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Post-Colonial Immigrants and Identity Formations in the Netherlands

edited by
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IMISCOE Research

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9 Cultural memory and Indo-Dutch identity formations

Pamela Pattynama

9.1 Introduction

In his well-known *Culture and imperialism* (1993), Said argued that imperialism and colonialism are constructed not only on the basis of military or economic force, but on culture as well (Said 1994).¹ Culture and politics, he states, produce a system of control that goes beyond military power, as it works through representations and images. Such representations and images not only provide the underpinning and justification of colonialism and imperialism, but they have also continuously dominated the imaginations and memories of both colonisers and colonised. Said's emphasis on the ongoing influence of imperialism upon people and the cultures they live in relates to the continuing interdependent dialogue between peoples and the legacies of colonialism and imperialism: imperialism did not end with colonial rule and cannot be limited to a specific moment in history. Traces of Said's ideas about the continuing cultural influence of the colonial past are present in Dutch discourses on the critical appraisal of Dutch colonial rule in South-East Asia and the Caribbean. In 2000, Paul Scheffer published 'Het multiculturele drama' ('The multicultural tragedy') in the prominent Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, which provoked heated discussions on the integration of newcomers into post-colonial Netherlands. In a later book, he wrote:

If we don't reconsider our image of the past and if we don't grant our colonial history a definite space in our collective memory, we violate the truth and distort the historical record. (Scheffer in Boehmer & Gouda 2009: 37)

In this chapter, I wish to take up the notion that although colonialism is often thought of as a phenomenon of the past, it continues in fact in new shapes and forms in our present-day post-colonial societies. I would like to extend this idea by underscoring the imaginative processes of post-colonial memory-making. These will serve to underline my argument regarding the significance of a systematic analysis of cultural memory in order to

understand post-colonial migrant identity formations. Central in my argument is the notion of ‘memory community’, which will be used to refine the reductionist notion of identity politics. In contemporary discussions regarding the social and cultural integration of newcomers, a lack of social cohesion is often defined as the underlying cause of what Scheffer (2000)² termed the ‘multicultural tragedy’. In this context, many have pointed to the absence of a shared cultural heritage and historical canon or, in other words, the failure to construct a national narrative in which all citizens can recognise themselves.³ However, a collective canon cannot be constructed simply by replacing one set of texts or narratives with another. As post-colonial critics Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989: 189) point out, a canon is not a body of texts, but rather a ‘set of reading strategies’ based on histories and institutional structures. The subversion of a canon would therefore involve not only an analysis of these institutional practices, but also a systematic study of the many ways in which contemporary multicultural society is connected with the past history of Dutch colonisation in South-East Asia and the Caribbean. The fact that the Netherlands has failed to acknowledge the continuing influence of its colonial legacies – its history of participation in the slave trade, the huge profits made in Asia and the nineteenth and twentieth century dealings with Islam in the Dutch East Indies – reveals that the country has still not come to terms with its colonial past (see Boehmer & Gouda 2009; see also Barnouw, De Keizer & Van der Stroom 1985).

It should be mentioned that the Netherlands is not the only nation suffering from ‘colonial amnesia’. For many receiving metropolitan societies, the colonial past has become an uncomfortable, often silenced, past that did not just go away. The way in which different metropolises have negotiated this uneasy subject is, however, widely divergent. As Bosma (2009: 11) argues, for example, in comparison with Great Britain, the Netherlands has never initiated a

critical and systematic reflection on the political, historical and cultural consequences of Dutch colonialism per se, nor for the power relations in our present-day society, nor for the contemporary relations with Surinam, Indonesia and the Netherlands Antilles.

According to Bosma, the absence of post-colonial debates is a consequence of the disappearance of the Dutch language in post-colonial Indonesia. This major section of its ex-empire therefore cannot ‘speak back’ as still English-speaking India does. He also mentions the general lack of intellectual engagement with colonialism and the decolonisation processes in the Netherlands as another reason. Finally, his observation that in the Netherlands post-colonial immigrants have always been divided supports my argument about distinct memory communities. In Dutch minority discus-

sions, post-colonial immigrants from the Dutch East Indies, Surinam and the Dutch Antilles have never performed as one distinct group. This fragmentation, Bosma argues, is an important reason for their invisibility in the multicultural Netherlands.

