

# **Reservoirs of violence: Beb Vuyk's postcolonial stories**

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The year 1945 marked the end of two occupations in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The first occurred with the German surrender in May. The second came about with the sudden surrender of Japan in August. The ending of World War Two in Asia left the Dutch East Indies in a volatile and complex situation. The “liberated” Dutch found themselves surrounded by hostile nationalist forces loyal to the newly founded Republic of Indonesia. Years of violence and a full-scale war ensued, with the Dutch reluctantly ceding sovereignty to the new republic in 1949. This study briefly looks at the situation that unfolded in late 1945 Indonesia and attempts to explain why the Dutch found the new situation hard to comprehend and to accept. I suggest that the short stories of Beb Vuyk offer unique insights into the reservoir of violence that had been expanding prior to 1945, the shift in violence between 1945 and 1949 and the violence as it was experienced by Asians and Europeans alike. Accepting that Vuyk's position within the colonial complex was that of a colonial before the war, I maintain that Vuyk challenges colonial narratives by drawing out some of the pathologies engendered by colonial intimacies. By reclaiming local, native and particular histories, her stories written between the late 1940s and late 1960s reflect a variety of experiences and do not privilege the experiences of European victims over Indonesians.

Key terms: Beb Vuyk, Dutch East Indies, postcolonialism, decolonisation, *Indisch* literature, Indonesia, colonialism.

## **Introduction: Liberation without liberation**

It is clear that the year 1945 marked a watershed in world history. The defeat of Nazism and fascism in Europe and the ending of Japanese militarism in Asia meant the liberation of millions. But in Asia, it was a strange type of liberation. As Ian Buruma (2013) pointed out: “Liberation is perhaps not the right word to describe the end of war in colonial societies” (111). For nationalists in colonial societies like

British Malaya, French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies, liberation would prove meaningless if the defeat of the Japanese would lead to a reconquest and reoccupation by their European colonial masters. Thus, just two days after the Japanese surrender, on August 17, 1945, the Indonesian nationalists Sukarno and Hatta declared the independence of the Republic of Indonesia (De Graaf 1959, 305-327).<sup>1</sup> In effect, they declared the Dutch East Indies to be obsolete and there would be no return to the pre-war colonial status quo.

Furthermore, "liberation" does not accurately describe the situation of the Dutch who previously had been held in Japanese camps in Indonesia for the duration of the war. While their compatriots in Europe may have enjoyed liberation from the Germans in May 1945, their own liberation from the Japanese in August 1945 meant that they quickly became the target of nationalist Indonesian violence. They now found themselves taking shelter in their former prison camps, under the protection of their former Japanese prison guards. Some remained in camps for years. As Sander van Walsum noted in an article in the Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* on August 15, 2020, the Dutch in the East Indies found themselves "liberated from the Japanese, besieged by Indonesians."

On the first anniversary of the ending of World War Two in Europe, Dutch historian Jan Romein (1946) published a journal article, "The Spirit of the Dutch people during the occupation." Note the singular form – "occupation". However, while the European metropole had endured a German occupation, in the Dutch East Indies, hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens, and millions of Indonesians, had suffered a harsh Japanese occupation. Romein seemed unaware of the inaccuracy in his title. His only mention of the Dutch East Indies was to confirm that they "had shared the same fate" as the metropole (Romein 1946, 179). This blindness was an early indication of a collective memory of 1945 that came to dominate Dutch culture, in which the Asian occupation and so-called liberation came to be all but unremembered, which is to say that they were knowingly not included in remembrance. Even today, the Royal Family joins the entire population in happily celebrating Liberation Day on May 5, despite the fact that in 1945 hundreds of thousands of Dutch remained under Japanese occupation for a further three months. Their attendance on August 15<sup>th</sup> at the annual celebration of the end of the war in Asia is a more subdued affair.

To gain an insight into the complex events around 1945 and immediately after, this article will argue that we can turn to the relatively slender post 1945 oeuvre of Dutch-Indonesian author Beb Vuyk and in particular her short stories of the 1950s and 1960s. Vuyk was born in Rotterdam in 1905. Her father had been

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<sup>1</sup> H.J. de Graaf was the first Dutch historian to offer a detailed account of what happened on that day.

born to an Indonesian mother (Vuyk 1981, 425). Due to her dark skin, she had sometimes been the target of racial slurs during her childhood in Holland (Vuyk 1981, 432). She published a handful of short stories by her mid-twenties, but then decided to move to the colony of the Dutch East Indies. On the journey, she met the man who would become her husband, a man born of a Dutch father and Ambonese mother (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 273). By the outbreak of World War Two she had published two full-length books and was working on a third which, partly written in a Japanese internment camp, was published in 1947 (Nieuwenhuys 1982, 273-274). By then the Indonesian Revolution had become a war. Vuyk chose to take the Indonesian nationality and worked in post-independent Indonesia as a journalist until she fell foul of the increasingly authoritarian government of Sukarno. In 1958, she was forced into exile and returned to the Netherlands, living on a houseboat, as seen in Figure 1, and retaining her Indonesian nationality.



