described with poignancy his reconstruction of the world of India he had encountered during his childhood in Bombay. Being haunted by a sense of loss as he was chained to his desk in North London, writing his novel *Midnight's Children*, he conjured up down-to-earth but chromatic fragments of India before and after the Partition. The memories he retrieved in his dreary London neighbourhood consisted of mundane things such as the colors of Bombay schoolboys' uniforms, the silly rhymes of popular songs, or the shapes of fruits in street vendors' baskets. He also recalled bright banners hanging off city bridges advertizing Binaca toothpaste and the Kolynos Kid or billboards announcing that 'Esso puts a tiger in your tank.'²

Some of these figments are real, he noted, but others are inventions

1 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's children* (2de druk; Londen 1995) 211.

2 Idem, *Imaginary homelands. Essays and criticism 1981-1991* (Londen 1992) 10-12.

because 'fragmentation makes some trivial things seem like symbols.' In hindsight, the commonplace things of daily life begin to glow and acquire an uncanny quality. Meaning, Rushdie continued, tends to resemble a kind of ramshackle building we construct from 'scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved.' Memory and the attribution of meaning can be compared to the work of a classical archeologist, who uses the broken pots and random artifacts of antiquity, even if they are inconsequential objects, to reassemble a sense of the past. At the same time, Rushdie warned that all reconstructions of the past, whether created by archeologists, historians, novelists, or regular citizens, should acknowledge that such fraught efforts are inherently time-bound, tentative, and provisional.³

Salman Rushdie's conjuring up of his subjective recollections of childhood before and after the Partition of India in 1947 may be compared to the processes that inflect the making of collective cultural memories in a particular national context. Historical memory, whether at a personal or communal level, tends to be fashioned by larger-than-life images that are forged within a particular social environment.⁴ As early as 1922, the American journalist Walter Lippmann already noted that 'photographs (...) seem utterly real. They come, we imagine, directly to us without human meddling and they are the most effortless food for the mind conceivable.'⁵ In our contemporary world, both attractive and shocking pictures are routinely distributed via contemporary media such as television or the internet and they influence what we recall of particular events. Quick and easy sound bites on the radio or truncated narratives in the printed press play a supporting role. In most instances, language accompanies and mediates the impact of visual images. As Susan Sontag has recently noted, 'words alter, words add, words subtract,' but pictures as well as words are also inflected by an inchoate sense of public morality and general education that operate helter-skelter among members of a particular community.⁶ Most instances of cultural reminiscence rely on a crude 'ethics of memory,' prompting individuals to engage, in most cases, in an effort to render their personal

3 Rushdie, *Imaginary homelands*, 10-12.

4 Lewis A. Coser ed., *Maurice Halbwachs: On collective memory* (Chicago 1992).

5 Walter Lippmann, *Public interest* (hervnieuwde druk; New York 1997) 61.

6 Susan Sontag, 'What have we done?', *Guardian Unlimited*, May 24, 2004. Avishai Margalit, *The ethics of memory* (Cambridge 2003), 10-12 and further, especially Chapter 3.

impressions in a rhetoric that is more or less consonant with the human experience of fellow citizens; these narratives also tend to conform to the political mores of the community at large. This general lack of specificity, however, has prompted a range of scholars to argue that there is no such thing as collective memory. As Sontag insists in her most recent book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 'collective memory [is] part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt (...) all memory is individual, un-reproducible (...) What is called collective memory is not a remembering but a stipulating.'⁷

In recent efforts to chart a general 'topography of mind' at the individual level, the recollections of a personal experience or social interaction are assigned a particular domain. This allocation of 'domain specificity' is relevant not only to historians but also to psychologists, who have proposed a distinction between 'semantic' and 'episodic' memory.⁸ Semantic memory is informed by our engagement with what the French historian, Maurice Halbwachs, has called the 'social frames' of the world around us – memories that are socially constructed and can be parceled out and communally shared.⁹ Episodic memory, on the other hand, relies on personal experiences that presumably can't be shared with, or appropriated by, others because they depend on subjectivity and personal narration.¹⁰ Inevitably, such topographies of cognition have changed over time. At both the individual and the collective level, a cherished remembrance in one era can easily become a sentiment that should be glossed over in a subsequent period because it suddenly produces either embarrassment, guilt or shame.

What determines the social well-being of the nation, the late nineteenth-century French political theorist, Ernest Renan asked in his oft-quoted essay on the so-called essence of the nation, 'What is the Nation?' (*Qu'est-ce qu'une*

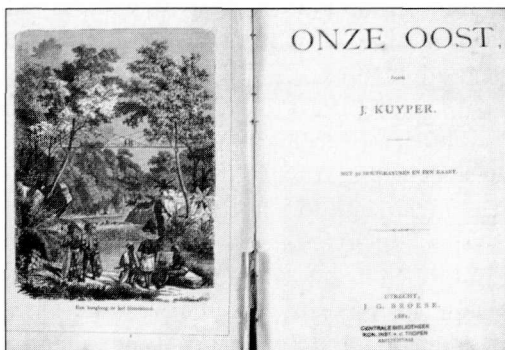
7 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the pain of others* (New York 2003) 85-86.