Complaints concerning the failure to take the colonial past more seriously are not a new phenomenon. The absence of serious contemplation regarding the impact of the colonial past in the Netherlands and the necessity for a historical view of contemporary debates about multiculturalism are issues that have been raised before (e.g. Van Doorn 1995).⁴ In a recent essay, post-colonial literary critic Boehmer and Dutch empire historian Gouda explore the post-colonial pedagogic landscape at the tertiary level in the 'diasporic' Netherlands through a discussion of the Netherlands' (Boehmer & Gouda 2009: 39) colonial legacies and the interpretation of the post-colonial in the Dutch present-day context. They argue that post-colonial critical writing is 'belated' and awaits its moment of articulation. As a consequence of this discursive belatedness, the status of the Netherlands as an ex-colonial power 'remains unproblematised', and the manner in which the history of colonialism might link up with the formation of contemporary national and migrant identities is left 'insufficiently examined'.³⁹ Boehmer and Gouda therefore point to literary texts as a rich source of information about the relationship between colonialism and post-colonialism. It is indeed remarkable that this site of active and lively post-colonial discussion has largely been overlooked. From the beginning of colonial literature until this very day, there has been a form of post-colonial reflection on, and reaction to, the colonial past and its aftermath.⁵ VOC travelogues and later literary texts have all carried information and memories about 'exotic' faraway places and have served as mediators that constructed, transmigrated and transformed social meanings about intercultural encounters (see e.g. Van Kempen 2003; Nieuwenhuys 1978). In the contemporary Netherlands, many, often bestselling, novels deal with the colonial past.⁶ Their steady popularity testifies to the never-ending influence and fascination the colonial past exercises in a post-colonial society in which 'migration' and 'integration' have become major issues. In this context, it is not difficult to explain why migration and integration have recently come to be seen not merely as the objects of anthropological, sociological or historical analysis, but of cultural analysis as well. Cultural analysis involves the interdisciplinary analysis of culture at large. Its aim is to trace cultural meanings, social beliefs, value systems and implied discourses through the exploration and interrogation of cultural objects, practices and narratives, such as works of art and popular culture, events, rituals and cultural heritage.⁷ These objects and practices have always interacted with each other and, by doing so, have participated in our collective memory in an important way.

9.2 Cultural memory

During the last decades, memory has emerged as a key concern and an important theoretical concept in American and European societies. Not only have psychologists and historians studied memory, but sociologists, philosophers, cultural analysts and media scholars also recognise the social, cultural and political factors in memory.⁸ In most Dutch studies, post-colonial memory is conceptualised as psychological-individual.⁹ However, memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as a personal or a social one. As the product of collective activity, rather than the result of individual psychic or mere historical accident, cultural memory connects individual and collective aspects of society. The idea of the intricate connection between the personal and the collective was introduced by French sociologist Halbwachs (1877-1945) in 1925 and extended into the 1990s. Halbwachs explained that memory is always a social activity, which is characterised by two important points. The first is that the remembered past is constructed by people in the present, who consciously or unconsciously shape and reshape the past in order to address their contemporary needs and interests. This explains why some groups of people remember some events and forget others, which, again, are major events for other groups. Halbwachs' second point is that a shared past is necessary for the creation and maintenance of a collective identity, shared by all members of the group. Such a 'memory community' is a group, be it a family, migrant, ethnic or national group, with collective memories, including a shared past. Through such processes individuals become socialised to what should be remembered and forgotten in order to develop a sense of belonging, togetherness and identity (see e.g. Halbwachs 1992; Sturken 1997; Van Dijck 2007). As such, cultural memory performs a central function in post-colonial processes of identity formation.

Cultural memory is embodied in oral and written texts, such as literature, which store meanings shared by a group of people. Rather than oral or textual media, however, visual images have become central to how we represent, identify and make memory in the world (see Sturken 2001). Apart from textual media, films, photographs, websites and museum collections or shared memorabilia erected as reminders (such as monuments, buildings or statues) serve as memory objects. 'Everyday myths' that circulate and disperse memories and narratives are also significant constructions of remembrance. Cultural memory is, moreover, embodied in repeated and repeatable practices, for example, the annual festivals organised by different ethnic communities, such as the Pasar Malam Besar (recently renamed the Tong Tong Fair), organised by the Indies community in The Hague, the Kwakoe Festival, organised by the Afro-Surinamese community in South-East Amsterdam and the Summer Carnival in Rotterdam, organised by people from the Netherlands Antilles. These regularly celebrated festi-

vals and ceremonies work as dynamic *lieux de mémoire* and attract thousands of people every year.¹⁰ They demonstrate that cultural memory is connected to significant places associated with the colonial past in the East and the West. In a similar way, the Indies Monument in The Hague and the Slavery Monument in Amsterdam, where repeated commemorations take place, inform representations of the past and, for different memory communities, function as memory sites.

Nonetheless, the processes of interaction, memory-making and collective identity-making embodied by these objects and practices have scarcely been taken into account in political post-colonial discussions. The reasons for ignoring this genre of post-colonial reflection might be due, firstly, to the narrow economic paradigm with which ‘post-colonialism’, ‘new-comers’, ‘integration’ and ‘migration’ are approached. Another reason for dismissing discussions that are embodied in cultural forms may be the above-mentioned lack of intellectual engagement with colonialism and decolonisation, and it may also be a consequence of the prolonged tendency to consider all writing about the Dutch colonial experience as ‘colonial’, irrespective as to when or how it was written (D’haen 2002; Gouda and Boehmer 2009: 50 also mention this remarkable point of view.)

In this chapter, I argue in favour of a systematic study of cultural memory. If we do not engage with cultural memory, we are restricted in our explanations of how colonial representations exercise continuing memory effects. It is important, however, to acknowledge the dynamics of cultural memory, rather than understanding it as stored or buried static traces of a past that are to be retrieved. Cultural memory involves cultural negotiation, elaboration and constant reinterpretation of the present in terms of the past. Cultural memory is therefore never fixed. Below follows a first example concerning the Dutch East Indies, which will serve to illustrate how a perspective of cultural memory can work as a post-colonial tool.

