

Maria Dermoût and “unremembering” lost time

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Between 1945 and 1949 the Dutch fought a futile war against Indonesian nationalists that ended with the loss of their great colony, the Dutch East Indies. A consequence was the so-called “repatriation” of hundreds of thousands of members of the *Indisch* community to the Netherlands. In the early 1950s two novels, set in the early years of the 20th century, *Only yesterday* (*Nog pas gisteren*) and *The ten thousand things* (*De tienduizend dingen*), appeared from a new writer, Maria Dermoût. In this essay I argue that both of these works helped to shape a collective memory of the recent colonial past and that with the loss of place, the *Indisch* community was threatened by a potential loss of identity, but that literature was able to provide the memory of a sense of place, and collective memory could be retained. I argue that this memory, as represented in Dermoût's novels, took on a nostalgic form, helping to shape a collective identity based partially on a melancholy sense of common loss. But dwelling on nostalgic loss did nothing to help explain the loss of the colony, and thereby inadvertently contributed to a general unremembering, or refusal to remember, the painful final years of decolonization. Furthermore, contrary to Rob Nieuwenhuys, I argue that Dermoût, though *Indisch*, was a typical European, that is, Dutch, author. A post-colonial analysis of her novels reveals that they were written from the viewpoint of colonial privilege and that, as such, they silenced alternative narratives and thereby further contributed to unremembering the painful process of decolonization. I conclude that Dermoût's work helped to create a mnemonic community based on nostalgic remembering, but by trivialising or ignoring Indonesian nationalist aspirations, her work inadvertently served to unremember the reality of decolonization.

Key terms: Maria Dermoût; Dutch East Indies; decolonization; nostalgia; collective memory; post-colonialism.

Introduction

Those who are forced to flee their homeland become, in Salman Rushdie's words, "haunted by some sense of loss", but the writers among them, according to Rushdie, share an "urge to reclaim" (Rushdie 1991, 11). He argues that, while we are all emigrants from the past, the exiled writer experiences the sense of loss "in an intensified form" due to being forced to imagine, create and reclaim in a space that is, literally, "elsewhere" (Rushdie 1991, 12).

In 1951 a Dutch debut novel, written from "elsewhere", was published, which reflected one writer's urge to reclaim. The author, Maria Dermoût (1888-1962), born and raised mainly in the Dutch East Indies, had left the colony and "repatriated" with her husband to the Netherlands in 1933. She never returned to her tropical birthplace. By the 1950s, having fought a futile and doomed war of decolonization against Indonesian nationalists (1945-1949), the Dutch government was forced to recognise the independence of Indonesia. The loss of the colony meant that now there was no possibility of return for Dermoût, or for the hundreds of thousands of "repatriates" who made up the so called *Indisch* community – *Totoks*, white Dutch who had gone to the Dutch East Indies, and *Indos*, people of mixed European and Asian heritage, but who were citizens of the Netherlands. All that could be reclaimed was the literary representation of place by means of memory. By the early 1950s tens of thousands of Dutch colonialists or *Indisch* persons had been "repatriated" to the Netherlands, (some having never before set foot there) joining Maria Dermoût in exile from their tropical homeland.

Only yesterday (Nog pas gisteren; 1951) was her first published book and, although she was 63 years of age at the time of its appearance, the vivid memories of childhood inscribed in the book give the impression that it was only yesterday that she had left the former colony and her youth behind. The very first sentence provides a strong localisation of memory: "On Java, somewhere in Central Java, in between the mountains Lawoe and Wilis, but closer to the side of Lawoe, deep in a walled garden under dark green trees, was a house" (Dermoût 2000, 9). Similarly, her second and most renowned novel, *The ten thousand things (De tienduizend dingen; 1955)*, opens with the short paragraph:

On the island in the Moluccas there were a few gardens left from the great days of spice growing and 'spice parks' – a few only. There had been many, and on this island they had even long ago been called not 'parks' but 'gardens'.
(Dermoût 2002, 5)

This is followed by a description of the garden as it looks now, as well "as then", with its "spice trees clustered together, kind with kind, clove with clove, nutmeg

with nutmeg, a few high shades trees in between, kanari trees usually, and on the bay-side coconut palms and plane trees to give shelter from the wind” (Dermoût 2002, 5).



Figure 1. Covers of *Nog pas gisteren* ('Only yesterday') and *De tienduizend dingen* ('The ten thousand things'). Private collection. Reproduced with permission.

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In both works, as seen above, Dermoût presents the reader straight away with an emplacement or localisation for the memory work that will follow. The events recalled will take place in place. While her first novel presents us with an almost cartographical emplacement of the house of memory, the second proceeds by placing the garden of memory on an unidentified Moluccan island, which is clearly Ambon (Praamstra 2001, 193), and then offers a description of the garden's layout. In this garden too there is a house, a broken down old house, and Dermoût asks: "What was left of all the glory?" (Dermoût 2002, 5). She then tells us that it is memory that remains: "The remembrance of a human being, of something that happened, can remain in a place" (Dermoût 2002, 6). This is why both works open with and are saturated throughout with a strong presence of place – because we inscribe place with memory; and, consequently, place comes to hold memory. Furthermore, both novels, in their openings, possess a suggestion of the searching nature of memory work. *Only yesterday*, with its vague "somewhere" in Central Java, then its narrowing down to a location

between two mountains, then immediately corrected to “but closer to the side of Lawoe”, gives the reader the impression of a memory at work. The description of the garden in *The ten thousand things* contains the phrase “Now, as then”, linking the present with the past, linking the place where remembering is happening with the place that is being remembered. Both novels attempt to counteract the painful, growing absence, by dragging the past into the Dutch present by means of reconstructing it through memory’s representations of locality.

Memory, identity, place

Margaret Farrar has argued that a sense of place “is inextricably linked to memory formation, which is, of course, crucial to identity formation, both at the individual and the collective levels” and that further, places become “written on the body, wired into memory; places become part of us, quite literally” (Farrar 2011, 725). More specifically, cultural anthropologist Marc Auge has written that ethnic groups will always, to some extent, seek identity through the demarcation of soil, creating a “fantasy of a society anchored since time immemorial in the permanence of an intact soil outside which nothing is really understandable” (Auge 2008, 36). Although the Dutch community in their colony of the Dutch East Indies could not in any way claim to be the indigenous inhabitants, nevertheless, some colonials, especially those of mixed heritage, believed their roots were firmly planted in the archipelago. This latter, in-between group formed a significant hybrid population, whose origins were deeply rooted in the Indonesian landscape. Historian Simon Schama, in his survey of the meaning of landscape and memory in European history, would seem to agree with Auge: “Landscapes are culture before they are nature; constraints of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock” (Schama 1996, 61). Even the *Indisch* critic and essayist, Rudy Kousbroek, certainly no romantic, admitted that the essential element of being *Indisch* was an *Indisch* youth; in other words, the memory of “growing up in a landscape [...] that leaves behind traces in the soul” (Kousbroek 2005, 169).

