

# Dutch immigrant identity as reflected in home artifacts

*Helene Demers*

Home artifacts, the objects and their stories carried from our homeland, aid in the construction and maintenance of memory, identity and home. They stand in for places left behind and mediate geographical and generational divides, and over time are transformed into different, but equally powerful, narratives and markers of a virtual “homeland” for subsequent generations. The oral history of a family bracelet is the vehicle for exploring the breaks in transmission that can occur when objects are bestowed in secrecy on the cusp of journeys resulting in incomplete narratives. The journey of reconciling such a narrative illustrates the complexity of immigrant identity, the transformation of meanings assigned to home artifacts and the emergence of new narratives carried from person to person across times and places.

Key terms: Home; home artifact; homeland; immigrants; memory; identity; narrative.

## Introduction

The items that immigrants bring with them and display in their homes have multiple meanings – ethnic, family, personal, religious, political – and mediate powerful feelings of identity and home(land), real or imagined.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on concepts from the field of material culture as it relates to “home studies” (e.g. Davidson 2011; Flynn 2004; Miller 2009; Pechurina 2011, 2015; Pink 2004; Smart 2007; Werner 2007) and workshops conducted with immigrants, I initially explore the multidimensional relationship between material objects and cultural identity and then shift to a personal oral history surrounding a family bracelet given to me by an aunt and its meaning in shaping my own identity. The bracelet links me to a homeland and a region as well as to a line of women I am named after, and its

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is dedicated to Jannigje and Janny. I would like to thank Tyler Sage for reading various versions of this paper and providing insightful comments. The stories of his walks along the Dutch coast evoked memories of childhood seaside holidays for me and these memories flow beneath the surface of this paper.

journey through time and place reflects the complexity of family narratives as well as the duality of immigrant identity. The home artifact narratives we share – and the ones we do not – assist in constructing and maintaining identity, home, and belonging for first generation immigrants but also create intangible connections to a virtual homeland for later generations.

### **Home artifacts and imagined homelands**

Home artifacts – the various material objects and home possessions which migrants “keep, use, exchange and curate” (Pechurina 2011, 97) – play an important role in linking immigrants with their “imagined homes” and, as documented by Daniel Miller, can “repair” personal and social identities (Miller 2009, 97). The potency of memories of imagined homes and homelands evoked by a material object and “in the sensation which that material object will give us” (Proust 1928, 48) is poignantly described by Gaston Bachelard in *The poetics of space*: “I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray” (1994, 15). Later in the same chapter, Bachelard states that “the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us” (1994, 15). Here I follow Bachelard but also interpret “house” to mean “homeland” and would add that traces of this inscription are left on subsequent generations. Marianne Hirsch, in her influential body of work on Holocaust memory, proposed the term “Postmemory” (Hirsch 2012) to describe connections to the past mediated not by recall but “by means of stories, images, and behaviors transmitted to later generations” (No author, 2012). In an interview about her book, she reflects on her personal experience of accounts her parents had told her: “Their accounts had the textures and qualities of memories for me, but they were clearly not my memories: I had not experienced any of them directly. I felt that I needed a term to describe this indirect form of recollection, its belatedness and its multiple mediations” (No author, 2012). I think here of my youngest son, attending university in the Netherlands, who is gradually walking the country’s shore and the islands, tracing an ancestral landscape filled with stories of previous generations. He reflects that these tracings are experienced as repetition, but also difference in that he is inscribed as well as inscribing (Tyler Sage, pers. comm., August 2016). A connection to a virtual homeland, previously intangible and shaped by transferred parental memories, is bridged and transformed by his trajectory through the contemporary Dutch landscape and the generation of new, but linked, stories and deepened intergenerational dialogue. In *Motherlode. A mosaic of Dutch wartime experience*, Carolyne Van Der Meer, a second generation Dutch-Canadian, sets out to preserve her mother’s family’s experiences of World War II but ultimately writes a narrative merging fact and fiction and informed by many voices. After

visiting her mother's childhood home in De Krim, Overijssel, she returns to the village square:

to purchase Gouda cheese, a hunk of rye bread, bottled water, and a package of *gevulde kanos*, my favourite almond finger cookie, fondly remembered from childhood. I sit on a bench and quietly tear the bread, adorning each piece with a savoury slice of cheese. It's hard to imagine my mother running in that backyard from air raids, but property holds many secrets. I know it happened and now I've seen the place. Somehow that is enough.  
(Van Der Meer 2014, 39)