8 Lawrence A. Hirschfeld and Susan A. Gelman, 'Introduction: Toward a topography of mind: An introduction to domain specificity' in: Hirschfeld and Gelman ed., *Mapping the mind* (Ann Arbor 1994) 5-35. See also the impressive essay by Aleida Assmann, 'Four formats of memory – From individual to collective forms of constructing the past', paper presented at Conference on 'Culture and Historical Memory', University of Manchester, England, April 2004.

9 Maurice Halbwachs, *Les cadres sociaux* (Paris 1985) 21.

10 Endel Tulving, 'Episodic and semantic memory', in: E. Tulving and W. Donaldson, ed., *The organization of memory* (New York 1972) 381-403; more recently, E. Tulving, 'Episodic memory: from mind to brain', *Annual Review of Psychology* 53 (2002) 1-25.

nation?) The mental and moral health of the nation, as Renan answered his own question, requires that its citizens agree at particular moments in history that a certain set of ideological commitments, political actions, or social events deserve to be remembered. At the same time, the inevitability of change over time also implies that at other historical junctures a range of things should be forgotten.¹¹ Any consensus regarding those aspects of the past that can be recalled with either joy or outrage because it bolsters the unity of the body politic, entails, almost automatically, that an unspoken agreement exists as to what should be stowed away, whether temporarily or permanently, in the dusty attic of cultural memory.¹²



A popular description of the Indonesian geography and culture was written by J. Kuypier in 1860.

Such a consensus, however, tends to be fragile and transitory. The process of remembering and forgetting is forever in flux. Memory concerning the historical record, as a constitutive force in the cognitive and imaginative fashioning of any nation-state, can be envisioned as a museum in which space is acutely limited. At certain moments in time, when a particular historical narrative has lost its luster or strategic usefulness, it must be removed from the museum of public recollections – or the ‘memory palace’ – in order to make room for a sparkling new recollection.¹³ The use, and subsequent redeployment, of finite physical spaces as a metaphor for changes over time in a nation’s collective memory also inspired Maurice Halbwachs in his book *La mémoire collective*, first

11 Quoted by Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Londen 1983) 15. See also Patrick Colm Hogan, *Colonialism and cultural identity: Crises of tradition in the Anglophone literatures of India, Africa, and the Caribbean* (Albany 2000).

12 The imagery of ‘stowing away’ uncomfortable, disruptive memories in ‘the dusty attic’ is derived from Pamela Pattynama, ‘Secrets and danger: Interracial sexuality in Louis Couperus’ *The hidden force* and Dutch colonial culture around 1900’ in: Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda ed., *Domesticating the empire: Race, gender, and family life in French and Dutch colonialism* (Charlottesville 1999) 106–107.

13 Jonathan Spense, *The memory palace of Matteo Ricci* (New Haven 1989).

published in 1950. He proposed that collective memory resembles a 'cemetery with a limited amount of space.' At any given moment, politicians and citizens within a national community must decide together which old graves deserve to be left untouched, whereas others must be dug up in order to make room for the shiny marble of new tombstones. Halbwachs' main point is that both individual and collective memories are engaged in a dialogue with the relevant social and political environment.¹⁴ It is a distinct social context that endows memories with coherence and enables them to be narrated because it is through the tangible, socially situated practices of commemoration that 'collective memory is materialized, localized, given shape, form, and feeling.'¹⁵

When all is said and done, however, shared memories boil down to the tangled human habit of remembering and forgetting by means of a mnemonic 'division of labor.'¹⁶ Or perhaps the sequence should be reversed. Collective memories, forged within a set of culturally defined ground rules, are anchored in the all-too-human tendency at an individual level to forget and only secondarily, about keeping alive a constantly changing inventory of recollections. Many amongst us know that a process of weeding and pruning occurs in our personal memory work and in the shifting stories we tell about our own lives. Most of us want to gloss over moments of weakness or embarrassment in order to remember, perhaps even magnify, instances of relative pride and glory. Human identity relies on an earnest effort at producing narrative coherence, prompting many people to suppress troubling incidents – as well as tiresome circumstantial details – that are capable of disrupting the logical flow of a life story.¹⁷ Personal memories are rarely simple or unencumbered. Each version of the past produces all sorts of subtle twists and turns in the process of reconstructing what happened before through the prism of what came next because it is primarily through a 'tight weave of forgetting and selective remembering that a continuous self is knitted together.'¹⁸ ¹⁹ Inevitably, the reality of being removed from the physical environment of one's childhood furnishes creative avenues for

14 Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Parijs 1968) 38.

15 Jennifer Cole, *Forget colonialism? Sacrifice and the art of memory in Madagascar* (Berkeley 2001) 23.

16 Margalit, *Ethics of memory*, 58-59.

17 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity* (Oxford 1991).

18 Gillian Slovo, *Every secret thing. My family, my country* (2de druk; Londen 2001) 195.

19 Michael Ignatieff, *The Russian album* (2de druk; New York 1997) 6.

retrieving and inscribing memories, both real and fabricated ones. The myriad choices in terms of socio-political affiliations and cultural belonging in our contemporary globalized world – whether based on such criteria as skin color, religion, class, gender, sexual orientation, or nationality – also yield all sorts of ingenious options that are capable of grafting representations of the self onto different group-specific narratives of cultural identity. As the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah has recently written with a dry sense of humor: in our current cosmopolitan ‘garden of cultural identities, silk flowers quickly grow roots.’²⁰

These maneuvers also occur in the forever-changing codifications of cultural memories at a collective level. As is available in the private realm, an unwieldy assortment of linguistic tropes and visual simulacra furnish the self-identified members of a particular community with a shifting set of metaphors in formulating their recollections. But the kinds of metaphors that are either condoned or stifled, perhaps even forbidden, remain controversial. Again, cultural memory depends on semantic and rhetorical devices that supply citizens in civil society with the intellectual tools enabling them to define and assert their place in a particular social environment. It can confirm their strategic positions in a political order by conjuring up a justification for individual and collective agency or, in contrast, supply a historical narrative that corroborates a sense of exclusion. It also empowers members to evaluate their tastes and preferences, to define who belongs and who does not, and to gloss over unpleasant moments or controversial incidents in the nation’s past.