When a people are removed from “their” landscape, their identity is threatened. Schama expresses it as follows: “National identity [...] would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition” (Schama 1996, 15). Auge points out that “it is spatial arrangements that express the group’s identity (its actual origins are often diverse, but the group is established, assembled and united by the identity of place)” (Auge 2008, 37). *The Indisch* community had various origins, descending from Dutch or other Europeans on the one hand and various Indonesian peoples, and even Chinese and Arabs, on the other hand – but it was the Dutch East

Indies that provided the location of their establishment, assemblage and unity. In this respect, while the Netherlands was the seat of their official nationality, the Dutch East Indies was their homeland. By the 1950s this homeland no longer existed, neither spatially or temporally. This was of great significance in Dermoût's attempts to emplace her memories in rich, vivid descriptions of the landscapes of Ambon and Java.

Auge argues further that "all relations that are inscribed in space are also inscribed in time" and that spatial relations "are concretized only in and through time", meaning that "their reality is historical" (Auge 2008, 47). In other words, anthropological space is a principle of meaning by which a group has inscribed a territory with their shared identity, relations and history (Auge 2008, 43). When the relational and historical foundations of a territory have been removed, when the territory can no longer be meaningfully read as a marker of identity, then the group finds itself, wherever it might be, in a non-place. When a people is forced to migrate away from their place or origin, like the *Indisch* community in the postcolonial period, then this place, rather than forming the living source of their identity, instead becomes a place of memory (Auge 2008, 63), as in the novels of Dermoût. Such was the situation of the repatriates who arrived in the Netherlands in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Their former homeland, rather than being a source of living identity, had been transformed into a place of memory.

The pervasive presence of landscape throughout Dermoût's works remind us of Schama's "mystique of a particular landscape tradition" and of Auge's suggestion that a group inscribes a territory with their common identity, thereby creating a myth of permanence rooted in territory. Dermoût, like her fellow *Indisch* repatriates, had been exiled from her territory and was now amputated from her place; her works are attempts at reclaiming, by means of an evocation of a place of memory, this lost territory.

Nog pas gisteren ('Only yesterday')

Only yesterday tells the story of 12 year old Riek, an only child. Her childhood is near idyllic, with a beautiful house, plenty of servants, a loving native *baboe* or nanny who sleeps on a mat by her bed (Dermoût 2000, 14). Riek's life is surrounded by stories that sometimes keep her awake at night (Dermoût 2000, 19). Sleep arrives only with forgetfulness, perhaps a metaphor for the Dutch postcolonial situation in which repatriates are tormented by their memories of Japanese occupation and Indonesian nationalist violence and will only achieve contentment through forgetting their past. Riek's life is surrounded by secrets, and violence is only ever slightly out of sight. The sultan wants to buy a particular beautiful boy "to play with", despite the fact that he has over a hundred others

(Dermoût 2000, 16). Riek is afraid of Arabs (Dermoût 2000, 17). Aunt Nancy reads her fairy stories but breaks down in tears because of homesickness (Dermoût 2000, 30-31). Everyone seems to have secrets, including Riek who has spied married Nancy locked in an embrace with bachelor “uncle Fred” (Dermoût 2000, 35). Riek and her mother visit an old, wise man in the mountains; he knows about plants and herbs, astrology and the ancient Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms of Java (Dermoût 2000, 38-41). When the old man dies, Riek feels the loss deeply, not just the loss of the old man, but also his garden, the mountains where he lived, the old Buddhist temples and Hindu Gods (Dermoût 2000, 46). With the old man’s passing an entire world, a world upheld by memory, is lost. It is a premonition of a loss to come. Dermoût seems to be telling us that everything, eventually, passes, including Dutch rule in Indonesia, and even the memory of Dutch rule in Indonesia will someday fade away.



Figure 2. Maria and her husband, Java, 1906. Private collection.
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Riek's childhood is further threatened as the native population grows restless and burns sugar plantations. Her family are gripped by fear that they will be targeted. "Why do they want to murder us?" the little girl wonders (Dermoût 2000, 49). The burnings stop, but a servant, Roos the seamstress, is killed by her husband and Riek encounters the reality of murder (Dermoût 2000, 50-52). By the end of the novel Nancy and Fred's relationship ends tragically, Nancy becomes *persona non-grata*, and Fred goes into exile and dies. Fred's devoted manservant Boeyoeng is overwhelmed with sadness. Boeyoeng suddenly departs for his home in Sumatra; Riek's baboe, Oerip, leaves after years of devoted service (Dermoût 2000, 81). Nothing remains, Dermoût seems to be saying, everything passes. One evening as she is saying her prayers Riek has a vision – she sees a dense forest, with colourful flowers, an elephant, tiger, apes, a snake and a horse. And in this Edenesque scene, she sees "Boeyoeng and uncle Fred together" (Dermoût 2000, 82). The next morning her father informs her that it has been decided that she is to be sent away to the Netherlands to attend secondary school. Everything passes, even Riek herself must leave. She thinks to herself that "dying and going away, it's the same thing" (Dermoût 2000, 84). Boeyoeng, Fred, Nancy, the old man, Roos, Oerip – all have left or died and now she is about to leave. But before she departs she realizes that she is still here, still in her place, and she tries to hold onto it for a moment, to take it all in:

There was so much: besides all the people, also the other things that she loved – her place on earth until now; the great house with the white marble floor and the black star and the golden birds on the sliding doors, the green surrounding gardens, all the trees, the mountain, Lawoe, beyond the garden wall. All of the mountains, the entire range – she knew them all by heart.

Java and her blue mountains, and the surrounding blue sea.

(Dermoût 2000, 85)

The novel ends with the words: "She needed time to lose it all" (Dermoût 2000, 85).

Only yesterday is a novel that opens and closes with a detailed localisation in place. The story that is told is enclosed, like bookends, by emplacements. It is a narrative of inevitable loss, a loss that is repeated and prolonged, not diluted, by memory. It is only in forgetting that the loss can be lessened, like Riek falling asleep upon forgetting the stories. Rarely sentimental, always understated, Dermoût explores deep emotions that influence lives, evoking the depths of human longing through perfect representations of nature, colour and sound.

Dermoût had already left the Dutch East Indies decades before decolonization and the writing of this novella. The memories that she recalls are of a time even further back, in her own childhood in the late 19th, early 20th century. However, her work serves as a metaphor for decolonization, which explains its popularity among the displaced *Indisch* population. As Pamela Pattynama correctly points out, the ending of *Only yesterday* “from a postcolonial perspective, foreshadows the national loss of the Indies” (Pattynama 2012, 100). Thick descriptions of nature, sounds, houses and food all combine to retrieve the absent, the lost, and bring it into the present, in a bitter-sweet memory. The entire novella represents continuous, varied forms of loss, constant passing, a “good safe word, ‘passed’ [*voorbij*], but it never lasts long. If it has passed, another comes,” so even the passing passes (Dermoût 2000, 53).