Van Der Meer's consumption of food iconic to the Netherlands and Dutch identity can be interpreted as a symbolic act commemorating the bridge to the imagined homeland and recognizing the traces inscribed by a parent's cultural origins.

In diaspora populations home artifacts and their narratives can also become powerful reminders of journeys taken and hardships overcome in order to arrive at a new homeland. Tonya K. Davidson refers to "objects recovered or safeguarded from incidents of trauma" as "object survivors" (Davidson 2011, 51). In *Tjideng Reunion*, Boudewijn van Oort, preparing for his father's funeral, contemplates a clock that has been in his family for several generations. "On the wood-paneled wall above me hung the old Friesian clock, calmly ticking away the hours with a wonderful soothing rhythm, as it had done for almost three hundred years. There was no other sound" (Van Oort 2008, 3). This clock miraculously survived his family's experience of World War II, displacement from their South African homeland, internment in the Netherlands East Indies, subsequent return to South Africa and eventual emigration to Canada. Along more contemporary lines, an article in the *Globe and Mail* dated July 2, 2016, highlights objects – some iconic, some personal – brought by Syrian refugees who recently arrived in Canada. Among the items carried by Aliye and Omer el Hussein were a Koran previously belonging to Aliye's grandmother, 20-odd hijab headscarves, a battered cell phone, a tiny embroidered bag of Syrian soil, the keys and deed to the family apartment in Aleppo, three kilos of Syrian coffee, and a delicate gold Turkish coffee cup. The coffee cup was part of a matching set Aliya brought from Turkey where they lived after fleeing Aleppo. Aliye was told the cups were Syrian, "but God knows. The more important thing is that it reminds me of my culture" (Aliye el Hussein 2016, 4-5). Like Van Oort's family clock, such "object survivors" can be viewed as tethers which reach temporally and spatially back, but they may also be tools for making a new home. When American writer and activist bell hooks first left home, she carried with her two emblematic artifacts, braided tobacco leaves and a crazy quilt given to her by her grandmother: "These two

totems were to remind me always where I come from and who I am at my core. They stand between me and the madness that exile makes” (hooks 2009, 16).

Omer and Aliye el Hussein are two of the many caught up in processes of migration which have come to define the 21<sup>st</sup> century, displacing and detaching groups and individuals from their homelands. From these displacing and relocation processes have followed studies of homemaking practices – what makes a place a “home.” In one such study of Russian immigrants in the UK, Anna Pecherina focused on a range of “typical” or iconic Russian objects which are often found in migrants’ homes (Pecherina 2011). She describes these diasporic objects as “circulating in transnational semiotic spaces (book covers, film posters, and other printed media) where they index “Russia” and “Russian” while mediating complex feelings and engagements with notions of “Russian-ness” and “home” for migrants” (Pecherina 2011, 98). I am reminded of the Dutch magazines, books, videos, recipes and plant cuttings<sup>2</sup> that actively circulate among Dutch immigrants and the sharing shelf of books and magazines at my local “Dutch store.” At the same time, Pecherina notes that when placed in domestic spaces these objects lose typicality and acquire fluid and multiple meanings – not just ethnic, but also familial and personal (Pecherina 2011, 98). This is echoed in my own experience of immigration and in my own research.<sup>3</sup> In three workshops conducted with Dutch immigrants (as well as three workshops with other immigrant groups) over a period of five years, participants were asked to bring an item that was symbolic of their homeland, consider the accompanying narrative, where the item was kept or displayed in their homes and whom they would pass it on to or exchange it with. Each workshop began with the story of my bracelet and was followed by sharing the meanings ascribed to the participants’ “home artifacts”, the stories associated with them (which triggered other stories), how they curated these objects by placement in specific locations in their homes and whom they intended to pass the items and the accompanying narratives on to. A consistent outcome of each workshop was that several participants realized they had neglected to pass on their home artifact narratives and expressed the intent to do so. Artifacts brought to the workshops included pairs of skates, stuffed animals, a grandmother’s Sunday apron, LPs, tea tins, books, a Delft tile, coins, a cigar cutter, teaspoons, jewelry, a piggybank, a *poffertjespan* (a cast iron frying pan with shallow indentations for making small puffed pancakes), an ID card from WW II, a