At the same time, issues of religion and cultural conventions play a role. In a gnostic Christian tradition, St. Benedict’s Rule, during the sixth century AD, prescribed that a community of believers must forget the secular world and its human conflicts, desires, and ambitions. They should remember, instead, those aspects of the symbolic life that may guide them towards God. These injunctions ordained a harmonious balance between

20 This observation applies to most human beings but even more so to the post-colonial migrant as ‘exile’, ‘political asylum seeker’, ‘economic refugee’, ‘transnational intellectual’, or ‘rooted cosmopolitan’, as defined by the political scientist Sidney Tarrow in opposition to the troubling label rootless cosmopolitans, a term often applied to Jews in antisemitic literature. For a complex analysis of the term rooted cosmopolitanism, see chapter six of Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton 2004) 213–272. The sentence on the rooting of silk flowers in the colorful garden of contemporary cultural identities appears on 135.

oblivio (forgetfulness) and the dictate of *semper memor* (always remember). Members of the community were summoned not to remember the reality of past events in their personal past in the outside world. The only memories worth preserving were those that lead to faith and salvation.²¹ During the Middle Ages, knowledge about the truth was frequently portrayed as a journey towards an actual place that embodied the tangible good life. Those who remembered the proper way might attain true faith and its abundant rewards, whereas the forgetfulness and ignorance of others could sentence them to eternal darkness or worse, to 'uncontrollable wildness and bestiality'.²²

It appears that in a Christian tradition, a tension exists between *semper memor* and *oblivio*, or in the well-known formulation of the French historian Pierre Nora, 'a dialectic between *souvenir* and *amnésie*'.²³ Forgetting, whether temporarily or permanently, is embedded in day-to-day existence, granting members of the Christian fellowship a certain freedom in deciding when to remember and when to forget. One could perhaps argue that the Christian dialectic between always remembering and oblivion implies that the pursuit of truth and the path to God is contingent on other factors, whether personal, social, or political ones. However, in a daily life determined by family membership as the organizing principle of society, most people were subjected to a distinct patriarchal rhetoric. Male voices were granted the privilege of making formal pronouncements. Men more clearly embodied the virtues of self-discipline and spiritual agency, whereas the primarily oral traditions of medieval women's lives were inscribed with the burdens of temporarily smoothing over, burying permanently in the cemetery of historical memory, or strategically reviving particular memories for the purpose of ensuring the equanimity and survival of the family unit.²⁴

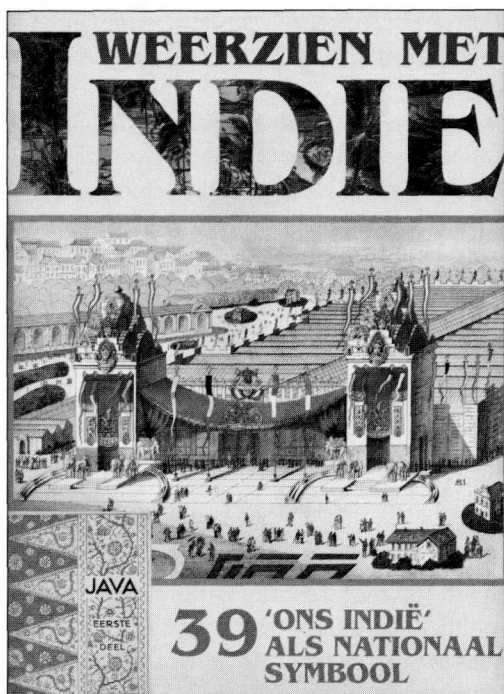
In the Jewish tradition of the Hebrew Bible – or the Old Testament – faithful readers are constantly admonished that remembering is an imperative, because all forms of forgetting will inspire God's irrevocable wrath. As the historian Joseph Yerushalmi has written in *Zakhor: Jewish history and*

21 Janet Coleman, in: David Connearn, *Hours* (Glasgow 2002) 11.2.

22 Herman Pleij, *Dreaming of Cockaigne. Medieval fantasies of the perfect life* (New York 2001) 249.

23 Pierre Nora, 'Entre mémoire et histoire: la problématique des lieux', *Les lieux de mémoire* I (Paris 1984) 19.

24 Elisabeth van Houts, *Medieval memories. Men, women and the past, 700-1300* (Essex 2000). David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the making. Cultural concepts of masculinity* (New Haven 1990) 186.



In the mid 1990's a renewed interest in Indonesian history resulted in the publication of the series *Weerzien met Indië*.