Decolonization meant that the homeland or place that had provided the group with an identity had been lost and in Dermout’s novel it is lost because eventually everything is brought to a state of loss by time itself. The European rule of Indonesia had passed, just like the rule of the earlier Buddhist and Hindu kingdoms. The memory of this loss is still fresh and therefore painful, but it too will pass, until forgetfulness is achieved. In the meantime, we have memory, such as that which is represented in *Only yesterday*. But the novel offers no explanation of the historical causes of the loss, no reasons why the idyll had to end. As we shall see later, this will have unintended repercussions for Dutch society’s inability to form a collective memory of the final years of colonization, the difficult years of 1945-1949.

De tienduizend dingen (‘The ten thousand things’)

The ten thousand things appeared in 1955. Rob Nieuwenhuys described it as “an exquisite story” (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 263). We have already seen how it opens with the setting of the story within a garden on an island in the Moluccas, the so called Spice Islands. This unusual novel is told in six sections or frames. However, the English translation by Hans Koning reworked these frames, to Dermoût’s satisfaction, and thereby “made visible the deeply hidden foundation of the narrative framing” (Freriks 2000, 285). The titles of these frames emphasised the importance of place for the localisation of memory: “The Island”, “At the Inner Bay”, “At the Outer Bay”, and again “The Island”. The main character is named Felicia but is mostly referred to as “the lady of the Small Garden”, rooting her in a sense of place. In the crucial, long second frame, “At the Inner Bay”, it is not so much the lady of the Small Garden who is the main character but, as Olf Praamstra has pointed out, it is the garden itself (Praamstra 2013, 57). One can hardly imagine a novel where memory is more strongly localised than *The ten*

thousand things. This rootedness in a sense of place is a perfect example of Auge's claim that a group's identity is "established, assembled and united" through the identity of place (Auge 2008, 37). What's more, with the multiple descriptions of landscape and natural objects we are once more reminded of Schama's "mystique of a particular landscape tradition" (Schama 1996, 15).

Dermoût's second novel is set in Ambon just before World War One. By the time Dermoût wrote *The ten thousand things*, the world she was describing and reliving had long ceased to exist. Yet it is as if she herself still dwelled deep within that world in the present. She tells us that inanimate objects, manmade or natural, hold memories of the distant past (Dermoût 2002, 5, 50); that songs are vehicles of memory (Dermoût 13); that recitation can enhance memory (Dermoût 2002, 36, 65); that narratives can operate as a form of *ars memoria*, aiding memory (Dermoût 2002, 80); that memory can be embodied, like when one picks up an implement and the hand remembers (Dermoût 2002, 108); that one can outsource memory to written notes (Dermoût 2002, 156); that photography can act as a prosthetic memory (Dermoût 2002, 160-162). In this large scale memory work, forgetting is the enemy. In the world of memory, forgetting is like a disease, as when a professor complains about his memory and wonders if he has malaria (Dermoût 2002, 176). The slave bell is supposed to be rung every time a boat enters or leaves the bay, though sometimes it is forgotten (Dermoût 2002, 7). Stones are erected as markers of everlasting remembrance, but the graves lie forgotten (Dermoût 2002, 10-11). The grandmother of the lady of the Small Garden urges her grandchild to remember and warns: "forgetting is not good" (Dermoût 2002, 87).

Each frame narrates a story of loss – violent, murderous loss. Life amidst the magnificent nature is undermined by dark, violent undercurrents. The result, like in *Only yesterday*, is overwhelming loss, a loss that is, as we have seen, a metaphor for the loss of their precious colony, the eviction of the Dutch from their innocence and their tropical paradise. That this sense of loss has been experienced personally by Dermoût cannot be doubted. The lady of the Small garden is the fifth generation to own the garden – "her son would have been the sixth generation" (Dermoût 2002, 6) – but the son is murdered and she is the end of the line. Dermoût too descended, on her father's side, from a family that had lived in the East Indies for many generations (Van der Woude 1973, 15). Her son, too, had died violently, in a Japanese prison camp in 1945 (Van der Woude 1973, 138). Like the lady of the Small Garden, "she had tasted bitterness, more bitter than the bitter water from the bitter spring, so she knew pain, inside and outside – and what is there to still pain?" (Dermoût 2002, 199). Like Riek in *Only yesterday*, she had been raised on a sugar estate on Java within sight of Mount Lawoe (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 255). For many years she had lived with her husband

in the Moluccas, like Felicia, the lady of the Small Garden (Van der Woude 1973, 59-75).

Naturally we cannot draw a simple parallel between her works, works of fiction after all, and 'real life'. But it would be equally unwise to completely dismiss these works of fiction as being purely imaginary. Nieuwenhuys writes that *Only yesterday*, which was "about memories of a childhood spent on Java" (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 255), contains "a considerable amount of autobiography" (257), and that in *The ten thousand things* she has "assimilated her private experience, although in a most guarded way" (261), while the lady of the Small Garden is based on Johanna Louisa van Aart, a historical figure who Dermoût had met on Ambon (Van der Woude 1973, 63) and who is said "to express some of [Dermoût's] views concerning loss, death and sadness" (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 262). Pattynama agrees with Peter van Zonneveld that such works are "disguised ego-documents" (Pattynama 2008, 52).

Nostalgia

Dermoût's two novels are not sentimental, but they both emphasise a feeling of yearning for a place that no longer exists. In this way they are sites where the *Indisch* mnemonic community, now stranded on the coast of the North Sea, could be provided with an identity; an identity based, at least partially, on shared loss. To some extent they are works of nostalgia – evoking an aching memory that is a bitter-sweet longing for something that is impossible to retrieve, the place of the group that is no more. But it is the "irrecoverability of the past that lends to nostalgia its emotional appeal" (Hutcheon 2000, 195). Dermoût expresses in her writing the dominant mode of memory, nostalgia, experienced by most forced migrants. As Julia Creet has written: "If leaving is the only option, where one leaves from becomes a nostalgic past" (Creet 2011, 6). For the first generation of *Indisch* repatriates, according to Pattynama, "there was no deeper emotion than the feeling of loss of and separation from the East Indies" and this feeling of "colonial trauma" that was shared by the repatriates, shaped them into a Dutch memory culture (Pattynama 2008, 59). These works package their memories in an artful, powerful manner, sure to impact deeply on those suffering from the melancholy that is brought on by loss. And though nostalgia, in some quarters at least, might have a bad name, implying superficiality and evasion, Pattynama argues that nostalgia is understandable. Indeed it is the only possible form of remembering available to a people who have lost everything, "their place of birth, purpose, culture, a climate, the smells, colours and sounds of the East Indies", yet this is not simply a trivial form of nostalgia for empire, but a "cover [*dekmantel*] for emotions which one could not easily present before the Dutch mnemonic culture of colonial guilt and shame" (Pattynama 2008, 59-60).

In other words, while Dutch culture in general may have viewed the memory of empire with guilt and shame, the memory of the *Indisch* community was more complex, involving, inevitably, the immediate sense of loss. Zofia Rosińska (2011) has described the dominant emotion among emigrant communities when confronted with the impossibility of return as being melancholy and that this melancholy becomes closely tied to the group's identity and memory. She argues that the vital role of memory is threefold: it forms identity; it is therapeutic, helping to bear the present hardship of transplantation; it is community forming, creating a bond by means of collective recollecting (Rosińska 2011, 39).