Figure 1. Beb Vuyk and her husband, Fernand de Willigen, on the deck of their houseboat "Almayer's Folly" in Loenen aan de Vecht. From the photo collection of the Letterkundig Museum, The Hague. Reproduced with permission.

A postcolonial reading of Vuyk's post-1945 works offers a multifaceted viewpoint, reflecting the motivations of a variety of actors, not just Dutch colonialists. Her short stories offer a vivid and complex representation of the meaning of 1945. They illustrate the motives that caused the shift in violence between 1945 and 1949 and offer insight into the turbulent events and consequences of violence.

However, before offering an analysis of Vuyk's work, I will provide an outline of the situation in the Dutch East Indies in late 1945. This will be followed by an explanation for why the Dutch were taken by surprise by the course of events and why a coherent interpretation of the events of 1945 remained lacking for many years. Only then shall we turn to the works of Beb Vuyk.

### **The Dutch East Indies/Indonesia in 1945**

The circumstances in the Dutch East Indies or Indonesia in August 1945 were complex. The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9 had brought about the sudden surrender of the Japanese. The war ended on August 15. Nevertheless, hundreds of thousands of armed Japanese soldiers still occupied most of the thousands of islands of the Indonesian archipelago, with hardly an Allied soldier in sight. In 1942, the Japanese had placed Dutch military personnel in prisoner of war camps in South East Asia. The entire white Dutch population (known as *totoks*), as well as many Eurasian Dutch (known as *Indos*), were interned in hundreds of detention camps throughout Indonesia. After the Japanese surrender, no army of liberation arrived at these camps to inform the inmates that they were free, simply because there was no Allied army nearby. Decades later, former prisoners would still complain that no Dutch officials were there to declare them liberated (Kristel 2002, 8). Hence the title of Rudy Verheem's (1979) memoir, *Bevrijding zonder bevrijders* ('Liberation without liberators'). Furthermore, Sukarno and Hatta's Declaration of Independence on August 17 meant that the Dutch in the liberated Japanese camps were now the potential enemies of the newly declared state. Those who ventured out of the camps found themselves entering a hostile environment where anyone and anything associated with European colonial rule could become the target of nationalist aggression. Verheem remembered: "In the Netherlands people danced on the days of liberation, in Asia there was little reason to dance" (Verheem 1979, 73). No doubt, many Asians did feel like dancing. What he meant was that there was little reason for Europeans to dance.

The liberation without liberators wasn't even a liberation in the true sense of the word. The Dutch were free to leave their former prisons, but quickly discovered that the safest place for them was to remain inside the camps, in a self-imposed lockdown, with their former Japanese guards now ordered by the Allies to become their protectors (Hollander 2008, 189). As Lin Scholte put it: "The war was over, supposedly, but the war had only started" (Scholte 2007, 353).

By September 1945, *Indos* who had not been imprisoned by the Japanese, as well as minorities like the Chinese, who were seen as pro-Dutch, found that life outside the camps was more dangerous than life inside the camps. Easy targets,

some were set upon by nationalist youths known as *pemudas*. With British troops landing on Java in September 1945, followed by Dutch forces in October, the situation quickly deteriorated. In the last months of 1945, thousands of Europeans, Eurasians, Japanese and Chinese were killed by Indonesian nationalists during the so-called *bersiap* period (Van den Doel 2001, 99; Limpach 2016, 133). In the city of Surabaya, nationalists massacred hundreds of British-Indian soldiers and the British responded with air, naval and land forces killing thousands of Indonesians (Van den Doel 2001, 113-115). In 1946, Dutch Special Forces carried out summary executions and massacres across the region of South Sulawesi, claiming the lives of thousands of victims (IJzereef 1984, 109-127, 141). By 1947, the situation had developed into a full-scale war with the Dutch unleashing two major attempts at reconquest, the euphemistically named "Police Actions." Despite mobilising a new army of 150,000 conscripts (Van Doorn and Hendrix 2012, 295), the Dutch were forced to admit defeat, but only after inflicting losses of well in excess of 100,000 dead among Indonesian nationalists. Most estimates of the number of Indonesians killed by the Dutch army during the Indonesian War of Independence are guesswork and vary enormously. It was not until 2017 that three Dutch historians were able to provide a first evidence-based estimate (Harinck, Van Horn & Luttikhuis 2017). They gave the number of 97,421, with the caveat that this was a low estimate. The real number of dead is likely far in excess of this. The Swiss-Dutch historian Rémy Limpach has persuasively argued that Dutch forces engaged in systematic mass violence that was both structural and widespread (Limpach 2016, 738-739). In early 1949, a United Nations resolution called for peace talks that would lead to Indonesian independence by at least July 1950 (De Jong 2011, 370-371). In December 1949, the Dutch queen transferred sovereignty to the new Republic of Indonesia, with Sukarno as president and Hatta as vice president.

