

# Review: A Ghostly Presence: Colonial Memory in Contemporary Dutch Literature

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Sarah De Mul, *Colonial Memory: Contemporary Women's Travel Writing in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011)

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'Gisteren gaat niet voorbij' – 'Yesterday does not go by': Sarah De Mul opens her study *Colonial Memory* (2011) by citing this pregnant title of a novel by the Dutch writer Aya Zikken. She uses this phrase to explain how the past, the colonial past, is not simply long gone and finished, but continues to spill over into the present and determine it. Whereas several scholars in the broad and popular field of memory studies have pointed out that remembering 'happens' in the present, De Mul takes this idea a step further. She argues that when it comes to colonial memory, including the dimensions that the former imperial powers would like to forget, the past continues to haunt the present. In an insightful study, De Mul sets out to examine how the colonial past appears as a ghostly presence in contemporary women's travel writing in Britain and the Netherlands.

*Colonial Memory* focuses on three travel texts by two Dutch and one British female writer – Aya Zikken's *Terug naar de atlasvlinder* (1981), Marion Bloem's *Muggen mensen olifanten* (1995) and Doris Lessing's *African Laughter* (1992). De Mul frames her analyses of these texts by means of two chapters in which she provides an overview of the various approaches to memory and in which she specifies her own contextualised and comparative take on colonial memory in women's travel writing. Pivotal to her discussion of colonial memory is not only the idea that the past is a multi-layered and multi-directional fabric, but also the supposition that the past is what Mieke Bal calls 'a strategic invocation in and for the present'.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand certain (historical or imaginative) reconstructions of the past, it is necessary to study the particular historical and cultural contexts in which these reconstructions are expressed. How do today's personal and political agendas shape or demarcate our individual and national memories of colonial experi-

ences? What do we choose to remember and how do the resulting memories rely on what we prefer to forget? Very much aware of the intricate complexity of memory as both a settling and an unsettling construct, De Mul writes: ‘The critical task, then, becomes to point to the representational limits and epistemological fallacies of colonial memory and to tease out why, for whom and to what purpose empire is remembered in the present’.<sup>2</sup> It is this task that De Mul elegantly undertakes.

## On Remembering and Forgetting

De Mul has restricted her study to work by women writers who use the autobiographically inflected genre of travel writing as a means to return to the (remembered) colonial past and space. In a critical discussion of their gendered positions, she lucidly reveals the double bind of these women writers. On the one hand, she shows how their travelling and travel writing enable them to become agents of history and ethnography. Their travel narratives enter into a historiographical discourse that, until the 1990s, has been dominated by political narratives of colonialism, mostly from a white male perspective. The women’s texts now shift the focus from these dominant narratives of colonial history to more personal memories of the colonial everyday. On the other hand, De Mul’s analyses make clear that these narratives – involuntarily – remain implicated in a western discourse that manufactures cultural otherness in naturalising, absolute terms. While this women’s writing succeeds in constituting a counter-historiography that contributes to more differentiated versions of the colonial self, it simultaneously fails to escape from drawing on objectifying and stereotyping modes of colonial othering.

This assessment, however, does not mean that the same patterns of memory and representation are at work in the three texts. De Mul strongly insists on the need for differentiation and contextualisation, both on an individual and a national level. Not only do these three women writers clearly inhabit different positions from which they remember, the British and Dutch cultures of colonial remembrance framing these narratives are also nationally specific. According to De Mul, both former imperial powers cling to a nostalgic vision of empire and have great difficulties acknowledging the contemporary consequences of their former imperial activities. The colonial era is seen as something of the past, a period that has come to its final end and no longer holds constitutive meaning for British and Dutch cultures of the present. Simultaneously she argues, proceeding in the direction that Paul Gilroy indicates in his path-breaking study *After Empire* (2004),<sup>3</sup> both former colonial powers struggle with accommodating the increasing ethnic diversity of their population under the umbrella of the national – albeit in nationally specific ways.