9.3 Dogs and natives

There is a recurring story about the Dutch East Indies in which a sign features prominently. On this particular sign, so the story goes, was written: *Verboden voor honden en inlanders* (‘Dogs and natives not allowed’). This information is continuously passed on and the story is told again and again by people who clearly ‘remember’ having seen these signs outside public swimming pools. They saw them, so they emphatically declare, with their very own eyes. Yet, despite the many ‘witnesses’, and although extensive research has been carried out, no solid proof (e.g. a photograph) for the existence of such signs has emerged (Beynon 1995).

Obviously, one should weigh carefully whether to consider personal memories as reliable sources of the colonial ‘truth’: whether these infa-

mous signs truly existed in the colony cannot be verified through personal memories or experiences. We need not, however, even put the question as to whether these memories are true or not if we see them in terms of cultural memory and conceptualise them as what Barthes (1970) called 'everyday myths'. Circulating in contemporary societies, such myths allow us to construct a world in which we can find a place and identity for ourselves.¹¹ If we examine the sign story, drawing on Barthes, it becomes one of those notorious colonial myths that keep circulating in the Dutch post-colonial zone. Its persistence indicates not only the continuing presence of the colonial past in contemporary Dutch culture. It also exposes how colonial segregationist policies and attitudes continue to haunt memories of lived experiences, while its repeated telling reveals how the colonial past keeps affecting present immigrant identities.

In addition, this myth supports the above-mentioned memory studies. In illustrating that personal memories are 'always already' collective or social, rather than exclusively individual or stable, it asserts the flexibility of memory. Individual memories, and consequently identities, change continuously as they, in our multicultural and globalised world, are affected by social, cultural and political factors, including other people's memories. The memory of Dutch colonial signs may, for example, have been influenced and transformed by the all too true South African apartheid signs, such as photographs of beaches and park benches marked 'for whites only'. When, in the late 1970s, memories of the East Indies began to emerge in the public domain, stories of the apartheid horrors had been circulating widely in post-colonial Dutch media. Events such as the shootings in Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976) were highly visible and had wide renown. The similarities between late-colonial apartheid in the Indies and apartheid in South Africa might therefore have contributed to the shift in personal memories. Perhaps the post-colonial realisation of experienced benefits, from a system of cruel distinction between Indo Europeans and Europeans versus natives, might have triggered uneasy feelings of shame and guilt. Such uneasiness about the past may well be initiated by a specific TV programme. After decades of silence, the colonial past was publicly discussed in the revolutionary climate of the late 1960s. One of the veterans who fought in the War of Independence against Indonesian nationalists, J. E. Hueting, appeared on national television and appealed for research into war crimes committed by Dutch forces during what was called in the Netherlands 'police actions'. His call reactivated memories pertaining to the decolonisation and marked a dramatic change in thinking about the colonial past. In the post-colonial public mind, the Dutch East Indies emerged as a source of shame and guilt over racism, exploitation and war crimes. This upset deeply anchored myths of an idyllic, proud era and the 'unfairness' of having lost the precious colony (e.g. Breman 1987; Van Doorn 1994). Through confluences of time and space and the merging of

disparate moments in personal and public life, the *Verboden voor honden en inlanders* story becomes an act of memory – that is, an ‘activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described’ (Bal, Crewe & Spitzer 1999: vii).

The case that best exemplifies how cultural artefacts embody shifts in memories of the colonial past may be the way in which Hella Haasse’s novel *Oeroeg* was adapted for a film with the same name (1993). Published in 1948, Haasse’s novel appeared a few years after the Japanese occupation of the Indies ended and just before the Dutch were forced to hand over their colony to the Indonesians. *Oeroeg* is situated in the colony, and tells the story of the unusual friendship between a wealthy Dutch planter’s son and Oeroeg, son to one of the father’s native workers. Their close friendship ends when Oeroeg as a young man becomes involved with Indonesian nationalists, turns against the Dutch colonisers and rejects his white friend. At the end of the novel, when the violent Bersiap announces the war of independence, the planter’s son realises he never knew who his best friend really was.¹²

During the 45 years between the book’s and the film’s emergence, anti-colonial, guilt-ridden discourses about exploitation and racism had begun to circulate in Dutch public culture. After Hueting’s dramatic accusation on TV, the image of the Indies turned from a beloved lost paradise into an uncomfortable, shameful memory. The shift in discourses is represented through the difference in memories embodied in book and film. In the book, which is focused on the loss of friendship and the beloved colony, colonial discourses on the relations between natives prevail, and Indo-Europeans are only described in very negative terms. The film, on the other hand, visualises the post-colonial guilt-ridden discourses in images of separate entrances for European and natives, tortured nationalists and racist whites. *Oeroeg*, the film, has two timelines and takes up the ending of the novel when the planter’s son, after years, arrives back in the colony as a military army officer to fight the nationalists. Through the second timeline, his adventures dissolve repeatedly into images of the past that deliver memories of his youth. Whereas the flashbacks visualise his fond memories of a shared boyhood in an ‘exotic’ landscape, the timeline in the present foregrounds the chaos, violence and crisis that after the Japanese collapse emerged in the Bersiap. Interestingly enough, the shift in discourses between media can also be recognised through transnational imagery. Nearly half a century after the book, the film embodies an altered view on the colonial past, which has its roots in the international activist politics of the late 1960s. The film features, for example, an impressive sequence of a burnt-down Indonesian native village in the jungle, which inevitably reminds the audience of the My Lai atrocities often shown in contemporary American anti-Vietnam movies. After Hueting’s notorious TV appearance, these scenes brought, by association, long-silenced Dutch war crimes to

the fore. The cultural memory embodied in the film thus works against the colonial discourse that permeated its literary source and reshapes public memories of the colonial past.