Figure 3. Maria with daughter and son, 1912. Private collection.
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In a famous article from 1989, anthropologist Renate Rosaldo warned against a so called innocent imperial nostalgia that, in effect, captured the imagination while concealing its “complicity with often brutal domination” (Rosaldo 1989,

108), echoing Rushdie's anger against the nostalgia of "Raj fiction and the zombie-like revival of the defunct empire" in Britain during the 1980s (Rushdie 1992, 121). But Pattynama claims that the nostalgia demonstrated by the likes of Maria Dermoût was not reactionary "imperialist nostalgia" but a vehicle for emotions that otherwise could not have been permitted public expression in the Dutch culture of memory during the 1950s, where colonial guilt and shame dominated (Pattynama 2008, 59-60). Furthermore, in her most recent book, Pattynama claims that, since the 1970s, nostalgia has become the primary mode of collective remembering, made possible by visual mass culture (Pattynama 2014, 27-29). She argues that nostalgia is not a simple affair and that there are different forms of nostalgia, serving different goals for different groups (Pattynama 2014, 136).

A great deal of recent research supports Pattynama's argument. Atia & Davis have argued that nostalgia does not have to mean a "betrayal of memory", but can be "creative and radical" when it gives "sensory awareness of the other places, times and possibilities" leading to "a kind of critical self-consciousness" (Atia & Davis 2010, 181, 183-184). Nostalgia is a complicated form of memory representation and, as Walder has argued, the "suspicion and mistrust with which it has been viewed by progressives, as a source of individual self-indulgence or collective myopia, reflects a lack of understanding of the breadth and significance of the phenomenon" (Walder 2011, 3). Likewise, while examining the pervasive presence of imperial nostalgia among the former colonised in Zanzibar, William Cunningham Bissell warns that "any attempt to cast colonial nostalgia as purely retrograde or reactionary seems dubious at best" (Bissell 2005, 217). For instance, Rosaldo's claim that because nostalgia as a concept was an invention of a 17th century Swiss doctor, the condition itself is thereby a Eurocentric one (Rosaldo 1989, 108-109), is disputed by recent findings in psychology, where experimental results in British nostalgia tests have been replicated in Chinese experimental findings (Zhou 2008, 1028), suggesting that nostalgia is universal. Indeed psychologists today see nostalgia as a resource that "strengthens social connectedness and belongingness, partially ameliorating the harmful repercussions of loneliness" (Zhou 2008, 1028), something that the displaced *Indisch* community, recently arrived in the alien metropole, certainly needed. Furthermore, psychologists tell us that "nostalgia is now emerging as a fundamental human strength" (Sedikides 2008, 307), serving a number of useful functions and imbuing life with meaning. No doubt the capacity to strengthen social connectedness and ameliorate feelings of loneliness as well as the capacity to foster a new purpose or meaning gives nostalgia its power, and hence its hold over the displaced *Indisch* community. Dermoût's works thereby inscribed a

form of remembering that helped create a collective identity among a mnemonic community where the binding element was the nostalgic remembering of loss.

But Dermoût's exquisite novels not only provided representations that formed an identity marker for the nostalgic community of *Indisch* repatriates, whose collective memory was focussed on their sense of loss; they also operated as a screen upon which 'unremembering,' in the sense of 'refusing to remember,' could take place. The novels of 1951 and 1955 appeared at a crucial time: while the metropole was still recovering from German occupation, while the decolonization process was being completed, while relations between the former colonial power and the former colony were deteriorating, while hundreds of thousands of repatriates were arriving in the Netherlands. It is against this background that Dermoût was doing her intensive memory work, and as we know from the work of Maurice Halbwachs, we do not remember alone but "the mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society" (Halbwachs 1992, 57), that is, the memories are "reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Halbwachs 1992, 40). In the Dutch present, the great colonial adventure had ended abruptly, inexplicably. The rich colony, that for well over 300 years had made the Netherlands a world power to be reckoned with, had been all but entirely lost, and for no obvious reason. Dermoût's work provided a recipe for surviving that sense of loss by helping to build a nostalgic community. In the final section of the book, the lady of the Small Garden sits alone on the beach, under the moon, on the feast of All Soul's Day, as she does every year, and she remembers her murdered son, and all those who had been murdered that year, and all those who have ever been murdered on the island. In this battle against forgetfulness, she tries to bring each to mind, until she enters a type of mystical reverie and she contemplates the murderers and finds that "she did not feel the anger, the disgust of always, but pity almost [...] oh why, why, you fools! – without the desire for revenge, without hatred now" (Dermoût 2002, 206). She sees the murdered and the murderers, she sees her long dead parents, she sees the seashells and stones of the islands, the waves, birds, roaring lions, and as she continues to sit on the rattan chair under the moon she realises "they weren't a hundred things but much more than a hundred, and not only hers; a hundred times 'a hundred things,' next to each other, separate from each other, touching, here and there flowing into each other, without any link anywhere, and at the same time linked forever [...] A link which she did not understand; understanding it was not needed, wasn't possible, she had seen it – for one moment over the moonlit water" (Dermoût 2002, 208). In this mystical, Eastern inspired vision, Dermoût sums up her philosophy on how to deal with loss – through forgiveness, through the realisation of the entanglement of everything, including all opposites, and the impossibility of rational understanding; the acceptance of the

absence of understanding. It seems to me that in this passage she is representing the loss of the Indies as being a loss that can be experienced, but cannot be understood, can be experienced but will only be accepted when the need for understanding is erased. The lady of the Small Garden is brought out of her reverie when two servants call her to come to bed and to drink some coffee: “The lady of the Small Garden whose name was Felicia stood up from her chair obediently and without looking around at the inner bay in the moonlight – it would remain there, always – she went with them, under the trees and indoors, to drink her cup of coffee, and try again to go on living” (Dermoût 2002, 208). So too, the *Indisch* community – *Totoks* and *Indos* – had to leave their beautiful archipelago – “it would remain there, always”, (but without them) – and in their new home, in the cold, northern Netherlands, they would have to “try to go on living.” It is significant that Dermoût here, in the book’s final sentence, refers to the lady of the Small Garden, “whose name was Felicia”, by her real name. The tautology is deliberate. “Felicia” means “happy”, and it is the acceptance of her loss, its intense remembering, but without the need for rational understanding or explanations, that makes her, finally, happy. Dermoût’s work does, after all, represent decolonization. Decolonization is the intense rupture with the past, the incomprehensible loss of one’s place, and it brings with it the challenge to remember, to accept and to go on living. But while Dermoût’s act of remembering may be a response to trauma, it obviously did little or nothing to help work through the trauma in order to achieve a more mature understanding. It explained nothing of the why and how of decolonization. As an instrument of unremembering, it did nothing to help remember and explore why, all of a sudden (seemingly), in the years 1945-1949, the native population of Indonesia had turned against their European (*Indisch*) leaders and the *Indisch* community had quickly discovered themselves to be strangers in the place they considered their own. On the contrary, nostalgic representations and collective memories of loss, by reinforcing the dwelling on pain, impeded any attempt to remember and face up to the roots of the trauma. For the following decades, into the 1970s, the Dutch imperial past was remembered, but the painful episode at the end, the violence of decolonization, was erased from the national collective memory.