Telling in this respect is De Mul's juxtaposition of the rather distinct ways in which Britain and the Netherlands handled the influx of British and Dutch immigrants from the (former) colonial territories. Whereas Britain initially (until Thatcher's 1981 British Nationality Act) opted for multi-racial citizenship, the Netherlands held on to a notion of citizenship in terms of whiteness, thus ignoring the presence of e.g. 'Indo' immigrants. De Mul finds a (partial) explanation for this discrepancy in the fact that the Indonesian decolonisation process coincided with the postwar reconstruction phase in the Netherlands. She writes:

Most residents did indeed arrive in the Netherlands in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, when the country was recovering from German occupation. In the public arena, little room was left for coming to terms with a collective or personal past, which was different and elsewhere. In addition, the 1950s was not an era that stimulated looking back, rather it was a time of looking forward, rather than of remembrance.<sup>4</sup>

This manifestation of what De Mul calls competing memories assumes again another form in the discussions on Dutch multiculturalism.<sup>5</sup> Whereas discourses on the multicultural society in Britain are generally connected to the imperial legacy, in the Netherlands these debates predominantly focus on the history of labour migration and thus seem completely disconnected from the colonial past: yet another instance in which the contemporary implications of the Dutch colonial past remain invisible.

In her case studies De Mul highlights how these national cultures of remembrance have a determinant influence on the figurations and negotiations of colonial memory in the travel texts. In my opinion the contextualisation of the Dutch travel texts appears somewhat more productive and convincing than the contextualisation of Lessing's narrative return to former Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, in *African Laughter*. This opinion, however, might well have to do with my own (Dutch) cultural affinity, and also with the simple fact that two Dutch case studies carry more weight than one British example. The integration of the Dutch and British case studies would probably have benefitted from a clearer motivation of the choice of selected writers. Now, for example, the question why Rhodesia features in particular as counterpart to the Dutch East Indies, rather than, for instance, one of the British colonies in East Asia remains unclear. And although less obvious comparisons often result in unexpectedly valuable insights, some more explanation would indeed have contributed to a fuller appreciation of the British-Dutch comparison.

## Nostalgic Memory and Post-Memory

In each of the three case studies, De Mul elaborates on a concept of memory: nostalgic memory (Zikken), post-memory (Bloem) and everyday memory (Lessing). In this review I will restrict myself to a discussion of the first two, applied to the Dutch works of literature. In the chapter on Zikken's *Terug naar de atlasvlinder*, the concept of nostalgic memory helps De Mul to analyse Zikken's attempt to simultaneously preserve the idealised Dutch East Indies of her memory, and to acknowledge that these Dutch East Indies are an impossible travel destination that can and will never be reached. In this chapter De Mul argues that colonial nostalgia plays a crucial role in the broader formation of an 'Indies imagined community' in and through literature. This imagined community is wrought up with racial tensions as becomes clear from the fact that some members of this community claim to have a better, more authentic access to the 'real' East Indies than others.<sup>6</sup> Presumably the 'full-blooded white' Zikken had no access to 'real' East Indies life in the strictly stratified space of the Dutch colony, and is thus unable (and unfit) to write about the colonial past in a truthful, authentic way.<sup>7</sup> Here De Mul enters into an interesting discussion about the authority of experience and the contested notion of authenticity. Her intervention makes clear that there is no homogenous or static memory discourse. Everybody has his/her own perception of the 'good old days'; contradictions and tensions are at the heart of the *tempo doeloe* discourse.

Whereas Zikken's narrative illustrates nostalgic colonial memory from a privileged white position, Bloem's travel text represents colonial memory from a racially hybrid position. De Mul begins her chapter on Bloem's *Muggen mensen olifanten* (1995) by reflecting on what she calls the 'spectre of Indo-Dutchness', a term referring to the unacknowledged, unaccounted for presence of citizens of mixed descent in post-decolonisation Holland. As De Mul points out, Dutch narratives of the nation largely obscure Indo identity and tend to forget the history of miscegenation in the Dutch colony. The work of Indo writers is often characterised by a desire to uncover this forgotten history and by an exploration of the split loyalties between the two cultures. This is true for Bloem's text as well. De Mul introduces Marianne Hirsch's notion of post-memory in order to study the way in which second-generation Indo writers such as Marion Bloem (re)visit the colonial past of their parents. Despite the fact that they were born and raised in the Netherlands, these writers often have substantial knowledge of a time and space that preceded their birth. In many cases, the partly traumatic memories of their parents have left important traces on their sense of belonging and cultural identity.