The term ‘cultural memory’ thus designates the margins between the public histories underlying national identities and the unrestricted realms of personal memory. While cultural memory transcends the individual, and has not (yet) become ‘official’ history, it does participate in the making of national collective memory (Sturken 1991). What counts from the perspective of cultural memory is how cultural forms, such as texts, films and myths, function in post-colonial memory-making and identity formations. According to Said, it is their ‘worldly’ position, rather than their aesthetic or artistic value, that should be studied. In *The world, the text and the critic* (1983), he called attention to the affiliations of texts, stating that texts should be questioned in their ‘worldly’ context of social and political realities and histories, rather than in terms of fiction and artistic traditions (Said 1983). Hence, before further focusing on the function of cultural memory in post-colonial Netherlands, a short historical detour through the colonial past of the Dutch East Indies is required. As my cases focus on the memories and identity formation of the Indo-Dutch, the following historical background is theirs as well.¹³

9.4 Indo-Dutch history

After Holland lost the Dutch East Indies in 1945-1949, Indies-Dutch migrants from various ethnic backgrounds, and for different reasons, came to the Netherlands following World War II. They were described as ‘repatriates’, even though a large number had never seen the ‘fatherland’ before. At the time, it was considered ‘natural’ that the ‘pure’ white settlers in the former Dutch colony, the so-called *totoks*, would return to Holland. It was, however, expected that most people of mixed race would give up their claims to Dutch citizenship and opt for Indonesian citizenship. Although they were formally members of the European community in the East Indies, the Dutch government maintained that these people of mixed-race belonged in Indonesia and viewed their integration into Dutch society as impossible and undesirable (Schuster 1999a). As a consequence of this attitude, the Indo-Dutch were initially discouraged from coming to Holland and their passage to the Netherlands was even impeded. Yet, their emotional and historical ties to the Netherlands were underestimated.

When large groups of mixed-race people began to arrive, the Dutch government perceived them as temporary immigrants and searched eagerly for an alternative, if not ultimate, destination for the Indo-Dutch. Their emotional ties to Holland and, specifically, their legal position as Dutch citizens proved, however, strong enough to give the migrants political strength.

After its initial reservations, the Dutch government opted for an intensive policy campaign aimed at resocialisation and assimilation of the group (Lucassen & Willems 1994; Lucassen & Penninx 1999: 140). After their arrival, Indies-Dutch immigrants found themselves both a problem to a nation recovering from German occupation and an unwelcome reminder of a colonial past the Dutch were eager to forget (Willems 2001). During the post-war reconstruction of the Netherlands, memories of the German occupation left little room for commemoration of the war in the Pacific. The colonial past seemed closed, like a finished, forgotten book. The East Indies disappeared from the public eye and became a well-kept 'family secret' – a blind spot on the national retina (Locher-Scholten 1995).

As a result of post-war rhetoric concerning reconstruction of the Netherlands, national unity and discussions about what was right and wrong, the immigrants from Indonesia soon realised that their individual recollections of suffering were irreconcilable with a mixture of nostalgia and amnesia about the East Indies that prevailed in the public domain until the 1970s (Withuis 1994; Timmerije 2002; Van Vree 1995). There is still bitterness among repatriates today at having received little recognition of their experiences. 'Overshadowed' by the victims of Germany, they feel that they were effectively silenced. While they were subjected – and also eagerly subjected themselves – to a rapid process of assimilation, their stories and memories were kept out of the public eye and banished to the domestic environment or the realm of social services (Ellemers & Vaillant 1985; Tinnemans 1997).

The 'national secret' only came out many years later. Public debate made its faltering entrance in the revolutionary climate of the late 1960s. The direct event that triggered this debate was veteran Hueting's previously mentioned appeal on national television for research into war crimes committed by Dutch forces during the so-called 'police actions', or rather, Indonesia's War of Independence. Even though neither this war nor colonialism as such had previously been subjects of public debate, they had 'gnawed' at 'the conscience of the nation' (Van Vree 1999: 205). The reactivation of memories pertaining to the decolonisation therefore marked a dramatic change in memories of the colonial past. In the post-colonial public mind, the Dutch East Indies emerged as a source of shame and guilt over racism, exploitation and war crimes. This upset deeply anchored myths of an idyllic, proud era and the 'unfairness' of having lost the precious colony. When the emotions finally became public, the Dutch East Indies was transformed from an arbitrary literary theme into a familiar theme in popular culture, art and historiography. Decades after their arrival, immigrants began to tell their own stories in which the other side of their integration was revealed. The first generation of immigrants integrated perhaps economically and materially, but their emotional and cultural adaptation faltered.

In the meantime, during the first decades after the end of World War II, both post-colonial migration and the influx of immigrant labourers, mainly from Turkey and Morocco, led to the formation of new, ethnically distinct populations in Holland. In search of a safe and better life, an increasing number of migrants and asylum seekers from the South began to seek entrance to the rich countries of the North. When family reunions followed and children of immigrant families started attending Dutch schools, the emphasis shifted to the long-term position of minorities. While they faced semi-permanent or permanent displacement, the issue of refugees was being pushed ever higher up on the Netherlands' political agenda (Essed 1995). In fact, since the 1990s, migration has become a central issue in international relations, not to mention a burning question. In the wake of 9/11 and subsequent terrorist attacks in London, Madrid, Mumbai and elsewhere, immigration and security policies, as well as social attitudes towards Muslim people, in particular, has changed and once more affected the self-perceptions of migrant and immigrant groups.