Cultural appropriation

Furthermore, postcolonial readings of Dermoût’s novels reveal deeper ways in which they hid the possibility of a mature remembering of decolonization. Nieuwenhuys has written of Dermoût’s unique place in Dutch letters, going as far as to claim that she “is not a real Dutch author” (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 256), that even in the decades that she lived in the Netherlands “she lived in Indonesia with and through her books” (255), adding that her stories “lack a Dutch point of

view”(256). This is a widespread view even today. Writing in the *Indisch* magazine *Moesson*, Vilan van de Loo claimed that Dermoût’s work belonged to the very best of literature in the Dutch language, but then, somewhat irrationally (for it would seem obvious that Dermoût wrote in Dutch, so what other language area could she possibly belong to?) Van de Loo declares: “But no, Dutch, maybe that word is too awkward [*hoekig*] for her. She wrote as she was, *Indisch*. Her novels and stories are lyrical, poetic, un-Dutch” (Van de Loo, 2003, 17). This article, written in Dutch, betrays a low opinion of the quality of Dutch literature, insisting, it seems, that Dutch writers are incapable of lyricism or poetry. More importantly, it reflects a sort of parochial alchemy that attempts to magically transform what is clearly Dutch into something “un-Dutch”, namely “*Indisch*”. And this is what Nieuwenhuys no doubt had in mind when he claimed that she was not a Dutch author and had no Dutch point of view. He could not have been more wrong.

True, Dermoût’s novels reflect a deep interest in the culture, beliefs and lifestyles of the peoples of Indonesia. Thiam has pointed out how *The ten thousand things* is heavily influenced by Chinese thought, a Taoist novel in theme and structure, and that the narrative is animated with concepts taken from Moluccan animist folklore (Thiam 2000, 81). Additionally, Bogaerts points out how frequently Dermoût’s writing, especially her short stories, combined her own memories with ancient Javanese epics (Bogaerts 2000). Praamstra argues that Dermoût presents the reader with an “Eastern view of life” (Praamstra 2001, 194), constructed from Taoist, Buddhist, Christian and, most importantly, Moluccan animist beliefs (196-197).

But this appropriating of non-western ideas, motifs and narratives and integrating them into one’s own work of art, is an example of something that was a common feature of European modernism. It certainly doesn’t make Dermoût “un-Dutch”. The Impressionists were fascinated by Japan, Gauguin appropriated aspects of the culture of Fiji, Picasso was inspired by African masks. Claude Debussy was influenced by Javanese gamelan music while Gustav Holst composed operas based on Indian mythology. Orientalist fantasies were a recurring element in modern European popular literature, like the work of Pierre Loti, as well as in serious literature, like the work of E. M. Forster. Herman Hesse’s *Siddharta* was a novel populated exclusively with Asian characters and, arguably, Buddhist ideas. The East Indies was the Dutch Orient and its appeal could be found in Dutch letters, such as in the work of Louis Couperus. It is within the context of this tradition, a European tradition made possible by the adventure of empire and a willingness to appropriate non-western narrative, characters and ideas, that we must place the work of Maria Dermoût.

Let me support this argument by recalling a selection of the works of literature that she herself was reading in the time that she was working on her novels. We find her seriously engaged with her favourite poets, like the Dutch poets J. C. Bloem (Van der Woude 1973, 158), Marsman and Roland Holst (Van der Woude 1973, 162), but also Wordsworth (Freriks 2000, 216), Matthew Arnold, Auden, Yeats, Emily Dickenson (Van der Woude 1973, 161), as well as Pound, Tennyson and T. S. Eliot (Van der Woude 1973, 162). The latter deeply influenced her in his approach to love and death and the attempt to find harmony in life (Freriks 2000, 190). His work supplied her with the epigraph to *Only yesterday*: “Teach us to care and not to care”. She was also particularly inspired by a poem from the modernist Vita Sackville-West (Freriks 2000, 215). The novelists that she read intensely around this time included Kipling, Camus and E. M. Forster (Van der Woude 1973). She described Forster’s *A Passage to India* as “one of the most beautiful [books] that I know” (Freriks 2000, 205). It thus seems to me to be difficult to deny Dermoût her deep love of western literature by accusing her of being “un-Dutch”. As Reinier Salverda has pointed out, many people have noted how Dermoût’s first collection of short stories, published in 1954, was heavily based on the Javanese Hindu epic *Babad Tanah Djawi* (in Dutch translation) and they are impressed by the exoticism, but they miss the fact that she marked her literary modernism by including a quote from British avant-garde writer Sacheverell Sitwell, and that below the surface lies her literary technical modernism (Salverda 2004, 221-222). Guus Houtzager has argued convincingly that Dermoût combines Eastern oral narrative techniques with sophisticated western literary tropes, such as dramatic irony (Houtzager 1984, 75), and that this makes *The ten thousand things* an example of typical 20th century western literature. He goes as far as to conclude that Nieuwenhuys’ obsession with squeezing Dermoût into an Asian tradition blinded him to the modern, western aspects of her novel (Houtzager 1984, 87). Praamstra admits that Dermoût’s use of Moluccan animist motifs in *The ten thousand things* were taken directly from the works of the great 17th century German naturalist, Rumphius (Praamstra 2001, 198-199).

Naturally, one could counter my argument by claiming that *The ten thousand things* is permeated by “Eastern” thought and Asian motifs. After all, Tjalie Robinson, who claimed Dermoût as an “Indisch” girl, happily pointed out that the epigraph of *The ten thousand things* came directly from Chinese philosopher Ts’en Shen’ *Te Tao Ching* (Van der Woude 1973, 184). The epigraph reads: “When the ten thousand things have been seen in their unity, we return to the beginning and remain where we have always been.” And it is true that she had been intensively reading some Chinese poems – but these “Poems of Departure” were Ezra Pound’s translations (Freriks 2000, 311). She also read the

old Chinese classic *Monkey*, in Arthur Waley's new translation, but only because it had been recommended in *The Perennial Philosophy*, a non-fiction work by British modernist writer Aldous Huxley (Freriks 2000, 217-218). This mystical work of Huxley's influenced her profoundly. His claim that oneness "is the ground and principle of all multiplicity" (Huxley 1946, 11), summarises Dermoût's basic philosophy in *The ten thousand things*. Huxley's quotation from the ancient Neo-Platonist, Plotinus, seems to have influenced the ending of *The ten thousand things*, with its mystical revelation on All Soul's Night: "Each being contains in itself the whole intelligible world. Therefore All is Everywhere. Each is there All, and All is each" (Huxley 1946, 11). Furthermore, we find Huxley quoting the following words from an ancient Chinese text: "When the Ten Thousand things are viewed in their oneness, we return to the Origin and remain where we have always been" (Huxley 1946, 21). In a letter to her German translator, Dermoût admitted that she had taken this quote for the epigraph to her second novel, not directly from Ts'en Shen himself, but from Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* (Freriks 2000, 128).