According to De Mul, Indo post-memory acquires a strategic function in *Muggen mensen olifanten*. In various situations, the protagonist Bloem postulates her familiarity with (a problematically homogenised) Indonesian culture: she makes

it clear that, in contrast to other travellers, pejoratively called 'tourists', she possesses 'inside' knowledge about the language, customs and beliefs of the people that she encounters. The moments of cultural intimacy with the locals that she describes help to support this idea: she laughs with the native girls as if she is one of them and exchanges glances of mutual understanding with a group of performers of 'traditional Papuan culture'. Moreover, her proficiency in Pasar Malay, the Indonesian lingua franca, distinguishes her from fellow westerners who have great difficulties communicating with the local people. The effect of Bloem's narrative performance of cultural affiliation is twofold, as De Mul interestingly points out. On the one hand, Bloem's assumed cultural home-coming in contemporary Indonesia serves to legitimise her ethnographic authority over the Indonesian space that she describes. On the other hand, it also functions to confirm her cultural difference from her (white) Dutch readership, thus underlining Indo marginalisation in the Netherlands. But again De Mul shows that there are more sides to one story when, at this point in her analysis, she questions the legitimacy of Bloem's claim of cultural insider status. She argues that, apart from the fact that there is a huge class difference between Bloem and her Indonesian interlocutors, Bloem's personal background is also intricately interwoven with Dutch colonialism. It seems that in her longing to connect to a culture that she recognizes from her parents' memories, Bloem overlooks the fact that, irrespective of the marginal(ised) status of Indo-ness in the Netherlands, her racially mixed Indo identity still connotes colonial times in Indonesia.

## **New Encounters, Further Explorations**

In *Colonial Memory*, De Mul vividly shows us that literary manifestations of colonial memory are part of a multi-layered fabric, marked by idiosyncrasies, dissimilarities, tensions and ambivalences. In her book she takes great pains to explore this fabric in all its complexity. This means refining, nuancing and complicating its meaning, rather than offering straightforward answers and explanations. By carefully analysing the (literary) aftermath of Dutch colonial experience, De Mul succeeds in broadening the predominant focus on British imperialism within postcolonial studies. Besides, her study demonstrates the great value of studying Dutch literature within an international comparative framework. The comparative analytical encounter that she stages between theories of memory and British and Dutch travel narratives proves very fruitful, and stirs a desire for follow-up explorations. Whereas De Mul's three elaborate case studies constitute a wonderful beginning, further analyses and broader comparisons of Dutch colonial memory and of its disquieting, ghostly presence in contemporary literature, are more than welcome.

## Notes

1. As quoted in Sarah De Mul, *Colonial Memory: Contemporary Women's Travel Writing in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), p. 20.
2. De Mul, *Colonial Memory*, p. 45.
3. In his study *After Empire* (London: Routledge, 2004), Gilroy suggests that the 'crisis' of British and Dutch multiculturalism might well have to do with an inability to come to terms with their imperial histories. He diagnoses a pathological mindset which he calls 'postimperial melancholia': an ambivalent mix of feelings in which sadness about the loss of imperial prestige and power coincides with the disturbing realisation that this imperial 'greatness' in fact resulted from extremely violent and immoral behaviour towards others. A culture of forgetting and denial stands in the way of a more (re)constructive working through of the trauma of empire towards more inclusive senses of Britishness and Dutchness.
4. De Mul, *Colonial Memory*, p. 57.
5. This idea of competing memories resonates Michael Rothberg's concept of 'multidirectional memory' (2009). Rothberg uses the concept of multidirectional memory to study the proximity and multiple overlappings of histories of violence – e.g. the Holocaust and colonialism – that are mostly seen as separate from one another.
6. As soon as De Mul touches on this subject, it becomes clear how few analytical tools we have for analysing race, especially in the Dutch context. It is a pity that De Mul refrains from addressing more fully the contested issue of racial difference, and the undertheorised but highly significant topic of visibility in relation to racial otherness (as in the Indo case). The reluctance (or incapability) within Dutch academia to think through the semantics of race is striking. Dutch scholars generally prefer to stay on the presumed safe side of racism by opting for the more elusive and euphemist terms 'ethnicity' and/or 'discrimination'. Unlike scholarly work in Britain and the United States, Dutch research generally avoids using race as a category of analysis, thus contributing to the further mystification of racist structures and to the disqualification of critical race studies. See Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving (eds), *Dutch Racism* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, forthcoming, 2012).
7. The work of Hella Haasse, who passed away recently, was subjected to a similar critique.

## Bibliography

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