Jewish memory, citing Deuteronomy, 'If it shall come to pass that you forget the Lord your God (...) I bear witness against you this day that you shall utterly perish.' Yerushalmi added that for any person, people, or nation, there are certain fundamental features of the past – whether historic or mythic, often a fusion of both – that 'become *Torah*.'²⁵

A fluid juxtaposition of *oblivio* and *semper memor* does not emerge from the Hebrew Bible. God's injunction to the Israelites is always to remember and never to forget. This command includes keeping alive not only personal

memories, but also ritually commemorating the past experiences of all Jewish men, women and children, because conscious remembrance at the individual as well as the collective level conforms to the dictates of the *Torah*.

In short, Jewish identity is anchored in a never-ending rehearsal of the sacred pact (*B'rit*) between God and the people of Israel, who were liberated from bondage in Egypt through divine intervention. It is therefore not implausible to link the preservation of the painful memories of the millions of Jews who were murdered, embodied in the displays and visitors' re-enactment of the fate of Jewish victims of the Nazi era in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, to the Biblical injunction of *Zakhor*. Movies such as Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's list* or Roman Polanski's *The pianist* further reinforce the Hebrew Bible's mandate to the people of Israel

25 Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor. Jewish history and Jewish memory* (New York 1989) 108, 113.

that they must remember, unless they wish to invoke God's anger.

In Southeast Asia, on the other hand, or more specifically, in an Indonesian-Javanese context, cultural memory or the process of remembering and forgetting has a radically different meaning. Ignoring the details of a personal or a collective past is natural and unproblematic. Why would anyone care about history for its own sake? A study of the past for the information it could provide about erstwhile socio-political relations and economic inequities, or bygone religious rituals and cultural conventions, is often viewed as an alien enterprise. Why would the past be studied for its inherent insights into how people lived, worked, and worshiped a decade, a century, or a millennium ago? Anyone pursuing the study of social history or past political practices for its own sake might appear to second-guess the organic, time-honored evolution of Javanese customs and traditions, thereby calling into question contemporary conventions of normality. The rituals of daily life in contemporary Java evolved from long-standing customs and traditions called *adat* in Java and other regions of Indonesia. These current conventions are grounded in social and cultural interactions since time immemorial, even though their prescriptions and meanings have shifted at regular intervals.

Clifford Geertz's representation of Javanese society as *palimpsest* or a multi-layered cultural text, revealing a chronological sequence of cultural practices that inevitably re-inscribe and re-signify archaic customs, is a striking image. Customs and traditions (*adat*) in Java or other regions of Indonesia, today, incorporate a range of impulses from the past, pushes and pulls of the present, and anticipations of the future. The Javanese verb *mèngeti* (from the root *ènget* or 'memory; consciousness, awareness') refers to 'this writing of history.' But *mèngeti* also means 'to predict' or better yet, 'to prophesy.' Its imperative form, *pènget*, means 'take notice!' or 'remember!' and suggests an intrinsic linkage between present and future recollections of the past. As the scholar of Java's historiographical and literary traditions, Nancy Florida, has aptly observed, chronicling the past in a Javanese context is at the same time 'the making of history: it is a prescient present's writing about a past which opens to a desired future.'²⁶

Similar retrospective and prospective components were embedded in the *adat* practices of many other ethnic cultures in the vast Indonesian archipelago beyond the Javanese heartland. At the University of Leiden

26 Nancy K. Florida, *Writing the past, Inscribing the future: History as prophesy in colonial Java* (Durham 1995) 396-97.

during the early twentieth-century, the legal scholar of international renown, Cornelis van Vollenhoven, noted in 1926 in one of his numerous publications on *adat* that in the Dutch East Indies 'customs and traditions are like cultivated fields that have reverted back to wilderness. At the same time, they are fertile fields still under cultivation. Yet *adat* also resembles gnarly tree trunks beginning to send out new shoots.'²⁷

In the eyes of scores of contemporary Javanese people and a range of Indonesians in general, studying history for its own sake is an exotic, even useless, activity because the object of remembering – and therefore, the purpose of historical research in general – is an effort to try to understand the fate of people who are long since dead and gone. Instead, the singular importance of the behavior of ancestors in the near or distant past is the lingering influence on the lives of their descendants, or the residual ability to exert ineffable power over the successes and failures of those who follow in their footsteps. The utility of the past is relevant in its display of prophetic potencies – its ability to reveal signs and directions for subsequent developments. As Florida has argued in *Writing the past, Inscribing the future: History as prophecy in colonial Java*, history's utility is to reveal the ways in which the future can be divined, anticipated, or inscribed.²⁸

In the context of Indonesian customs and traditions, these interpretations of the meaning of history have led to the relegation of the colonial past to the official burial sites of cultural memory. In contemporary Indonesian society, the history of 300 years of Dutch imperialism only resurfaces in political rhetoric or in strategically useful slogans because it seems as if Indonesians 'simply don't bother with history, not out of resentment or shame ... no, purely because it does not exist.'²⁹ And here we must return to Clifford Geertz's notion of customs and traditions being grounded in a cultural memory that may be conceptualized as a multi-layered text engaging in a 'subtle interplay between concealment and revelation.'³⁰ In this imaginary document, recording the accumulated evidence of previous

27 Cornelis van Vollenhoven, *Miskening van het adatrecht* (Leiden 1926), quoted in Frances Gouda, *Dutch culture overseas: Colonial practices in the Netherlands-Indies, 1900-1942* (Amsterdam 1995) 56.