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<sup>2</sup> Cuttings of plants once belonging to relatives in the Netherlands actively circulate in my family and among friends.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout Canada, “ethnic stores” are sources of typical objects (and foods) for those who did not or could not bring them from “home”. “Dutch stores” typically carry items such as tea towels, kitchen towels, *washandjes* (wash cloths, literally ‘washing gloves’), *boerenbont* china, perpetual calendars, CDs, and wooden shoes.

small replica of a *draaiorgel* ('street organ'), photographs, a beloved aunt's skirt, a teething ring and a metal milk container. Iconic objects such as a small version of a traditional Dutch metal container ("*melkkan*") used to collect and store milk – now a decorative object – evoked memories of the owner as a small girl riding home from a local farm on the back of her grandfather's bike, feet firmly planted in the bicycle's panniers to keep warm, while carefully balancing the full milk container. Sharing such narratives with other immigrants triggers similar memories and assists in affirming identity and belonging. In *Belonging. A culture of place*, hooks notes, "we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection" (2009, 5).

Previous research on Dutch-Canadian identity (e.g. Biemond-Boer 2008; Gans 1979; Ganzevoort 1982; Schryer 1998; Van den Hoonaard 1991) touches on, but does not focus specifically on, home artifacts. A study conducted by Biemond-Boer in the Fraser Valley, British Columbia, mentions that objects from the homeland (home artifacts), such as furniture, were present in all homes in the study. Biemond-Boer suggests that Dutch immigrants in her sample kept the original furniture they brought because they were family possessions as well as "souvenirs" and indicate a strong connection to the Netherlands. She further comments that an additional reason for keeping the furniture is the strong Calvinist emphasis on thrift (Biemond-Boer 2008, 94). My own research indicates that object placement is significant e.g. Dutch *verjaardagskalenders* ('perpetual birthday calendars') are customarily hung in the bathroom (not a Canadian custom). While Biemond-Boer (2008, 96) notes that iconic objects such as windmills, wooden shoes and tulips were quite scarce in her sample, my own observations indicate that worn wooden shoes are frequently placed by the front or back door of Dutch-Canadian homes not as footwear to slip on, but as decorative items. In our home, my late mother's wooden shoes sit by the front door – reminding me daily of her love of gardening. They can simultaneously be understood as iconic, decorative, and "linking" objects. The term "linking objects" was first used by Vamik D. Volkan in 1972 to describe physical objects that belonged to the deceased and how these objects become important in mourning processes. Linking objects are somewhat like transitional objects of children – seeking solace in physical objects to overcome separation (Volkan, 1972, 215-222).<sup>4</sup> My eldest son wore wooden shoes as a child and they sit by our fireplace, perhaps as a reminder of *Sinterklaas*, when children's shoes were placed by the fireplace in anticipation of *Sint's* arrival. Similarly, Biemond-Boer (2008, 95) documents the specific placement of carved wooden plaques of Bible verses from

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<sup>4</sup> Volkan's theories of the role of "linking objects" in grief and mourning represent other avenues to understanding the function of home artifacts especially in the case of traumatic displacement and relocation experiences.

respondents' wedding ceremonies on living room walls. Both Biemond-Boer (2008, 93) and Ganzevoort (1982, 304) note that *vitrage* (lace or net curtains) are a custom older Dutch emigrants have kept. Respondents insisted that this is a matter of preference, not a way of distinguishing themselves from Canadians (Biemond-Boer 2008, 93). In my experience, however, *vitrage* does mark these homes as being Dutch to the informed passerby and such public identity markers are present in many immigrant communities. An older Chinese immigrant in a home artifact workshop conducted at the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria (October 2009) shared that she recognizes a Chinese-Canadian home by the vegetable garden in the front and the visible placement of ceramic lions.