The processes of displacement, multiculturalism and globalism have consequences for the way the so-called established minority groups such as the Indo-Dutch are perceived and perceive themselves in relation to refugees and other newly arrived immigrants. For example, thanks to their supposedly rapid assimilation, Indo repatriates, much like the Hindustani Surinamese, came to be seen as a successfully integrated minority group. They even became model minority citizens, held up as an example to more unruly newcomers in the Dutch multicultural landscape (Wekker 1995). The story of successful Indo-Dutch assimilation can be regarded as a national narrative. It reveals Dutch self-images of 'race' and class and suits the existing ideas of national identity. Contrary to recurring signs of xenophobia, the Dutch have always fostered an image of their hospitality, tolerance and liberal attitudes. In this context, the official story of the successful integration of Indo-Dutch migrants can be interpreted as a sign of national tolerance. Perhaps the achieved assimilation may even be regarded as a final tribute to the once revered Dutch colonial enterprise. The memories and self-perceptions of Indo migrants themselves, however, suggest that integration into Dutch culture did not run quite as smoothly as has generally been assumed (Pattynama 2000).

Over time, the shared, if internally divided, memories of the distinct groups of Indo-Dutch immigrants and their children have complemented and complicated the circuit of national memory culture. The haunting colonial past has become one of the two yardsticks by which moral and political questions are judged in the Netherlands. In comparison to the other experience, that of the German occupation, however, it holds a very ambivalent position. Various groups contest the significance and interpretation of events (Legêne 1998). Tension between conflicting bodies of memory explains the powerful emotions repeatedly evoked by post-colonial dramas

like the Moluccan train hostage crisis of 1975 (see Steijlen in this volume), the exile of 'traitor' Poncke Princen, a re-emergence from oblivion of the women forced into prostitution by the Japanese (the so-called 'comfort women') and questions of financial compensation and back pay.¹⁴ In the cultural landscape of the post-colonial Netherlands, memories of distinct groups have interacted and become interwoven. As a consequence, the memory of the colonial past has become an intricate, contested and contradictory 'texture of memory' (Young 1993). This complicated remembrance is inextricably linked to the memory communities and identity formations of the Indo-Dutch.

Knowledge of who we are is based on long-term remembrance of facts, emotions and experiences. Memory gives meaning to the present, as each moment is constituted by the past: memory is the means by which we remember who we are. That is why memory provides the very core of identity (Sturken 1999: 1). Such self-image or sense of identity is, however, never stable. It is subject to constant remodelling because our perceptions of who we are change, along with our self-projections and our desires to belong. When, as early as in 1925, Halbwachs emphasised that a collective imagined past is crucial for the unity of a society, he continued Durkheim's idea that every society displays and requires a sense of continuity with the past. As mentioned before, a shared past is, for Halbwachs, essential for the sense of a community and, like Durkheim, he assumes that the function of remembering is not to save or transform the past, but to support a commitment to the group (Misztal 2003: 50-51). According to Halbwachs, collective memory is always set in 'social frames', as groups themselves determine what is worth remembering and what is to be forgotten. The social frameworks of the communities we participate in tell us, in other words, what to remember and what to forget. Following this line of thought, we can assume that individual post-colonial migrants who identify with *de Indische gemeenschap* ('the Indische community'), adopt its social frames, which implies the sharing of memorable concerns, values, experiences and narratives: 'The individual brings recollections to mind by relying on the frameworks of social memory' (Halbwachs 1992: 182).

Through processes of shared remembering and forgetting, different groups articulate conflicting recollections of the East Indies. Struggling with traumatic recollections of a lost war, for example, East Indian veterans clash with first-generation immigrants who lost their homeland. Meanwhile, the immigrants challenge so-called 'imperialist nostalgia' (Rosaldo 1989). Despite gender, race, ethnicity, age and other differences, Indies-Dutch groups have claimed the colony as a collective identity marker through various acts of memory, including fictional narratives, autobiographies, sculptures, paintings, polemics, documentaries, websites and plays.¹⁵ In so doing, they have formed memory communities and created a sense of togetherness through processes of shared remembering and forgetting