It is not simply the great works of Eastern philosophy that influenced Dermoût, but the work of Aldous Huxley. So, contrary to what Robinson thought, having an Asian epigraph to *The ten thousand things* did not demonstrate that Dermoût was *Indisch* as opposed to Dutch and neither did it prove that she had read the *Te Tao Ching*; rather it proved she had read Aldous Huxley. It was an indication of how she was part of a general European movement that was intrigued, in an Orientalist manner, with some aspects of the cultures of colonised people.

In short, when considering the fact that she had been living in Europe for almost two decades before the publication of her first book (and had never returned to Indonesia in that time), when considering that the appropriation of colours, ideas and various cultural motifs from non-western cultures had become the norm among modernist artists and writers and when taking into account that Dermoût's diet of serious reading was heavily weighted towards the works of romantic and modernist European and American authors, then it seems a bad case of special pleading to claim her exclusively as "Indisch" and "un-Dutch". The irony here is that Dermoût herself regularly denied the label "Indisch" (Van der Woude 1973, 16-18; Freriks 2000, 301-311).

The colonial point of view

Dermoût's books could only have been written from a Dutch point of view, that is, the point of view of colonial power. To claim otherwise is to be blind to the asymmetrical nature of power that characterised relationships in the age of imperialism. Boehmer & Gouda have argued that even today, university

departments of Dutch are characterised by a “strong tendency to refuse to accept postcolonial perspectives on any terms. This tendency emerges in particular from scholars of Indies writing, a coterie identified with the journal *Indische Letteren*” (Boehmer & Gouda 2012, 37). They fault this “coterie” with sharing a “remarkable point of view”, namely, that the colonial experience that is articulated in Dutch literature “represents a period frozen in time, a reality that does not recede.” We need not agree with this serious accusation – after all Gouda's own work has appeared in *Indische Letteren* and the “coterie” includes postcolonialists Pattymana and Praamstra, who are on the editorial board and have had flourishing careers at universities in Amsterdam and Leiden respectively. Nevertheless, this “remarkable point of view” that they attack was first articulated by Nieuwenhuys himself when he claimed that the literature of the Dutch East Indies consists of a genre that is “a self-contained unit that cannot develop further because there are no new voices and because what was voiced no longer exists” (Nieuwenhuys 1982, xii).



Figure 4. Maria Dermoût reading in her sitting room, Noordwijk, 1958.
Private collection. Reproduced with permission. <https://mariadermout.wordpress.com/>.

Nieuwenhuys did admit that Europeans in the Indies lived in closed enclaves that excluded the millions of natives, that the subjects of their novels were themselves and that the native “is described only insofar as he or she enters their society” (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 145) – which isn’t very often, it must be said,

except for the scores of servants. One has to add, *The ten thousand things* is something of an exception, dwelling, as it does, on Indonesian as well as European characters.

However, Nieuwenhuys was wrong when he said that Dermoût did not write from a Dutch point of view. Novels like *Only yesterday* and *The ten Thousand things* could only have been written from a Dutch point of view, that is, the point of view of the Dutch colonial master. It is the privilege of the colonial power, which is Dutch power, to tell its own story. Furthermore, it is the privilege of colonial power to tell the other's story as well, in as much as it touches or overlaps with the story of its own power, like when servants enter the colonial narrative. Dermoût's stories are populated with numerous Indonesians, mainly, but not all, servants. We get to learn something of their backgrounds. The story of Suprpto, for instance, a young Javanese aristocrat who works as the assistant of a professor, is told with sensitivity and understanding (Dermoût 2002, 154-192). To some extent he is the main character of this frame and the Scottish professor has the supporting role. But it is the privilege of the colonial power to narrate the other's story. This was articulated by Edward Said: "The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism" (Said 1994, xii).

We never read of any of Dermoût's main European characters abusing their power. On the periphery of the story in *Only yesterday* we glimpse allusions to colonial cruelty: "When you strike, you must hit hard, but not quite dead, I always say" (Dermoût 2000, 55); the oppression of the faceless peasants and the consequent fear of their colonial masters who prepare to defend themselves (Dermoût 2000, 48); the rigid class system whereby Riek and her mother travel first-class in the train but Oerip, her baboe, sits in third-class (Dermoût 2000, 36).

But the main characters are horrified by the brutality of some colonials. They study the ancient cultures of Java and have great respect for native beliefs. In *The ten thousand things*, the lady of the Small Garden has, it seems, gone native. She is "small and bent, in her sarong and simple white cotton jacket [...] in bare feet on strong leather sandals" and everyone on the island knows of her, speaks of her, but they "didn't speak evil of her" because, put simply: "They liked her" (Dermoût 2000, 17). But, again, Said reminds us that "the rhetoric of power all too easily produces an illusion of benevolence when deployed in an imperial setting" (Said 1994, xix). During the first three decades of the 20th century, while Dermoût was living in the colony, the Dutch colonial government operated under a policy that was meant to be benevolent, aiming to develop the social and economic position of the native, yet this was also the time of the birth of the first Indonesian nationalist movements. The response of the Dutch government,

especially following an attempted communist rebellion in the late 1920s, was to limit political and civil freedoms, imprisoning many suspects for years without any charges. By the early 1930s, around the time that Dermoût would leave the East Indies for the last time, the leading spokespeople for Indonesian nationalism (and future leaders of independent Indonesia) had been interned in prison camps. In such a system, when opposition is disallowed and criticism is silenced, it is easy to be convinced of one's benevolence. The exercise of power, under such conditions, seems natural, especially when one's power is strongly rooted in place.

Much is made of the physical descriptions of the owners of the Small Garden. We learn that the grandmother "was a skinny little woman with a dark complexion, dark hair and dark eyes" (Dermoût 2002, 29). We are told that Felicia, the lady of the Small Garden, when a young woman, was "small and strong with a round boyish face, springy brown hair, dark attentive eyes" (Dermoût 2002, 39), and her son, Himpies, has "warm brown eyes with spots" (Dermoût 2002, 90). There is no doubt at all that the family is European and the native people refer to the lady of the Small garden as "the little white woman" (Dermoût 2002, 89). But the stress on dark complexion and dark eyes seems to be an indication that they are of mixed blood or *Indos*. This is supported by the expression "She herself belonged to the island" (Dermoût 2002, 17), meaning, probably, that she is descended from a native Moluccan. Praamstra goes as far as to say that the grandmother was Ambonese, making the family Eurasian or *Indo* (Praamstra 2013, 57). He agrees that the strong sense of place in the novel, the vital importance of the Small garden, the fact that the garden has been in the family's possession for five generations, is little more than a strategic deployment that asserts ownership and colonial hegemony (Praamstra 2013, 57-60), which is consistent I think with the ideas of Marc Auge. Within the garden there exists a hybrid society where *Totoks*, *Indos*, natives – masters as well as servants – come together in a peaceful, privileged place where respect and toleration are the order of the day. In such a place, where hegemony is complete, power can afford to remain invisible. A good example is found in the final lines of the novel, already quoted, when the servants call Felicia to come to bed and to drink coffee. She rises from her chair "obediently". It is she who obeys her servants. But this friendship between mistress and servant, seemingly based on equality, is not equal at all. It is her prerogative to obey, or disobey, as she likes. In fact the hybrid society that she has created on her property can only exist thanks to the laws implemented by the colonial government, not least the laws of property. If the colonial authority would cease to exist, such an idyllic micro-society would be doomed, which of course is exactly what came to pass. But what remains unmentioned in Dermoût's

account, but is pointed out by Praamstra, is that the Small Garden in which European and Asian meet each other with mutual respect is in a space that once was “violently taken away from the original population” (Praamstra 2013, 59). From this reading, contrary to Nieuwenhuys’ claim, Dermoût’s point of view could only be that of a Dutch colonialist, a Dutch point of view, backed by the apparatus of power which, though kept out of sight in her novels for the most part, nevertheless surrounds the narratives and enables their telling. To not understand this is to not understand decolonization.