Home artifacts hold a different meaning for first generation immigrants with regards to identity than for the second generation (Gans 1979, 5; Rooijakkers 2000, 124). Rooijakkers posits that material objects are important components of cultural identity for first generation immigrants, but take on a different function and more of a symbolic value for the second generation. Annette Wierstra, a second generation Dutch-Canadian, describes the symbolic meaning of her grandfather's cigar mold on her blog *Created heritage: Exploring my Dutch heritage through food and stories*:

It's a cigar mold from my maternal Grandpa, Fokko (Franklin) Prins. In Holland, Grandpa Prins [had] his own cigar store behind the house. My great grandfather was a tenant farmer, and there wasn't enough land for his seven sons, so they had to find alternative work. My Grandpa came to Canada because he has (sic) work in Southern Alberta; like many immigrants, he came to Canada with hopes of a better life and more opportunity after the second world war (sic) devastated Holland. When I look at the mold, it is a connection to my mom, Joanne, and her family. It reminds me of the path my family took from Holland to Canada.

(Wierstra n.d.)

I suggest that not only do home artifacts take on new functions and symbolic meanings for second generation immigrants, but they also give rise to new narratives. For me, my mother's green enameled *petroleumstelletje* (a small paraffin stove) evokes visceral memories of simmering *soep met balletjes* ('soup with small meatballs') in the small unheated kitchen of my early childhood, with the smell of nutmeg used in the meatballs lingering in the air. For the next generation, never having experienced it in its original location, it yields a different story of using tea lights in Oma's *petroleumstelletje* to boil water during a prolonged power outage one winter.

### The oral history of a bracelet

In 2009 I began to explore the history of a bracelet given to me by my aunt and the lives of the women to whom I am linked by name, place, and family history, when asked to prepare a presentation for a BC Women's History Conference. Research has shown that we begin to look back on our lives in our 40s (Rubin, Wetzler & Nebes 1986, 212) and until then I had not given the story of my bracelet much thought. The delicate gold bracelet with a small garnet in the center of a traditional *Zeeuwse knop*<sup>5</sup> clasp is not something I wear and is kept in a shabby old jewelry box purchased at a garage sale by my oldest son at age five.



Figure 1. The family bracelet. Photo by author.

I am the fourth child in a family of seven and was named Helene Janny after my paternal grandfather, Leendert and my father's sister, Janny. At the time of my birth Leendert owned a tobacco shop<sup>6</sup> with attached living quarters where he, his wife and three adult daughters resided. Their three sons, one of which was my father, were married and lived elsewhere. One of the daughters eventually married, which left Janny to care for her ailing mother and her handicapped sister. After they passed away, she cared for my grandfather for many years and eventually took over the tobacco shop until she retired. To this day, very few members of my maternal and paternal families have moved away from the region in Zuid-Holland they originated from, and my family's relocation to the province of Gelderland at age eight represented a monumental move. When I was a teenager, my family emigrated to Canada (even further "away"). I was sad to leave behind my friend Trudy who had been my *hartsvriendin* (my best friend, literally 'heart friend') since our move to Gelderland. Trudy and I exchanged silver plated friendship bracelets with our names engraved and vowed to stay friends forever.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> A style of jewelry characteristic of the province of Zeeland.

<sup>6</sup> I have fond memories of helping my grandfather empty out his shop window for display changes and convincing him to sing ballads like *Het Vrouwtje van Stavoren* which I was determined to memorize.

<sup>7</sup> This worn bracelet is stored in the jewelry box with the gold bracelet.



Figure 2. The friendship bracelet. Photo by author.