28 Florida, *Writing the past, Inscribing the future*, passim.

29 Rudy Kousbroek, 'Het verloren paradijs: gesloten wegens achterstallig onderhoud,' *NRC Handelsblad*, 9 December 1994.

30 Florida, *Writing the past, Inscribing the future*, 275. She also discusses the significance and implications of the verb *semu*, which refers to the ability 'to produce signs that at the same time conceal and reveal meaning', 276.

cultural patterns displays the partially obscured but still palpable inscriptions underneath the newer texts. This implies that cultural memory is an incremental process of signification and re-signification, articulated by means of a coiling movement that inevitably refers back to itself as if time performs 'loops' and allows the future to curl into the past.³¹ The concrete compilation of a sequence of past cultural habits, contained in the multi-layered *palimpsest*, is subjected to a discursive practice that revives, invents, and then re-inscribes new meanings and instrumentalities in efforts to bridge the gap between past and present. At the same time, the patterns of language and discourse provide a natural linkage between mental processes and social practice.³²

It should be clear that the distinct ways in which historical memories unfold at particular historical junctures are intertwined with the institutional mechanisms that are available for the commemoration of the British Raj in India, French colonial rule in Indochina and North Africa, or the history of Dutch governance in the East Indies. Besides, within former colonizing societies, individual citizens – or groups of citizens whose identifications are distinguishable on the basis of ethnicity and gender, on the one hand, or political agendas, social affiliations, religious commitments, and educational levels on the other hand – maintain different emotional and intellectual ties with the colonial past. For example, an eighteen-year old Dutch soldier, drafted into the Netherlands Army and dispatched to Southeast Asia in 1946 to participate in a bloody military campaign against Indonesian nationalism, inevitably harbors very different interpretations of the meaning of Dutch colonial history in the Indonesian archipelago than a committed member of the political left born into the baby boom generation after World War II. An Indo-Dutch woman, whose ancestors lived in Southeast Asia for many generations, will look back on the so-called good old days of the colonial past – *tempo dulu* – with different perspectives and feelings than the young Dutch wife of a colonial civil servant or a tobacco planter who arrived in the Dutch East Indies two decades before the outbreak of World

31 For an insightful analysis of 'looping discourses' see Roel van den Oever, 'The Politics and poetics of cultural remembrance and homosexuality: Larry Rivers' Frank O'Hara,' paper presented to PhD seminar, Belle van Zuylen Institute, University of Amsterdam, May 2003, 12. See also Richard Powers, *The time of our singing* (Londen 2003) 11.

32 David Middleton and Derek Edwards, 'Conversational remembering: A social psychological approach,' in: idem ed., *Collective remembering* (Londen 1990), cited by Cole, *Forget colonialism?*, 25.

War II. Because Indo-Dutch women were both the embodiment and the symbol of the naturalized mestizo culture of the Dutch East Indies, their reconstructions of the past are, in many cases, filled with images of longing that should be placed in the museum of memory. At the same time, their personal sense of loss as well as the burdens of miscegenation projected on to them, are sentiments they might like to bury permanently in the graveyard of historical memory.³³

In short, the multiplicity, the contestation – and sometimes, the incompatibility – of particular group recollections compel us to interrogate the notion of a collective cultural memory. Societies don't remember in a coherent or a concurring fashion. The term 'collected' memory might be a more appropriate phrase. As the historian James E. Young has argued in a book entitled *The texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning*, 'If societies remember, it is only insofar as their institutions and rituals organize, shape, even inspire their constituents' memories.'³⁴ In terms of recycling the memory of the colonial past, the attribution of meaning involves, on the one hand, an 'imperialist nostalgia' that vindicates colonial rule as 'decorous and orderly' and in retrospect even as beneficial, especially when compared with post-colonial structural poverty and political violence in countries such as Indonesia or India.³⁵ On the other hand, it can also entail an outright moral condemnation of European exploitation and racism imposed on native 'others'. Amidst these polar opposites, a range of interlocutors located in 'in-between' spaces construct memories that are filled with ambivalence and contradictions.³⁶

From the perspective of former colonial civil servants, the history of the Dutch East Indies is remembered as a model of propriety and wisdom. Due to the superior professional training of Dutch civil servants at the

33 For this observation, I rely primarily on the valuable work of Pamela Pattynama. See, for example, 'Migrant in eigen land. Kolonialisme, nationaliteit en levensverhaal,' *Gaan en staan. Jaarboek voor vrouwengeschiedenis* 21 (Amsterdam 2001) 36–59, and *idem*, 'Herinneringsliteratuur en postherinneringen bij eerste en tweede generatie Indische schrijvers,' in: Maaïke Meijer en Rosemarie Buikema ed., *Kunsten in beweging. Cultuur en migratie in Nederland I* (Den Haag 2003).

34 James E. Young, *The texture of memory: Holocaust memorials and meaning* (New Haven 1993) 11. See also Christopher Browning, *Collected memories: Holocaust history and post-war testimony* (Madison 2003).

35 Renato Rosaldo, 'Imperialist nostalgia,' *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989) 107–108.

36 'In-between' is a phrase associated with Homi Bhabha; see, for example, 'Of mimicry and men: The ambivalence of colonial discourse,' *October* 28 (1984) 125–133.