However, Dermoût does not entirely ignore the ugly side of colonialism. As we have seen, in *Only yesterday* the peasants burn down the sugar fields and the planters are gripped by fear. We learn that prisoners are beaten. In *The ten thousand things* we are reminded of the former existence of slavery:

My father said once – everyone had slaves, those were the years of slaves, that was the evil of the time, my father said. Every time has its own evil, but a human being can still be good. In the years of the slaves a man could be good to his slaves, my father said – his father had been good, but his mother had not, his mother had been cruel. (Dermoût 2002, 64)

This passage seems to me to unintentionally trivialise the ugliness of slavery as a system. To accept that slavery is bad, on the one hand, and then, on the other hand, to accord that every era has something that is bad, trivialises. If the only important thing is to be good, then the evil of the system is perpetuated. And if this goes for slavery, then logically, it goes for colonialism as well. Colonialism has its ugly, brutish side, but every era has its own form of evil. The important thing is to be good, but good within the system. That seems to be the message. And this interpretation is supported by the words of Maria Dermoût herself. In 1958 the newspaper *De Haagse Post* ran a major interview by Tjalie Robinson with the esteemed author, reprinted shortly after in the *Indisch* periodical *Tong Tong*. There, she voiced her dislike of the label “colonial family”, explaining “East and West were not a problem. We were spoon-fed the idea that ‘Every person has equal worth’” (Robinson 1958, 2). But was the nice slave owner any better than the cruel slave owner? Was the nice colonial, the one who treated her servants as her friends, better than the nasty colonial, who treated her servants like servants? Was being nice good enough if the system itself was built on inequality and privilege?

Regardless of how much she disliked the term “colonial”, we learn that the family of the Small Garden was wealthy, owning a big house with a spice plantation but also a house in the town, which they rented out. As a child, the lady of the Small Garden and her parents went to live in the Netherlands and she returned as a young mother. In turn, she sends her son Himpies to the

Netherlands to be educated and to become a surgeon. These are the privileges made possible by the colonial system. Education remained impossible for most inhabitants of the colony, not to mention a superior education in the Netherlands. However integrated the family becomes into the world of the East, they maintain their link to the metropole and retain the advantages that western hegemony bestows. And yet the trappings of power that ensure this asymmetrical relationship between the coloniser and the colonised remain almost invisible in Dermoût's representations of colonialism. The novels include incidents of violence and murder, but they are incidents, not symptoms of some deeper, political malaise. The birth of modern Indonesian nationalism is usually dated to the founding of the large scale Sarekat Islam movement. Takashi Shiraishi writes: "The rise of a popular movement, expressed in such forms as newspapers and journals, rallies and meetings, trade unions and strikes, associations and parties, novels, songs, theatres, and revolts, is the phenomenon that most vividly struck the Dutch as the 'native' awakening in the Indies in the first quarter of the twentieth century" (quoted in Mrazek 1992, 172). But this awakening makes little more than a rumble in Dermoût's novels. One can wonder if she even noticed it. Of course every historical representation, whether fictional or non-fictional, is a suggestion as to how to view one aspect of (past) reality. Not all facts can be included, nor should they be – a story that includes all the facts would be incomprehensible, as well as infinite. So some facts must be passed over in silence. Dermoût is not required by any means to expose and exhibit resistance to the ugly underbelly of Dutch colonialism. But because Dermoût's representation of the past became an important contributor to the construction of collective memory within the *Indisch* community and among the Dutch in general, we do have to pause, and examine what was silenced.

Silencing other stories

Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot claimed, in a memorable phrase, that one silences a fact "as a silencer silences a gun" (Trouillot 1995, 48). Dermoût tells us that the land had been in the family's possession for five generations, but she silences the brutality of its appropriation. She informs us of the earlier existence of slavery, but silences the fact that the Netherlands was a major world player in the global slave trade. She tells us that Riek's parents were sugar planters, but silences the fact that sweetness and exploitation frequently went hand in hand. These are a number of examples of what Trouillet calls "formulas of erasure" (Trouillot 1995, 96). He has written that "planters and managers could not fully deny resistance, but they tried to provide reassuring certitudes by trivializing all its manifestations. Resistance did not exist as a global phenomenon. Rather each case of unmistakable defiance, each possible instance of resistance was treated

separately and drained of its political content” (83). Admittedly, Trouillot was not writing of Indonesia but of 18th century Haiti, but his words apply equally to the Dutch colony in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It seemed to be unthinkable that the native population could have any reason to form a systematic opposition, and therefore acts of violence needed to be considered incidental, and thereby trivialized, with their political content silenced. This is why the Dutch were taken so much by surprise when they faced a national revolt. This is why it took so long to come to terms with reality. This is why, decades after the Indonesian Revolution, the Dutch had still no clear indication of what had gone wrong. The violence of the post-war *bersiap* period could be blamed on the Japanese; its continuation could be understood against the background of the Cold War; the leadership of the revolt could be considered Fascist (and communist at the same time!) collaborators of the Japanese. In Dermoût’s work, the nostalgia that Pattynama finds so innocent, might not be a hankering after imperial relationships, but there is a refusal to go beyond the melancholy of loss and acceptance. Instead, colonial exploitation is silenced while native resistance is, to echo Trouillet’s words, “treated separately and drained [...] of all political content” (Trouillot 1995, 83).

Let us look at three examples of this from *The ten thousand things*. Firstly, we learn that during the age of slavery, when there had been a slave market on the island of Ternate, the first spice growers had employed a Balinese slave girl as the nurse for their three daughters. One day the daughters are all poisoned and the slave accused of murder and tortured until she is crippled, but she refuses to confess: “the Balinese are very wise, they have means against pain” (Dermoût 2002, 63-64). The tragic killing of the little girls is a motif that returns again and again. They are continually remembered. But the slave and her motivations are never referred to again.

Secondly, when Himpies is at university in the Netherlands, he changes his plans about becoming a surgeon and instead enlists in the military academy to become an officer in the colonial army. He returns to his mother as a military officer and is sent on an expedition – “just a small expedition” – to the island of Ceram, to make a “show of strength for the Mountain Alfuras who had become a nuisance and who were going on too many head hunts” (Dermoût 2002, 97). Note the use of the innocent enough sounding euphemism “small expedition”. We are not given to consider that Dutch colonial authority might have been a nuisance for the Mountain Alfuras. During the “expedition” Himpies is shot and killed by a single Mountain Alfura arrow. The killing is described as random, senseless, memorable only for the heroic efforts of his comrades attempting to save the young soldier (Dermoût 2002, 106-107). The motivations of the Mountain Alfuras are passed over in silence.