By that time, hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens had been "repatriated" to the Netherlands. They received what many would remember as a cold welcome (Oostindie 2010, 26). Most had been born in the Dutch East Indies. The majority were of mixed Asian-European heritage (Bosma 2009, 128). They had lost their homeland and now found themselves exiled in the mother country. For these Dutch citizens and their descendants, 1945 does not represent the joyful liberation still celebrated every year on May 5 in the Netherlands. This was a liberation tinged with bitterness, a liberation followed by the trauma of mass violence and the loss of home.

### The shock of 1945

Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) argued that a characteristic of every system of political domination is “the tendency to proclaim its own normalcy” (84). Major resistance to colonial domination becomes, for the authorities, unthinkable. When revolution does eventually break out, “Worldview wins over the facts: white hegemony is natural and taken for granted; any alternative is still in the domain of the unthinkable” (Trouillot 1995, 93). The chaotic and tense situation in the Dutch East Indies in 1945, especially the outburst of nationalist violence against colonial rule, came as a shock to the Dutch. The unthinkable had happened and seemed beyond comprehension. It was difficult to explain, and this led to decades of unremembering, a term I use to denote the deliberate intention of not remembering and which I will describe more fully in the next section. Thirty years after the Indonesian War of Independence had ended, historian Henk Wesseling (1980) claimed that Dutch society still suffered from an “imperial hangover” (128). Years later, historian Vincent Houben (1997) argued that open discussion of that war remained “as much taboo today as it was earlier” (64).

Rob Nieuwenhuys pointed out that much Dutch literature from the colonial period -such as the work of Multatuli, Daum, Bas Veth and Walraven - was critical of colonial society and colonial authority (Nieuwenhuys 1978, 15-16). However, this does not suggest that these authors could have imagined an Indonesia independent of Dutch tutelage. Admittedly, E. du Perron's *Land van Herkomst* ('Land of origin') from 1935 was a genuinely anti-colonial novel. However, as Van Neck-Yoder (1986) argues, Du Perron's characterisation of colonialism as a type of fascism “had no precedent” (674).

The work of Dutch poet Willem Brandt (1947) articulated his failure to understand the events of 1945: “That you and I, who once were brothers/ like carnivores prowl around each other/and you don't know why this knife, this blood [...] and I don't know why this fear, this hate” (32).<sup>2</sup> Dutch colonial experts had been equally unprepared for the scenario that confronted them in 1945. In 1942, the minister for foreign affairs of the Dutch government in exile, Eelco van Kleffens (1942), naively remarked that although the Japanese had conquered the colony, the native peoples “remained loyal to the kingdom of which they form a part” (96). Before the Japanese invasion, the Dutch government had initiated a commission under the leadership of Frans Visman to investigate the state of the colony and evaluate the need for constitutional reform. Professor Jan Broek provided a

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<sup>2</sup> These are Brandt's original Dutch words: *‘Die u en mij, die eenmaal broeders waren;/ als roofdieren elkaar omsluipen doet;/ en gij weet niet waarom dit mes, dit bloed [...] en ik weet niet waarom die angst, die haat –’* Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Dutch into English in this article are mine.

summary of the colloquially known Visman Report for an international audience.<sup>3</sup> He argued that the long association of the Netherlands and the Indies “has created many spiritual ties” and that all groups shared “the wish not to break the bond which had been forged in the course of centuries” (Broek 1943, 336). Such wishful thinking found an echo in June 1945, when Visman himself optimistically reported that Indonesians were eagerly cooperating with Dutch authorities in the zones already seized from the Japanese (Visman 1945, 184). In November 1945, at the height of the hostilities of the *bersiap* period, Visman continued arguing that his commission had revealed that no nationalist group in Indonesia wanted independence. This proved “that there is no reason to ascribe the present disturbances in the Netherlands Indies to discontent with the past policies of the Netherlands government” (Visman 1945, 6). It was an act of wilful blindness on the part of these enlightened despots. The idea that the Indonesians were willing to fight for their own independence was beyond the bounds of their colonial imaginary.