As our furniture had been shipped, one of my sisters and I along with Trudy spent a few nights before our departure at my grandfather's house, sharing a room with Tante Janny. Early in the evening, Tante Janny called Trudy and me into the bedroom, carefully closed the door, and took a shoebox from a high shelf in the closet. Inside were a small beaded purse and a box containing a bracelet made of three heavy silver chains joined by a delicate gold clasp with a garnet in the center. She told me they had been given to her by Tante Jannigje (her aunt, my great-aunt), who had been given them by her wealthy employer when she left her service to care for her sick sister Jaantje. I well remember the impressive array of medicines great-aunt Jaantje had on the nightstand next to her bed.<sup>8</sup> Because I was her namesake and moving so far away, she was giving me these items now, as she might never see me again. I thanked her, but secretly thought the bracelet old fashioned and much preferred the silver name bracelet I had exchanged with Trudy.

Sometime after arriving in Canada, I sold the bracelet given to me by my aunt to one of my sisters for \$20 because I wanted to buy a transistor radio. My sister replaced the heavy silver chains with fine gold ones, transforming the bracelet much as immigrants retain a core of ethnic identity while incorporating elements of their new homeland. A few years later, my husband bought the bracelet back from my sister as a surprise birthday gift. I consider myself fortunate to have been given this gift twice and given the opportunity to recognize its link to my personal history.

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<sup>8</sup> Our family doctor who used my grandfather's tobacco shop as a pick-up location for prescriptions also prepared medicine for Jaantje. When asked by one of my aunts what kind of medicine it was (since nothing appeared to be wrong with her), he replied, "water and a little coloring."



*Figure 3. The family bracelet. Photo by author.*

When I began to research the story of the bracelet for the BC Women's History Conference, I was unable to speak with Tante Janny, who was recovering from surgery. Her sister had never heard of the bracelet and the beaded purse, but shared what she knew of my great-aunt Jannigje (with whom the bracelet story began). Jannigje had been in the service of a wealthy woman who had no heirs and the agreement was that if Jannigje cared for her all her life, she would inherit some of her wealth. However, when Jannigje's mother died, she was expected to leave her position to look after her sister, much to the displeasure of her wealthy employer who promptly wrote her out of her will. Tante Janny did not recall that we stayed at their house before moving to Canada and relatives did not think Tante Jannigje had anything valuable other than a small bible with a gold clasp she left to Janny when she died. I visited Tante Janny twice before her death a few years ago but intuitively felt I should not bring up the bracelet, as she became quite emotional during one visit and was unable to speak at all during my last visit. Subsequent inquiries have not yielded much more information and the origins of the bracelet remain a mystery. Families often have multiple narratives of the same event. Some narratives, like my bracelet story, are shrouded in secrecy. I may never uncover the truth of its origins. How did my great-aunt and aunt come to be in the possession of the bracelet? Why the secrecy? Despite the gaps in this particular family narrative, my search for answers reminds me of the importance of family history and place in shaping identity. On the journey to trace the history of the bracelet, I heard many stories about my father's side of the family and particularly the lives of the daughters who were duty bound to look after parents

and siblings. The polder landscape through which I travelled to visit relatives is the landscape of my childhood and I was reminded of how deeply rooted I am in the place of my birth. As Liên-Worrall states in the afterword of *Finding memories, tracing routes. Chinese Canadian family stories*:

Our understandings of ourselves are so powerfully shaped, for good or ill, by our relations to family and to others who have raised us. For those fortunate enough to hear stories passed down as family lore, whether we treasure them or not, we should recognize that they form an incomparable inheritance, different and unique to each of us. (Liên-Worrall 2006, 73)