My third example concerns the Scottish professor who undertakes a tour of the islands with his Javanese assistant Suprpto. The professor generously distributes shiny coins to those who bring him botanical specimens. He is murdered by machete wielding Binongkos or sea tramps (Dermoût 2002, 183-184). We learn a great deal about the professor, his family, his naïve enthusiasm and occasional wisdom, his trusting nature and his positive philosophy of life. Dermoût only tells us of the Binongkos that “they were a strange kind of people, speaking a language no one understood; and no one wanted to have anything to do with them” (Dermoût 2002, 173). Again, no real attempt is made to understand their point of view. They are dressed “in rags, almost naked” with “small, squat bodies” and “black, stupid eyes staring straight ahead”, armed with machetes, “the only part of them that was alive” (Dermoût 2002, 173). They enter the story simply to murder the professor in order to rob him. The rest is silence.

It is easy to read these acts of violence as mindless; three disconnected acts. But there is an alternative narrative that is silenced, one that would explore the need for desperate resistance to colonial authority. We are reminded of Said’s reference to the power to narrate, but also to block other narratives.

Conclusion

Dermoût’s novels, beautifully written, widely and greatly admired in the *Indisch* community and beyond, staked a claim to a territory in the past which provided a clear marker of identity. They then helped to construct a collective memory of nostalgia, a melancholy dwelling upon the acceptance of irreparable loss, the loss of that very place that she had described with such loving detail, a benevolent tropical home that had given the group its identity. From now on, that place would remain a marker of identity only in as much as it would be remembered by the collective in stories that were permeated with nostalgia. But her work did little to bring about any reconciliation with loss and offered no explanation for what had happened during decolonization. It ignored the privilege inherent within the colonial point of view and silenced alternative stories that could explain Indonesian nationalism. The irony is that her memory work served in a positive manner to create a mnemonic community based on nostalgic remembering, but by trivialising or ignoring Indonesian nationalist aspirations her work inadvertently served to unremember the reality of decolonization.

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About the author

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Maria Dermoût et la suppression de la mémoire du temps perdu

Entre 1945 et 1949, les Pays-Bas ont mené une guerre futile contre les nationalistes indonésiens qui s'est soldée par la perte de leur grande colonie, les Indes orientales néerlandaises. Il s'en est ensuivi le soi-disant « rapatriement » aux Pays-Bas de centaines de milliers de membres de la communauté Indisch (indo-néerlandaise). Au début des années cinquante, deux romans ont paru qui se déroulent au début du vingtième siècle, *Nog pas gisteren* ('Hier encore') et *De tienduizend dingen* (*Les dix mille choses*) d'une auteure qu'on a découverte alors, Maria Dermoût. Je prétends dans le présent article que les deux ouvrages ont contribué à la formation d'un souvenir collectif du passé colonial récent. Non seulement la communauté Indisch a souffert la perte de son pays connu, elle a pu craindre la perte irrévocable de son identité, mais la littérature a pu lui assurer le souvenir d'un sens de lieu, et la mémoire collective a été sauvée. Je prétends que ce souvenir, comme il est représenté dans l'oeuvre de Dermoût, a pris une forme nostalgique, aidant ainsi à former une identité collective basée en partie sur un sentiment mélancolique de perte partagée. Mais cette insistance sur la nostalgie a empêché un examen des raisons de la perte de la colonie, et cela a contribué par inadvertance à une suppression de mémoire (« unremembering ») générale, à un refus de se souvenir des dernières années si pénibles de la décolonisation. Je prétends en outre, en désaccord avec Rob Nieuwenhuys, que Dermoût, malgré ses origines Indisch, était une auteure typiquement européenne, en somme néerlandaise. Une analyse postcoloniale de ses romans révèle qu'ils sont écrits du point de vue de quelqu'un ayant eu les privilèges d'un colon, qu'ils ne laissent pas la parole à des récits alternatifs et ont donc, en fait, influencé d'autant plus la suppression de la mémoire du processus de la décolonisation. Je conclus que l'oeuvre de Dermoût a contribué à la création d'une communauté de mémoire basée sur des souvenirs nostalgiques, mais qu'en banalisant ou en niant les aspirations nationalistes indonésiennes, son oeuvre a eu la conséquence accidentelle de supprimer la mémoire de la réalité de la décolonisation.

Maria Dermoût en het “onthinneren” van verloren tijd

Tussen 1945 en 1949 heeft Nederland een vergeefse oorlog tegen Indonesische nationalistes gevochten, wat heeft geleid tot het einde van hun grote kolonie, Nederlands-Indië. Een gevolg hiervan was de zogenaamde “repatriatie” naar Nederland van honderdduizenden leden van de Indische gemeenschap. Begin jaren vijftig zijn twee romans verschenen, die zich afspelen in het begin van de twintigste eeuw, *Pas gisteren* en *De tienduizend dingen*, geschreven door een toen pas

ontdekte schrijfster, Maria Dermoût. In dit artikel stel ik dat beide werken hebben bijgedragen tot het vormen van een collectief geheugen van het recente koloniale verleden. Mede door het verliezen van hun eigen plek leefde de Indische gemeenschap met de angst hun identiteit onherroepelijk kwijt te raken, maar de literatuur heeft de herinnering aan een besef van plaats gehandhaafd, en het collectieve geheugen is bewaard gebleven. Ik beweer dat deze herinnering, zoals die verbeeld wordt in het werk van Dermoût, een nostalgische vorm heeft aangenomen, en daardoor heeft geholpen om een collectieve identiteit te vormen die gedeeltelijk gebaseerd is op een melancholisch gevoel van gedeeld gemis. Maar het benadrukken van nostalgisch gemis heeft niet geleid tot een verduidelijking van de redenen voor het verlies van de kolonie, en daardoor heeft het onbedoeld bijgedragen aan een algemene “ontherinnering” (‘unremembering’), een weigeren zich de pijnlijke laatste jaren van de dekolonisatie te herinneren. Verder beweer ik, in tegenstelling tot Rob Nieuwenhuys, dat Dermoût, ondanks haar Indische afkomst, een typisch Europese, dat wil zeggen Nederlandse, schrijfster was. Een postkoloniale analyse van haar romans laat zien dat ze geschreven zijn vanuit het gezichtspunt van een koloniaal bevoorrecht persoon die alternatieve verhalen geen stem geeft en daardoor in feite nog sterker het “ontherinneren” van het dekolonisatieproces beïnvloed heeft. In mijn conclusie beweer ik dat het werk van Dermoût heeft bijgedragen aan het creëren van een geheugengemeenschap die gebaseerd was op nostalgische herinneringen; maar door het bagatelliseren of negeren van Indonesische nationalistische aspiraties heeft haar werk het onbedoelde gevolg gehad dat de realiteit van de dekolonisatie “ontherinnerd” werd.