Dutch newspapers in 1945, like the political leaders, found it difficult to comprehend the unthinkable. With the first Dutch flights over Java since the Japanese surrender, *De Volkskrant* announced on August 23 in its front-page article “*Nederlandse vliegtuigen boven Java en Madoera*” (‘Dutch airplanes over Java and Madura’) that all seemed peaceful and calm in the city of Surabaya. It was not until mid-September that news of anti-colonial commotions began to appear. In “*Ongeregelheden op Java*” (‘Disturbances on Java’) on September 19, *De Volkskrant* reported the situation on Java to be “deplorable,” with the number of mindless violent incidents increasing. *Het Vrije Volk* reported, under the headline “*Guerrilla op Java?*” (‘War on Java?’) on September 21, that nationalists in Batavia had pulled Japanese officers from their cars and murdered them and had attacked Europeans and Indonesian leaders who were loyal to the Dutch. In a front-page article on September 24, “*Betoging in Batavia*” (‘Demonstration in Batavia’), *Het Vrije Volk* reported that Sukarno had addressed a huge crowd in Batavia at an illegal demonstration. The following day, in “*Verwarde toestand op Java*” (‘Confused situation on Java’), *Het Vrije Volk* reported that since the arrival of Allied troops in Batavia a few days earlier, five Japanese soldiers and one Eurasian had been killed. By early October the situation had worsened. Newspapers reported that the situation was tense, but that the arrival of Dutch forces would calm things down. In an article on October 10, “*Soekarno's werkelijke aanhang niet meer dan 5 procent*” (‘Soekarno’s actual following no more than 5 percent’), *De Volkskrant* reported that Sukarno’s support among the people was

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<sup>3</sup> Officially it was titled *Verslag van de Commissie tot Bestudeering van Staatsrechtelijke Hervormingen*.

negligible. In a further article of the same day, "*Overschat de incidenten in Indië niet*" ('Do not overestimate incidents in Indies'), *De Volkskrant* optimistically reported a claim that nationalist violence did not deserve all the attention it was getting. What most Indonesians wanted, *De Volkskrant* reported, was the safety and security of Dutch rule. Thus, national media coverage reflected the views of the politicians.

On the day this optimistic article appeared, *pemuda* units raided the homes of many Dutch (*totoks* and *Indos*) and within days scores of abducted Dutch citizens had been tortured and murdered. What followed in the next few weeks was a bloodbath, with thousands of Indonesians, British-Indian and Dutch killed (Van den Doel 2001, 111-116). Similarly, just days after *De Volkskrant* had publicized its optimism, a Muslim leader in Aceh on the island of Sumatra, Teungku Daud Beureu'eh, declared that the nationalist struggle was a *jihad* ('holy war') and called on all Muslims to wage war against those who cooperated with the Dutch. Within a few months, many local leaders loyal to the Dutch throughout Indonesia were killed or dismissed from their posts by republicans. On Sumatra itself, nearly all sultans and their family members were massacred (Chandler, Cribb & Narangoa 2016, 254-255, 262-263). Thus, on the eve of the onslaught of popular violence, we find that the Dutch media seemed to be as misinformed as the politicians. That anti-colonial mass violence was about to erupt was still beyond their colonial imaginary. Oblivious to the revolutionary potential, they viewed the situation in Indonesia within the horizon of safety and security.

### Colonial explanations

How to explain this genuine sense of shock? Jacques de Kadt argued that Dutch colonialists were unprepared for the events of 1945 because they lived in a sort of smug expatriate bubble, separated from local life, and could only imagine Indonesia becoming independent in the far distant future (De Kadt 1949, 24-26). Few Dutch colonials could imagine that Indonesians wished to end Dutch rule entirely. During the 1930s, the Dutch political police or *Politieke Inlichtingen Dienst* ('Political Intelligence Department') ran a new system of repression (Van Doorn & Hendrix 2012, 21-32). This had all but silenced revolutionary opposition, but Bouman (1949) argued that the forceful repression of Indonesian nationalists had led the pre-war colonial authorities to the false impression that they had wiped out Indonesian nationalism (32-33). Writing with the gift of hindsight, former colonial official Louis G.M Jaquet admitted that the authorities had vastly underestimated the power of Indonesian nationalism in 1945 (Jaquet 1978, 24-28).



Syed Hussein Alatas (1977) argued that European colonisers in Asia constructed the myth of the passive or lazy native, and then produced an ideology in which the native needed the rule of enlightened Europeans in order to develop (13-14). James Baldwin (1962) made the case that any sudden revolt by the oppressed actually attacks the social reality that the oppressor has constructed, and this is particularly terrifying for the latter. The colonised function as a fixed star in the symbolic universe of the coloniser (for instance, as passive or lazy natives), but once the colonised move out of their designated places, “heaven and earth are shaken to the core” (9). The sudden outburst of popular violence that targeted everyone associated with Dutch rule destroyed the myth of the passive, lazy natives. The Dutch, persuaded that the natives still needed their enlightened rule, suddenly found heaven and earth shaken to the core, and the consequence was a collective trauma.

This traumatic shock of 1945 translated into a period of cultural unremembering that lasted for decades. Numerous scholars use the term “forgetting” when analysing the construction of national collective memories (Ricoeur 2004; Connerton 2009; Assmann 2012; Rieff 2017). However, “forgetting” does not adequately describe this process. Individuals who experienced events remember and transmit these memories to a second generation, usually within the family. I use the term “unremembering” not as a synonym for forgetting, but as a term to describe a collective refusal to remember, a process of concealment that opposes the work of national remembering. Socially traumatic events or the sudden eruption of the unthinkable into reality – for instance the violent outbreak of revolution followed by brutal war and the loss of empire – are not forgotten, but they come to be unremembered. The process of unremembering is at work in many quarters, but especially in the work of politicians, scholars, and writers.