(Irwin-Zarecka 1994). Rather than understanding in terms of a search for authenticity or 'false nostalgia', these reconstructions of the past may be explored in terms of Barth's understanding of ethnic identity.¹⁶ Barth argues that the identity of groups is developed through interactions, encounters and contacts that take place at the boundaries between communities. Groups achieve their collective identity by defining themselves as being different from other groups and drawing social boundaries from differences group members themselves regard as significant, while some other differences are 'forgotten'. Hence, instead of defining collective identity as a set of features that group members share, Barth looks at the dynamics of the formation and maintenance of boundaries. If we extend his ideas of community formation to cover post-colonial migration, then the research of migrant groups should not focus on the features, traditions, rituals or heritages that characterise their identity from within, but rather on the processes of interaction through which post-colonial migrant identity is maintained and reconfirmed. However, Barth's belief that ethnic groups are not only socially constructed, but that their identity is also 'situational' and flexible is often used by researchers who look at ethnic identity as a political tool and a source of power for subjugated groups. Obviously, it is useful and relevant to emphasise the empowerment and agency of migrants in the making of their own identities. However, the danger of placing too much emphasis on the deliberate adoption of particular identities by groups is that the involved restrictions are not adequately recognised. Identity formations come into being in a socio-cultural arena in which individual and collective identifications are constantly renegotiated. On the one hand, identity is the result of an active, dynamic process but, on the other, it is also severely restricted by established power relations and prevailing forms of stereotyping (see e.g. Appiah & Gates 1995; Hall & Du Gay 1996). As the contingent outcome of struggles over externally ascribed and self-acclaimed identities, individual identities are also limited by what Halbwachs calls 'social frames' within memory communities. For instance, one's individual memories of the colonial past cannot be disconnected from how the colonial past is remembered within the Indies community as a whole. It is this interaction between individual and collective memories that is embodied in the writings of second-generation migrants.

9.5 Second-generation migrants

Born in the Netherlands, second-generation immigrants grew up with their parents' silences and contradictory stories about the Dutch East Indies. Shaped by often traumatic events that took place before they were born, these fragmented narratives have framed the second generation's memories and identity formation. At the same time, the second generation developed

in an ‘upfront’ Dutch culture that made them expose the traumas of their parents. From the early 1980s onwards, second-generation Indo-Dutch began to resist their parents’ silent adaptation and to oppose the colonial denial of their families’ Indonesian ‘roots’. Second-generation writer Theodor Holman (1953) articulates these tensions between the first and second generations in a telling short dialogue between himself and his mother:

My mother, I say, has a – what shall I say – a small camp syndrome. Sometimes she is unable to escape a dream. Is that right, mother? She has nightmares then... [Mother:] ‘Yes, that’s awful. I leave my bed and I start to scream and do other things...’ [...] You don’t talk about that, mum. [Mother:] ‘No, I don’t talk about that. You wouldn’t understand anyway’. What kind of nonsense is that, that we wouldn’t understand? (Holman 2001: 264-265)

The time was ripe: in a changing multicultural Netherlands, new groups of immigrants were outspoken about their ethnic identities with a ‘naturalness that made us jealous’ (Serie 1997: 208). For the first time in 1983, self-conscious second-generation Indo-Dutch writers began to write about their specific post-colonial position. The ‘postmemories’ they created are distinct from the recollections of the first generation, which are based on experiences, however imaginary they may be. The generational distance does, however, not keep them from having a ‘deep personal connection’ with their family history of colonialism and migration.¹⁷ In their writings, the contested past continues to be a living source of knowledge and identification passed on in Indo-Dutch families (Boon 1994: especially 132). Precisely because colonial Indonesia no longer exists, and the source of identification consists of transferred, mediated and partly silenced stories, these writers’ work is engaged with imaginary, recreated representations of the East Indies. Hence, although they cannot claim recollections of their own, their reconstructions of the ex-colony define their self-representations.¹⁸ In fact, the Dutch East Indies have become a major identity marker for both Indies-Dutch immigrants and their offspring.

9.6 Family histories

In the work of Indo-Dutch author Adriaan van Dis, for example, the Dutch East Indies represents the transitory sense of self shared by the second generation. The eponymous protagonist in *Nathan Sid* (1983) is an Indo-Dutch boy growing up as the only son in a migrant family consisting of elder half-sisters. Not only is Sid different from them because of his white skin, but he is also the only member of this mixed family born in the

Netherlands. Furthermore, the other family members share the war years and a past in the camp, which excludes him. To make matters worse, he has to go through life as an illegitimate child, a complicated consequence of decolonisation and migration. Memory functions here on both a cultural and a personal level, to establish a narrative of origin and belonging. Incidentally, the surname Sid refers to the history of white fathers in the East Indies who acknowledged their children with indigenous women in a peculiar way: some bestowed their last name on their mixed descendants but spelled the name backwards. However, the father encountered in the work of Van Dis is not a white Dutchman, but an Indo-Dutch former soldier of the Dutch Indies army. Possessed by a Japanese camp syndrome, he unintentionally subjects his son to extreme demands and violence. As a symbol of a traumatic family history, such tragic father figures often appear in the literary writings of second-generation Indo-Dutch immigrants.

In *Geen gewoon Indisch meisje* ('*An unusual Indo-Dutch girl*') by Marion Bloem, the first-person narrator is engaged in a dialogue between individual identity and collective Indo-Dutch memory, which shapes the book's theme and form. Its protagonist realises, for instance, that the process of assimilation, which the first generation of Indo-Dutch people was subjected to, entailed a fixing of origins and history. The book creates a dynamic female position within the second generation by revising family stories and youth experiences. Similarly, reflections on being an artist and travelling to post-colonial Indonesia to participate in the construction of a post-colonial identity.