### Conclusion

Given to me on the cusp of a journey, the bracelet has travelled from the Netherlands to Canada. It has been transformed by movement through “different spaces” just as immigrants experience transformations in their own movements. The bracelet links me to my homeland as well as to a line of women I am named after. Its journey and the secrecy that surrounds it reflect the complexity of immigrant identity. In the workshops on home artifacts I have conducted with Canadian immigrants, narratives of receiving unexpected gifts or family secrets at such times of departure are common, especially when air travel was rare and the possibility of reuniting remote. Like the story of the bracelet, immigrant narratives often become obscured, transformed or lost over time. Trudy, who witnessed the giving of the bracelet and the beaded purse, and whose own gift of the silver name bracelet I treasure, passed away before I thought to ask her about her memory of the event. The bracelet is a tangible connection to a childhood friend and to two women who had many constraints placed on them. The women I am named after lived in a time of strict class and gender divisions, and I imagine my great-aunt Jannigje had little choice but to go into service. Both Jannigje and Janny sacrificed marriage and families of their own in order to care for parents and sisters. They lived their entire lives in the same region surrounded by family and lifelong friends and acquaintances. I am profoundly aware that I have had a very different life trajectory, different expectations and opportunities, and I pay tribute to these two selfless women and the secrets that surround them. bell hooks reminds us that “[w]e are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering” (hooks 2009, 5). I hope to pass the bracelet on some day. So far it has been passed from aunts to nieces with a shared name, but that child is yet to be born. Whomever the bracelet is passed on to, the story will continue linking women across time and space. In my search to uncover the story behind the bracelet, I have gained insight into my family history

and women's history and had the privilege of listening to many immigrant narratives. Despite the gaps in my own narrative, I have come to know myself better through the act of remembering.

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### About the author

Helene Demers is a member of the Department of Anthropology at Vancouver Island University. Her research in the Cowichan Valley spans 27 years and includes recording life histories and the repatriation of a Cowichan mask. As an immigrant, she is deeply aware of the significance of the interconnection between identity and place and this is a thread that runs through her research. She has had the privilege of listening to many stories of the Cowichan Valley which connect her to a different landscape far from her homeland. Currently, Helene is researching the meaning of "home artifacts", the items that immigrants and refugees bring from their homeland, as well as the role of "linking objects", the items that provide solace in mourning processes.

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### L'identité des immigrants néerlandais reflétée dans des artefacts domestiques

Les artefacts domestiques, les objets et leurs histoires transportées de notre pays natal, aident à construire et maintenir les souvenirs, l'identité, le chez-nous. Ils représentent des endroits que nous avons quittés et enjambent des abîmes géographiques et générationnels, et au cours des ans ils sont transformés en des récits différents mais tout aussi puissants, des signes d'une « patrie » virtuelle pour les générations futures. L'histoire orale d'un bracelet de famille est un moyen d'explorer les cassures de transmission qui peuvent se produire quand, au moment du départ, des objets sont confiés à quelqu'un en secret et portent donc un récit incomplet. Le parcours de réconciliation d'un tel récit illustre la complexité

de l'identité immigrante, la transformation du sens attribué aux artefacts domestiques, et la création de nouveaux récits qui, à leur tour, seront passés d'une personne à l'autre à travers les époques et les endroits.

### **Huishoudelijke voorwerpen en de identiteit van Nederlandse immigranten**

Voorwerpen meegenomen van thuis, en de verhalen die eraan verbonden zijn, helpen de immigrant bij het construeren en onderhouden van herinneringen, identiteit en een gevoel van thuis. Deze objecten en hun verhalen staan voor alles wat we hebben achtergelaten en overbruggen de scheiding tussen plaatsen en generaties die emigratie onherroepelijk met zich meebringt. Na verloop van tijd vormen zich nieuwe, maar net zulke krachtige, verhalen die verwijzen naar een virtueel "thuisland" voor de volgende generaties. De mondeling overgeleverde familiegeschiedenis van een armband vormt het beginpunt voor een exploratie van de narratieve breuk die het gevolg kan zijn wanneer een voorwerp in het geheim wordt doorgegeven aan een emigrerend familielid. Het proces van verzoening met de onherroepelijke onvolledigheid van het verhaal illustreert de complexiteit van de immigranten-identiteit, de transformatie van de betekenissen toegeschreven aan de meegenomen voorwerpen, en de vorming van nieuwe verhalen om door te geven aan de volgende generatie.