Dutch historians of colonialism, for the most part, contributed greatly to unremembering, studiously ignoring for decades the controversial topic of decolonization. There were a few exceptions. Jan Hendrik Pluvier demonstrated that the roots of the Indonesian Revolution of 1945 were to be found in the manner in which the increasingly intolerant colonial government had tried to repress all Indonesian nationalist aspirations. Long before the Japanese occupation, Indonesian nationalists, according to Pluvier, had lost faith in Dutch rule (Pluvier 1953, 167-204). Hermanus J. de Graaf penned an article in 1959 that was the first attempt to analyse in detail the events of August 1945, especially the lead-up to Sukarno and Hatta's Declaration of Independence (De Graaf 1959). It was all but ignored by the members of the Dutch guild of historians.

Meanwhile, former colonials and conservative politicians quickly perpetrated the narrative that the Dutch had been dispossessed of their rightful colony by Japanese collaborators (Sukarno and Hatta), aided by the ignorant interference

of outsiders. Early in 1946, the conservative historian Carel Gerretson mourned the “deep pain” of 1945, in which the work of three centuries had been undone within three months. He blamed the Dutch colonial authorities for the debacle, but he argued that the explosion of Javanese violence in 1945 had been spurred on by the Japanese, and this had been compounded by the mistakes of the Americans and, above all, the British (Gerretson 1946, 7-8). Former Lieutenant Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies Hubertus van Mook, a man of progressive views (albeit, *colonial* progressive views), claimed that had the British quickly disarmed the Japanese in 1945 most of the bloodshed that followed would have been avoided (Van Mook 1949, 77). The former conservative Dutch prime minister Piet Gerbrandy argued that Dutch benevolent rule in Indonesia had been near perfect and the ingenious Dutch had created a situation in the tropics resembling “the Garden of Eden before the Fall” (Gerbrandy 1950, 40). He mourned the fact that the Dutch had been wrongly driven from this ideal colony “under the pressure exercised by Britain, the United States and U.N.O.” (Gerbrandy 1950, 11).

These explanations are linked by the assumption that Dutch colonial rule was exceptionally benign. The colonial experts assumed that the old order could be revived without bloodshed. They could not countenance that for millions of people, the entire edifice of European colonialism needed to be destroyed in the speediest possible manner. This unremembering prevented the Dutch from coming to terms with their history. It foreclosed any real engagement with the events of 1945. In a similar vein, Baldwin (1962) argued that the greatest crime of White Americans was not that they had destroyed hundreds of thousands of Black lives, but the fact that they “do not want to know it [...] It is the innocence which constitutes the crime” (5-6). The shock that the Dutch felt at the revolt of the Indonesians, and their attempts to explain events by blaming everyone else, was a desperate flight towards innocence, much like Gloria Wekker’s (2016) *White innocence*. Only recently is the process of unremembering being undone through the publication of historical works like those of Gert Oostindie (2015) and Rémy Limpach (2016), as well as literary works like Alfred Birney’s (2016) prize-winning novel about a violent colonial past.

Australian historian Robert Cribb (2007) argues convincingly that the catalyst for the anti-colonial violence of late 1945 had been the nationalist fear that the return of Dutch power meant that the Indonesian Revolution would be hijacked by a Eurasian or *Indo* elite who would install themselves as the leadership in any new Indonesian state. At a deeper level, the violence of 1945 flowed from what he termed a “reservoir of violence” (I have borrowed this term and used it throughout this essay as well as in the title) that had been shaped and supported by the Dutch colonial authority’s acceptance of organised crime and gang violence

during the pre-war period. Cribb adds that after the Japanese surrender in 1945, thousands of *Indos* tried to turn back the clock and rebuild life as it was prior to 1942. In doing so, they did not bother to hide their deep contempt for the newly declared Indonesian Republic (Cribb 2007, 35-44). The consequence was that the reservoir burst, releasing a wave of violence that consumed thousands of lives. Far from being Gerbrandy's Garden of Eden before the Fall, for many of its inhabitants the Dutch East Indies had been a violent and fairly dangerous place, as well as a society where deeply rooted resentments festered.