The novel portrays two main characters. Sonja, the assimilated one, is 'sunbathing among her white girlfriends'. Zon, on the other hand, is ambling 'as if she had lost the greater part of herself somewhere'. The use of two characters is part of the tradition of the literary 'in-between figure', which is closely related to the 'stranger' or 'social outsider'. More so, it is a sign of the Indo-Dutch transmigration of stories: one recognises E. du Perrons' *Land van herkomst* ('*Country of origin*') and Multatuli's *Max Havelaar* here. Literary critics could nonetheless not resist the temptation, and interpreted the dual characters of Zon/Sonja mainly as a signal of an 'identity crisis' or 'discord', even of 'continuous problems with her Indo-Dutch identity' (Goedegebuure 1983; Van Leest 1989). These interpretations of a migrant child torn between two cultures continue colonial representations of the 'unreliable half-blood' or the 'tragic mulatto' (Cottaar & Willems 1984; Pattynama 1998). A post-colonial perspective that, instead, would have taken cultural memory into account may reveal a dynamic identity formation, which recreates the past and connects it with the present and the future: 'she cannot continue what is already dead. She has to create her own kin' (Bloem 1983: 242). Rather than an in-between figure, Bloem's protagonist is a socially framed post-colonial subject who still

shapes and transforms an identity through imagination and the revision of narratives and images.

Alfred Birney is another second-generation Indo-Dutch writer who makes use of his family history in the construction of Indo-Dutch identities. While Birney's early works are infused with the homesickness and homelessness by which postmodern Western literature is determined, in his later works, the Indo-Dutch diaspora, rather than the postmodern Western crisis, serves as a point of departure. Birney gives voice to a son telling stories full of the madness of a father who had survived a Japanese prison camp, fought on the Dutch side in the Indonesian War of Independence against the other half of his own family and subsequently had to migrate to the Netherlands. Through the son's perspective, second-generation migrant Birney turns the postmodern sense of homelessness into a post-colonial sense of homelessness. The post-colonial search for an identity is inextricably interwoven with the (painful) colonial past: 'there was a rat gnawing at my stomach, lapping its way up through a raw sadness' (Birney 2001: 288).

Birney's novel *Yournael van Cyberney* (2001) underlines a connection with the colonial past once more. In the title, the name Yournael – a seventeenth-century Dutch word for 'travel diary' or 'travelogue' – first reveals the Indo-Dutch roots by making reference to the old East India Company, in the Asian possessions of which the Indo-Dutch communities emerged. The pseudonym 'Van Cyberney' is a compound name indexing the Dutch colonial rule that initially encouraged interracial sexual activity (Gouda 1995; Stoler 2002; Pattynama 1998). It consists of the last name of Birney's Chinese grandmother, Sie – transliterated at Cy – and also refers to his father's mixed descent as Si is a well-known Indo-Dutch designation for a male person. However, Si Birney is more than an autobiographical product of history. He is also firmly positioned in the present-day world: *Yournael* begins as a series of emails in cyberspace, the virtual space corresponding with the imaginary space occupied by the East Indies. On an inter-textual level, the serial emails can be seen as the offspring of the popular serials written by authors in colonial times, *Yournael*, however, is arranged as a polemic collection. Just as his famous predecessor, Dutch writer Multatuli, criticised the nineteenth-century colonial bastion, Birney agitates against the twentieth-century 'Dutch literary bastion'.⁶⁴ He hits out at the marginalisation of authors whose work falls outside 'polder literature'. He mocks the referees of Indo-Dutch literature and denounces the establishment of publishers, literary critics and literary scholars. The noise is intended to provide him with the position of a Dutch post-colonial writer between other newcomers – the same, but different all the same.

In *Yournael*, Birney makes his point through an Indo-Dutch writing style comprising a mixture of distinct genres, a process that echoes the writing style of Indo predecessors such as E. du Perron and Maria Dermoût. As a result, *Yournael* is more like a collection of accidental websites than a

proper novel. With its apparent hotchpotch of genres and texts of unequal length, content, tone and form, *Yournael* continues an Indo-Dutch tradition of mixing that was begun in the East Indies and ended up in a Dutch polder, while also paying homage to the first generation. Its loose structure is, however, deceptive: the various chapters are interconnected by a typical post-colonial novelistic element, the *Bildung* of a protagonist who initially poses as what Pratt (1996: 7) calls an auto-ethnographic subject: a colonised subject representing himself in ways that ‘engage with the coloniser’s own terms’ to turn into a self-conscious post-colonial subject. An example of the way the second generation borrows memories from the first generation is the Indonesian term ‘*kesasar*’ (‘being lost’), which Birney takes over from first-generation writer Frits van den Bosch. Displaced, the term then surfaces in a Dutch-speaking environment and is taken up by the second generation, turning it into a Dutch-Indo memory. But while for the first generation, *kesasar* is based on longing for the past, it acquires a perspective on the future for the present second generation. The narrative of travel to the ‘homeland’ with which *Yournael* ends exemplifies this. Post-colonial Indonesia does not provide the narrator with a home, but the erstwhile homeland does make him aware that homelessness itself may be a post-colonial identity. The last sentence of *Yournael* is as follows: ‘It does not matter where you are when you are a restless Indo’ (Birney 2001: 227).

9.7 Conclusion

In the inquiring works of self-aware Indo-Dutch writers, such as Bloem and Birney, the East Indies is a marker for a post-colonial identity that is sustained by memories of colonialism, family histories and migration. By appropriating self-definitions in post-colonial Holland, their Indo-Dutch central characters show how Indo-Dutch identity is shaped and transformed in the context of Dutch multiculturalism. As such, their work contributes to the urgent reflection on a transnational world.