Indology faculty of Leiden University since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Dutch colonial empire in South East Asia was administered in an exemplary fashion thanks to the profound ethnographic scholarship, linguistic skills, and historical knowledge employed by the blue-eyed rulers of the Indonesian archipelago.³⁷ The Dutch nation in its own self-conscious projections was a *gidsland*, a guiding light in showing the rest of the world how to govern a colony in an exemplary manner, as the title of an admiring English-language account had announced as early as 1861.³⁸ Insights into ethnic customs and traditions (*adat*) merged with a thorough understanding of regional languages and religious beliefs, a combination that translated into effective labor management practices and the maintenance of intra-ethnic peace and public security, thereby guaranteeing the profitability of the colonial system.

The missionary policy of the Dutch colonial government divided the territory of the Indonesian archipelago into a patchwork of evangelical fields, all of which were located on the periphery of Java's Islamic core or beyond the Hindu Island of Bali, where christianizing activities were prohibited. In fact, the island of Bali was converted into a living museum – an archetype of pristine 'oriental' culture untainted by the West that should be safeguarded against corrupting influences from the outside. In the outlying regions, however, German Lutherans were assigned the Toba Batak area of Sumatra, whereas missionaries representing the Dutch Reformed Church were allowed to preach and convert in the Karo Batak region. The colonial state granted American Baptists permission to missionize among the Papuans in Irian Jaya or the Dayak in Borneo, whereas Roman Catholic priests were entitled to convey God's word to the inhabitants of the islands of Eastern Indonesia.

The record of the Dutch East Indies' 'Open Door' policy since the early twentieth century, granting unrestrained capitalist access to the lucrative exploitation of the Indonesian archipelago's rich natural resources – oil, bauxite, tin, gold, rubber, tobacco, coffee, tea, quinine, palm oil, sisal – also reinforces a sense of self-satisfaction on the part of former policymakers when they look back and construct a narrative about colonial history. The fact that a number of contemporary companies such as Royal Dutch Shell, Mobil Oil, Goodyear, and Pirelli found their multinational origins in the

37 Theodore Friend, *The blue-eyed enemy. Japan in Java and Luzon, 1942-1945* (Princeton 1988).

38 J.W.B. Money, *Java: How to govern a colony* (Londen 1861).

'Open Door' policy of the Dutch colonial state, reinforces this pride. These factors contribute to a 'collected' memory that is cast in the rhetorical mode of an 'ethical' respect for local cultures, a devotion to the uplifting of the well-being of the Indonesian people, and a commercial *mise en valeur* of the archipelago's natural resources for the benefits of international capitalism and free trade. In many instances, this reified narrative skips over colonialism's systemic cruelty, economic exploitation, or racist humiliations.

Not surprisingly, on the opposite side of the memory spectrum, critics of European colonialism cite the Dutch capitalist exploitation of the Indonesian archipelago as one of the most egregious examples of the excesses perpetrated in the course of the history of European imperialism in Asia. From this political perspective, only the regime of terror imposed on Africans in the rubber-growing territories of the Belgian Congo during the reign of King Leopold II exceeded Dutch greed and exploitation in Southeast Asia. Nothing that the Dutch accomplished in the East Indies can be remembered as salutary. The Dutch East Indies, after all, had been one of the imperial possessions among Europeans' colonized territories that generated profits for the mother country on a steady basis. In fact, since the 1840's Java served as a prolific cash cow. The memory of Dutch colonial rule should therefore be on permanent display in the museum of memory as a signpost and cautionary tale of human evil. It should never be buried in the cemetery of history because its immorality and depravity should remain an object lesson for current and future generations, although the historical record shows that Dutch colonial rulers accomplished a range of things that could be defined as beneficial to the native population. Even if they were to concede some of these positive features, staunch critics of the Dutch colonial exploitation will likely judge these historical data as irrelevant and meaningless. The inoculation of the native population against smallpox and other diseases, the construction of an elaborate network of roads and railroads in Java, improved hygiene and the digging of sewer systems in major cities, the improvement of the annual yield of rice harvests due to research in physical chemistry: none of these improvements ought to influence the sum total of historical memories. Dutch colonial governance in the Indonesian archipelago, instead, should only be exhibited in the memory palace of the contemporary Netherlands as evidence of Western racism, megalomania, and barbarism.

The veterans lobby of military conscripts who participated in the two police actions against the Indonesian Republic in 1947 and 1948, has con-

jured up yet another interpretation of the meaning of the colonial past. Dutch soldiers were sent to Southeast Asia to protect innocent women and children, recently released from Japanese prison camps, from murderous attacks by Indonesian nationalists. From their perspective, the Dutch military was engaged in a mission of mercy or Peace Corps work *avant la lettre*.³⁹ In their recollections, the Royal Netherlands Army's task was hindered by a lack of resolve, even outright cowardice, exhibited by the government in the Netherlands. The ruling political coalition in The Hague, in turn, was constrained in its pursuit of the destruction of communist-inspired Indonesian Republic due to the interventions imposed by the American foreign policymaking establishment in Washington DC. In the shared imagination of the veterans lobby, the outbreak of the Cold War in 1947 and the Truman administration's fear of Communism in Asia – due to Ho Chi Minh's Vietnam, Sukarno and Hatta's Indonesian Republic, and Mao Ze Dong people's campaign in Mainland China – prompted the US State Department to switch its unequivocal political support from the Dutch to the Indonesian side.⁴⁰ According to former Dutch soldiers who were forced to fight in Java and Sumatra in 1946-1949, therefore, the story of the colonial past is warped by their anger at America's alleged meddling in the 'domestic' relationship between the Kingdom of the Netherlands and its dominion in Southeast Asia.