### Postcolonialism

Paul Connerton contends that immediately following 1945, a generation of authors invented a new type of literature that offered testimony and bore witness to catastrophic events. These works provide histories that were penned in a spirit of mourning and that attempted to cope with tumultuous loss (Connerton, 2011, 17-30). Most *Indisch* literature written after Indonesian independence falls within this horizon of mourning – it is a nostalgic literature of longing for that which has been irredeemably lost. Beb Vuyk witnessed from up close the catastrophe of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and her post-1945 writings are permeated by her own wartime experiences as well as the experiences of others (Nieuwenhuys, 1982, 272). These stories were written in mourning for the innocence lost when the madness of terrible cruelty was unleashed. However, they form an exception in *Indisch* literature by their lack of nostalgia for the days gone by. Instead, her stories can be read as postcolonial representations of colonial and anti-colonial violence.

Most Dutch literature of the East Indies was written from a colonial perspective, accepting without question the European point of view (Praamstra 2009, 151-152). Writers who are post-colonial, that is writing after decolonization, still maintain the European, colonial perspective. They are post-colonial only to the extent that they are writing in the period of post-empire. Colonial literature, whether written during the time of Empire or during the post-colonial period, is a literature that according to Elleke Boehmer (2005) is “written by and for the colonizing Europeans about the non-European lands dominated by them” and consequently embodies “the imperialist's point of view” (3). In colonial literature, colonised people suffer the violence of invisibility. When they do appear, they are reduced to passive positions of silent humility, or irrational violence. In Dutch colonial and post-colonial novels, natives, when they appear as characters, are usually servants, often lacking a name. They are simply a “supporting cast” or “scenic backdrop” (Stoler & Strassler 2000, 10). Even when we learn a little of their backstory, we seldom gain an insight into their private thoughts. Usually they lack agency, except when they sometimes become the perpetrators of mindless

violence. Their motivations are rarely examined. For instance, Maria Dermoût's novels *Nog pas gisteren* ('Only yesterday') (1951) and *De tienduizend dingen* ('The ten thousand things') (1955), though suffused with tropical landscapes and Asian motifs, reflect the point of view of a privileged European colonial (Doolan 2013, 19-20). This takes nothing away from the literary quality of these works – Beb Vuyk herself considered Dermoût's *De tienduizend dingen* to be "one of the most beautiful books ever written in Dutch" (Vuyk 1983, 39).

Boehmer (2005) maintains that postcolonial literature (without the hyphen), on the other hand, "critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship" and "sets out in one way or another to resist colonist perspectives" (3). The postwar stories of Beb Vuyk, I will argue, complicate the colonial gaze. Vuyk's work contests and subverts Dutch colonial ideologies and representations by reclaiming local, native, and particular histories. She provides an oeuvre of short literary works that offer a point of view that contests the dominant colonial mode. Her post-1945 writings provide a polyphony of voices that include the voices of the oppressed. Almost unique among Dutch letters, her stories make the colonised visible.

### **Beb Vuyk as a colonial writer?**

In 2015, Olf Praamstra (2015a) published a critique of Vuyk's 1939 novel *Het laatste huis van de wereld* ('The last house in the world'), arguing: "Vuyk is no different than other colonial conquerors" (143). The article also appeared in a book collection (Praamstra 2015b). The following year, Praamstra (2016) published a longer indictment of Vuyk's character and position within literature, claiming that Vuyk had had a "chameleon-like attitude" towards the colonial Dutch East Indies and independent Indonesia (45). He opened that article by declaring that Vuyk risks becoming a forgotten author, relegated to the second or third tier of Dutch literature. (Praamstra 2016, 43). To put it mildly, his two articles are unlikely to gain her a new readership. In the Manichean world of postcolonial scholarship, for Vuyk to be considered a colonial author could prove the death knell. Her work will be unremembered. It took Christina Suprihatin (2019) just a handful of pages to endorse Praamstra's verdict: "*Het laatste huis van de wereld* by Beb Vuyk is written from a colonial perspective" (63). Praamstra's 2015 article was concerned with Vuyk's work before the outbreak of World War Two, ignoring her work from the 1950s and 1960s. His 2016 article covered Vuyk's career until her death.

To find that Vuyk's early works reflect a colonial standpoint is akin to kicking open an already open door. When she was in her mid-twenties, Beb Vuyk decided to move to the Dutch East Indies (Praamstra 2016, 45). Europeans who

voluntarily migrate in order to build a career and who enter into the reality of colonialism are, of course, colonial! As one writer explained, innocent Europeans began to lose their innocence once they embarked on the ship in Europe, and upon reaching the colony they disembarked with an inflated sense of themselves. The conversion from modest European to inflated colonial was "a process of oxidation of the soul from which no one escapes," as Beb Vuyk noted in *Het laatste huis van de wereld* in a passage that neither Praamstra nor Suprihatin seem to have noticed (Vuyk 1981, 179).