In this chapter I argued for the significance of a systematic analysis of cultural memory in order to understand how post-colonial migrant identity formations are being shaped and transformed through memory-making. My point is that the central notion of cultural memory opens up opportunities to understand how the imagination of decolonisation processes is shaped and how this has affected the ways in which post-colonial migrants have come to perceive themselves and the culture in which they live. To me, it seems important to know how representations and images are used to characterise, embody, remember and come to terms with processes of decolonisation. Although colonialism is often thought of as a phenomenon of the past, it does in fact continue in our present-day post-colonial societies in new shapes and forms.

Notes

- 1 Since the appearance of Said's *Orientalism* in 1978, the complicity between historical discourse, literary representation and European strategies of cultural domination has emerged as a major preoccupation in post-colonial studies. Said shifted the study of colonialism to its discursive operations and showed that the history of colonialism and imperialism is intimately connected to language. Since the 1990s, scholars across a number of disciplines have begun to focus on the study of post-colonial visual culture as well.
- 2 www.nrc.nl/W2/Lab/Multicultureel/scheffer.html; accessed in 2008, no longer available in 2012.
- 3 As testified by the recently codified Canon of Dutch History made available online at www.entoen.nu.
- 4 In 1995, Ewald Vanvugt arranged the exhibit 'Nestbevuilers: Critici van het koloniale bewind' ('Those who foul their own nest: Critics of colonial rule') at the Letterkundig Museum in The Hague, which presented the biographies of a number of anti-colonial administrators, such as Jacob Campo Weyerman, Willem van Haren, Dirk van Hogendorp and Multatuli (see also Vanvugt & Van Campenhout 1996; Vanvugt 2002).
- 5 I wish to emphasise here that with the term 'post-colonialism' I sometimes refer to the period after the colonial era, though also mean 'to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 1989: 2-13).
- 6 See e.g. bestselling works written by Adriaan van Dis, Hella Haasse, Marion Bloem and Yvonne Keuls. Writers with neither an Indies family history nor other ties with the colonies have also inscribed colonial elements in their works; see e.g. Jan Wolkers, Gerard Reve, W.F. Hermans, Maarten 't Hart and Doeschka Meijnsing.
- 7 An example of the recent level of attention given to the study of culture is the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research programme known as 'Cultural dynamics', which seeks to solve social problems from the perspective of culture and cultural heritage (see www.nwo.nl/nwohome.nsf/pages/NWOA_6J8FRJ). For an excellent historical discussion of Indo-Dutch cultural heritage, see Van Leeuwen (2008).
- 8 While for some historians, use of memory in their quest for the truth about the colony is still a matter of concern, for others, the distinctions between 'objective history' and 'subjective memory' have become blurred. The latter group acknowledges that archival material is also selective and that the mechanisms of imagination, narrative order and subjectivity associated with memory are present in accounts of 'proper history' as well (see White 1987). One step further involves acknowledging the significance of cultural memory for the relation between colonialism and post-colonialism.
- 9 For a psychological-individual approach, see Tinnemans (1997), Captain (2002) and Steijlen (2002). For a social-historical view, see Bossenbroek (2001) and Scagliola (2002).
- 10 These national festivals were introduced with the arrival of post-colonial migrants to the Netherlands: Pasar Malam Besar in 1958, Kwakoe in 1975 and the Summer Carnival Rotterdam in 1984. The festivals reflect the multicultural society that the Netherlands has become over the past decades (see Alferink in this volume).
- 11 A myth can be seen as a fictitious or unproven story. Barthes (1970), however, was fascinated by the meanings of cultural objects, practices and stories, and explored such myths as 'dominant ideologies of our time' in which fiction and reality may overlap and become fused.

- 12 Known as the Bersiap, the Indonesian War of Independence lasted from about October 1945 to the beginning of 1946. People remember this period as most violent, cruel and chaotic. It began after Japanese capitulation when the former Dutch East Indies were left with a vacuum of power.
- 13 In this chapter, I make a linguistic distinction between migrants from the Dutch East Indies with a 'mixed-race' background (Indo-Dutch) and migrants who may have lived in the Indies for generations, but come from a white family (Indies-Dutch). In the ex-colony, both groups belonged to the group of so-called 'Europeans', although many Indo-Europeans remember being treated as second-rate citizens in the late colonial East Indies. Often these two groups have overlap, but there are also significant differences, particularly in matters of identification and memory.
- 14 Bootsma, Dortmans and Roelofs (2000). For enforced prostitution, see Ruff-O'Herne (1994) and also *Troostmeisjes en Japanse militairen* (2000); for payback issues, see Keppy (2006).
- 15 For a heated polemic about literature, memory and Indo and Indies identities essays, see Boon and Kousbroek in Boon (1994).
- 16 For a discussion of false nostalgia, see Jameson (1991). In the late 1960s, Barth (1969: 14-16) conceptualised what has become a central notion of group formation.
- 17 Hirsch's (1997: 22 in Pattynama 2003) term 'postmemory', used to designate the Jewish second generation, is also appropriate to characterise the work of the Indo-Dutch migrant second generation.
- 18 Other recurring elements are the usually disappointing journey to the former colony, the autobiographical genre, the far-reaching effects of the war (personified by a 'war father') and the generational transference of stories (see *Indische Letteren* 18 (4), a special volume from 2003 entitled 'De tweede generatie').