Cultural memory work in a group-specific context, in other words, is always socially and politically situated.⁴¹ This recognition implies that any assertion about cultural memory at a collective or national level must be parsed, deciphered, and brought back to the constitutive elements of its community-based 'collected' memories. Defining and classifying, but also examining and charting, the diversity of 'collected' remembrances may make it possible, in due course, to venture an inductive statement about the nature of collective memory. Such statements, in turn, should incorporate a careful analysis of the socio-political institutions, rhetorical conventions as well as the available media that either facilitate or hinder the formulation of a particular cultural memory. Both formal and informal agreements about

39 See Tessel Pollmann, 'Oorlogsmisdaad of exces? Militairen en hun visie op de periode 1945-1949', *Bruidstraantjes en andere Indische geschiedenissen* (Den Haag 1999) 95-123.

40 See Frances Gouda (with Thijs Brocades Zaalberg), *American visions of the Netherlands East Indies/Indonesia: US foreign policy and Indonesian nationalism, 1920-1949* (Amsterdam/Chicago 2002).

rhetorical rules tend to specify and embody the cultural knowledge of a particular community. A consensus about acceptable rhetoric determines which figures of speech can be used in articulating cultural memories and which should be hidden – or what Jean-François Lyotard has succinctly called ‘showing-hiding’.⁴²

However, the contestation, sometimes even mutual exclusiveness, of collected reminiscences over time often renders judgments concerning the use of appropriate metaphors in the reconstruction of colonial histories both awkward and painful. The identity and position of the interlocutor who formulates a particular comparison or figure of speech, moreover, complicates the process further. A good example is the diversity of recollections of the Dutch colonial deportation colony – also called detention camp – of Boven Digul in the western half of New Guinea, founded in 1928, where the Dutch East Indies government incarcerated Indonesian nationalists. A Dutch doctor who served in Boven Digul during the early 1930’s described the colony in 1936 as an institution that maintained a photography studio, a jazz band and a lively theater group (*wayang orang*). The camp also offered a music and opera society called ‘Liberty’, a gamelan orchestra and many other social clubs. Dr. L.J.A. Schoonheydt remembered that regular soccer matches took place in the colony, pitting an enthusiastic team of military guards against an opposing team made up of a combination of the most athletic prisoners and the best soccer players among Boven Digul’s Dutch civil servants.⁴³

The well-known American writer, John Gunther, made a fleeting reference to Boven Digul in his blockbuster book *Inside Asia*, first published in 1936. He noted that this ‘isolated camp in cannibal territory’ incarcerated only the most fanatic among the Indonesian nationalists who were left alone ‘to construct their own utopia’.⁴⁴ A few years later, a journalist for a respected daily newspaper in the United States, *The Baltimore Sun*, echoed Gunther’s assessment and wrote in a feature article, entitled ‘Dutch guard

41 This comment obviously refers to the long-standing intellectual influence of Donna Haraway such as ‘Situated knowledge: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective,’ *Feminist studies* 14 (1988) 576-577.

42 Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard. Writing the event* (New York 1988) 90, as discussed in Frances Gouda, *Poverty and political culture. The rhetoric of social welfare in the Netherlands and France, 1815-1854* (Lanham 1994) 13-33.

43 Dr. L.J.A. Schoonheydt, *Boven-Digoel* (Batavia 1936) 182-183, 79.

44 John Gunther, *Inside Asia* (New York/Londen 1939) 322-323.

empire with aid of cannibals,' that Boven Digul was a deportation colony where Indonesian nationalists, often accompanied by their wives and children, 'can build their own houses, plant their own gardens, dig their own wells, and attend to the cattle provided by the Dutch government.' Because the prisoners did not have to work and were subjected to 'easy discipline', foreign correspondent Marc Greene reported that Boven Digul granted its inmates 'plenty of time and opportunity to debate their various plans for World Revolution. They can extol the virtues of Mr. Trotsky and denounce Mr. Stalin, or vice versa, as long as they please.'⁴⁵

It wasn't until after World War II that the American media publicized a more realistic appraisal of the conditions that had prevailed in Boven Digul, where Indonesian nationalists had been held without due process of law. An editorial in *The new republic* no longer euphemistically referred to Boven Digul as a deportation colony or a detention facility but labeled it, instead, as 'one of the world's most terror-ridden concentration camps in a swampy malaria-infested jungle.'⁴⁶ Published after Allied troops had liberated Nazi concentration camps in Poland and Czechoslovakia and the full-scale horror of the Holocaust was beginning to settle in the public imagination, making such an implicit connection between Boven Digul and Auschwitz by using the term concentration camp was not only tendentious but questionable at the same time. When the Indonesian nationalist Sutan Sjahrir, who had been one of Boven Digul's inmates during the early 1930's, wrote in 1945 that Nazi Germany could have learned a lot about constructing their World War II concentration camps by 'studying [Dutch] practices in the [prison camp] Boven Digul,' his comparison was only silently acknowledged, if at all.⁴⁷ However, when an Australian delegate to the Security Council in late 1948 stated publicly that Dutch acts of cruelty in Indonesia 'were worse than what Hitler had done to the Netherlands,' his words met with outrage in the Dutch national media because he had used a forbidden metaphor.⁴⁸

The public censure imposed on all figures of speech that explicitly equated the behavior of German Nazis with Dutch colonial officials and