It is not remarkable that Vuyk was a colonial. After all, Multatuli arrived in the Dutch East Indies as a colonial careerist, and then he became critical of a certain type of colonialism. Wim Wertheim went to the Dutch East Indies as a servant of colonialism, and then became a radical anti-colonialist. Du Perron lived the life of a spoilt, rich colonial, until he transitioned into being an anti-colonial. What is remarkable is the change from colonial to anti-colonial. Praamstra admits that Vuyk's change began when she met Du Perron in the late thirties, and by the early 1940s, she had been won over to the cause of Indonesian independence (Praamstra 2016, 57-58). In 1945, she openly took the side of the Indonesian Republic and chose for Indonesian nationality. Praamstra maintains that this choice was based on "bitterness" against Dutch governmental discrimination (Praamstra 2016, 57-58). Not a sense of justice, but bitterness! Praamstra also suggests that Vuyk based her choice on "hatred for full blood whites" (Praamstra 2016, 58). Perhaps it was simply that Vuyk was following the example of her friend and hero Du Perron, who in 1940 wrote: "To be convinced that one is standing on the right side, one has to be *Indonesian*" (Du Perron 1959, 127). When Vuyk was forced into exile in the Netherlands in 1958, she kept her Indonesian nationality. Praamstra describes her wish to retain her chosen nationality as "*krampachtig*" or compulsive and small-minded (Praamstra 2016, 64).

Praamstra's account of Vuyk's actions regarding the Moluccan crisis is confusing (Praamstra 2016, 60-63). In 1950, the newly independent Republic of Indonesia was faced with its first big test – an independence movement in the Moluccan islands. Vuyk supported Jakarta's attempt to maintain the unity of the state. Praamstra describes her support as "fanatical" (Praamstra 2016, 60). He does not explain what measurement he used to determine fanaticism. Twice he describes Vuyk's support for maintaining the integrity of the unified Indonesian republic against Moluccan separatists as "neo-colonial" (Praamstra 2016, 59, 76). He criticises Vuyk for maintaining that the Moluccan revolt and the so-called Republic of South Moluccas (RMS) was the creation of a military clique of former soldiers of the Dutch colonial army (Praamstra 2016, 61).

Praamstra never mentions that at the root of Moluccan nationalism, according to Fidus Steijlen (1996), a professor of Moluccan migration and culture,

lies a sense of colonial privilege, combined with an identification with the western colonial elite (59). The idea that Moluccans had always been loyal servants of the colonial authorities originated as pro-Dutch propaganda (Smeets 1995, 7). This led to many Moluccans developing a loyalty to the Dutch Royal Family that one historian describes as “fanatical” (Bartels 1986, 25). Consequently, the Moluccan revolt and the ideology of the RMS was supported in the Netherlands by a wide variety of conservative individuals and organisations that supported empire (Manuhutu 1991, 74-77). Right-wing journalist Jan Fabius wildly compared the treatment of the Moluccans to the treatment of the Jews under the Nazis (Fabius 1954, 122-123). Conservatives like Carl Gerretson and Piet Gerbrandy threw in their lot with the arch-imperialist organisation *Door Eeuwen Trouw* (‘Faithful through centuries’) to campaign for Moluccans’ independence. (Bosma 2009, 23) This was nothing more than an attempt by some Dutch to “preserve influence in the archipelago” (Laarman 2013, 107). Thousands of Moluccan soldiers and their families went into exile in the Netherlands. As the decades slipped by and they remained in exile, leadership and unity was maintained by the ex-military men (a military clique) who, Steijlen tells us, permitted little toleration for opposing views (Steijlen 1996, 82). Bosma agrees that intimidation and social ostracism were used in order to maintain the RMS ideal in exile (Bosma 2009, 53).

Praamstra is surely confused when he berates Vuyk for being “fanatical” and he is incorrect when he labels her “neo-colonial.” The colonials were on the side of the Moluccans! What Praamstra finds most difficult to accept is that Vuyk decided for Indonesian nationality. From the late 1950s onward, Vuyk was an Indonesian author writing about her adopted homeland from a place in exile in the Netherlands. This was a revolutionary act, one that still rankles apparently.

Praamstra rightly takes issue with the fact that Vuyk temporarily supported the dictator General Suharto during the 1970s (Praamstra 2016, 68-72). He is suspicious of her claim that she was the “only one of the *Indisch* authors, who does not write out of nostalgia” (Praamstra 2016, 67). Praamstra calls this a “mantra” that she often repeated, a part of a mythical self-image that she created of being someone not “contaminated by the colonial past” (Praamstra 2016, 67). Praamstra concludes that Vuyk was an embittered outsider who never fitted in and whose life remained dominated by her incapacity to accept her hybrid origins (Praamstra 2016, 76). But she is surely in good company. Tjalie Robinson (2011) saw himself as a Dutchman in exile in Holland (148). Rob Nieuwenhuys (1959) admitted that his cultural vision had always been coloured by his “*tweeslachtigheid*” (‘dichotomy’) or ambivalent origins (226). E. M. Beekman called Nieuwenhuys “intellectually and emotionally a displaced person” (Beekman 1982, xiv). Praamstra seems to find it a character weakness that Vuyk wanted to be a full Indonesian. But Edward Said, while famously pointing out the strength of

hybridity (Said 1994, 317), near the end of his life admitted that he suffered from “an acute memory of the despairing feeling that I wish we could have been all-Arab, or all-European and American, or all-Orthodox Christian, or all-Muslim, or all-Egyptian, and so on” (Said 2000, 5).