45 Marc T. Greene, 'Dutch guard empire with aid of cannibals,' *The Baltimore Sun*, April 7, 1940.

46 Editorial in *The new republic*, October 29, 1945.

47 Sutan Sjahrir, *Indonesische overpeinzingen* (Amsterdam 1945) 85.

48 E.J. Dommering, 'De Nederlandse publieke discussie en de politionele acties in Indonesië,' *Nederlands juristenblad*, March 4, 1994, 281.

soldiers in Southeast Asia, remained in force through the 1990's. When the historian Rudolf Mrázek, wrote in 1994 in his biography of Sutan Sjahrir that the *Tanah Tinggi* (high ground) encampment of Boven Digul was 'a truly hellish, debilitating, fast-killing place,' or two years later, when yet another historian, Takashi Shiraishi, noted that in Boven Digul's 'phantom world, inmates were physically shattered, mentally broken or driven insane,' their assessments did not provoke controversy in Dutch circles.⁴⁹ Their descriptions of the deathly structural conditions imposed on Boven Dugul's inmates were glossed over. A different response obtained in 1994, when the novelist Graa Boomsma wrote in *De laatste tyfoon* that Dutch soldiers fighting against Indonesian nationalists 'were not German SS officers, no, but because of the things they did, they can be compared to SS officers.' In a subsequent interview he further noted that 'Boven Digoel existed long before Hitler established the concentration camps Buchenwald and Bergen Belsen.' Although Boomsma's statements were reminiscent of the criticism leveled in the post-World War II period, he had overstepped Dutch society's rhetorical boundaries according to an influential sector of public opinion during the 1990's. Not only the Dutch media criticized him but an organization of military veterans promptly sued him, as well as the journalist who interviewed him, for libel.⁵⁰

Since the independence of India (1947) or Indonesia (1949) became a historical fact, the recycling of the colonial past has undergone periods of stunned silence during the 1950's and 1960's (*oblivio*, or in Pierre Nora's words, *amnésie*), only to be followed by periods of volatile engagement (*semper memor*) in both Great Britain and the Netherlands. Since World War II, these fluctuations have been shaped by political events in Europe and Asia. In the late 1960's, when protests against the US military's alleged neo-colonial intervention in Vietnam prompted world-wide protests, the public debate about the significance and moral implications of the Dutch

49 Rudolf Mrázek, *Sjahrir: Politics and exile in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY 1994) 132. Takashi Shiraishi, 'The Phantom World of Digul,' *Indonesia* 61 (April 1996) 93-94. Similarly, the Dutch scholar J.M. Pluvier had already written in 1953 that in contrast to Nazi concentration camps, Indonesian political prisoners were neither mistreated nor exterminated. Instead, Dutch authorities had simply neutralized Indonesian nationalists by 'letting the inmates die, go insane, or be broken' by the deadly malarial swamp that housed Boven Digul.

50 Graa Boomsma, *De laatste tyfoon* (Amsterdam 1994) 55, and interview in *Nieuwsblad van het noorden*, March 6, 1994.

colonial past flared up as a genuine historical image.⁵¹ During the decades of the 1970's and 1980's, criticism of the history and legacy of European colonialism was strident and often became intermingled with discussions about the nature of post-colonial migration to the European heartland. During the 1990's, the tenor of collected memories of former colonizing nations shifted again and was inflected, to some extent, by what Salman Rushdie has called a romantic 'Raj Revival'. English-language BBC productions such as 'Jewel in the Crown', 'The Flame Trees of Thika', the James Ivory-Ishmael Merchant film 'Heat and Dust' or Hollywood movies such as 'Passage to India' and 'White Mischief' revived a virtual sense of nostalgia for the elegant world of colonial rule. The Dutch movies 'Oeroeg' and 'De Gordel van Smaragd' can be viewed as part of the same phenomenon.⁵²

At the beginning of the new millennium, the debate seems to have subsided, if only because the generation of people with actual experience and tangible collected memories about the former colonial empires in South and Southeast Asia has died. It is possible that in the future, the debate may flare up again or, to use a mixed metaphor of Attia Hosain, a time will come once more when memories will burst around us again like fire crackers and 'unfold like flowers in the sun.'⁵³ If and when this occurs, it will no longer entail a contested discussion with former residents and civil servants who assert superior wisdom because they participated in the actual construction of colonial history. Their passing might give historians a chance to treat and diagnose the collected memories of the colonial past in a more clinical fashion. Just as doctors have a mandate to intervene because a patient requires attention, regardless of the inadequate medical knowledge or technical equipment at their disposal, so should historians, despite their subjective and fractured visions, act under a moral obligation to keep alive 'a nation's memory, or that of humankind.'⁵⁴

51 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the philosophy of history,' *Illuminations* (New York 1969) 256.

52 Pamela Pattynama, 'Een kampongkind in de nationale herinneringsbeelden. Over Gordel van Smaragd,' in: Tessa Boerman, Patricia Pisters & Joes Segal ed., *Beeldritsen. Visuele cultuur en etnische diversiteit in Nederland* (Amsterdam 2003) 41-52.

53 Attia Hosain, *Sunlight on a broken column* (2de druk; New Delhi 1992) 176.

54 Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of revolution. An autobiography of Western man* (Norwich, VT 1969) 695.

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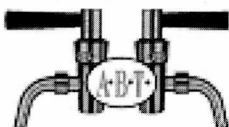


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