In short, Praamstra's revelation is that Vuyk produced a colonial novel before World War Two. He also wants to convince us that Vuyk projected an incorrect self-image; that in reality she was motivated by bitterness and hate, fanaticism and neo-colonialism. Between the late 1940s and late 1960s she penned a number of short stories, “magnificent but above all [...] harrowing stories” according to Praamstra (2016, 64). Alas, he offers no analysis of them. Perhaps he is content that she is in danger of becoming a forgotten author. In order to counter this unremembering, it is to her stories that we now turn.

### A polyphony of voices

In colonial literature, where the so-called native is reduced to passive silence, we don't get to hear about the dreams and motivations of the ruled. In Vuyk's work also, the story is never directly told by an Indonesian. The narrator is usually, like Vuyk herself, an *Indo* woman. However, within the narrative frame of a story told from the privileged European or *Indo* point of view, Vuyk includes multiple perspectives. These perspectives, unlike in more straightforward colonial narratives, offer a glimpse of what it must have meant to be an Indonesian under Dutch rule, under Japanese rule, during the *bersiap* period or during the Indonesian War of Independence. Exceptionally, in some of Vuyk's stories the European narrator does not relay her own experiences only, but basically becomes the mouthpiece or, as Scova Righini (2004) calls it, the “service-hatch” (*‘doorgeef-luik’*) (195), through which an Indonesian gets to tell his story.

Take for instance her 1947 novel *Het hout van Bara* (*‘The wood of Bara’*). It is set between the years of the Great Depression in the late 1930s and the Japanese invasion in 1942. The novel is about a conflict between a patrician *Indo* family in the Moluccas, the Hilligens – the *totok* Eli and her *Indo* husband Hajo – and Bouts, the tyrannical Dutch administrator on the island. A secondary character is the minor local regent Abdoellah. We learn a lot about Abdoellah's appearance, his background and his dreams. He is a very dark young man who wears a white suit and leather shoes. His Western education was interrupted because of economic hardship. He speaks Dutch with the authorities, Malay with Chinese and Arabs, and Alfur with his own people. His wife and he have only one child. His wife is illiterate, but Abdoellah himself loves reading, though he does not have enough money to buy books. He loves visiting the Hilligens, for conversation and to borrow their books (Vuyk 1981, 278-280). Indeed, ever since being a little boy, he has

greatly admired Hajo and, clearly, he dreams of one day living the life of an upper class European, something he knows to be impossible. This makes him “a lonely man” (Vuyk 1981, 293).

When the Hilligens fall foul of Bouts and a feud ensues, Abdoellah avoids the Hilligens and the reader is offered his motivation – he considers himself a friend of the Hilligens, but he is afraid of Bouts who, as the official colonial authority, has the power to destroy the livelihood of any native (Vuyk 1981, 321). Eventually it is Abdoellah who approaches the Hilligens again, asking for their understanding and forgiveness. He explains his motivations in his own words and the Hilligens are forced to confront the truth that the colonial system itself is unjust since the natives are at the mercy of the arbitrary tyranny of local Dutch rulers (Vuyk 1981, 358-361). Abdoellah is a secondary character, but his is not a one-dimensional profile. He has a personal life, a personal history, and dreams for the future. He takes actions and justifies these actions. Alas, we also see that his options within an unjust colonial system are limited and therefore, despite his compassionate nature, a reservoir of violence is slowly expanding.

“Huize Sonja” (‘House Sonja’) was published in 1966. The protagonist is a *totok* called Etta who is married to Harry, a descendant from a patrician *Indo* family from the Moluccas. In this story, the servants play an important role, especially one houseboy called Simon Arakian, “a Timorese, a big, strong lad with wild eyes and a forest of fizzy hair, so stiff and thickly grown that he could hide his money, cigarettes and his writing materials in it” (Vuyk 1981, 462-463). Simon remains a mystery throughout the story and we never really discover what is going on in his mind. Nevertheless, as Vuyk tells the story of Etta, Simon's profile becomes more definite. He is an active agent who partially shapes his own future. When Etta and Harry decide to move to Java, it is Simon who takes the initiative to offer to go with them, even suggesting that he would like to see more of the world (Vuyk 1981, 469). But there is more to Simon Arakian than first meets the eye. Gradually our suspicion that he has a violent past appears to be confirmed (Vuyk 1981, 483-484). By the end of the story, with the Japanese army approaching, Simon takes some independent actions that seem to reverse the servant-master relationship (Vuyk 1981, 486-488). Simon's character in this story is much more than the decorative servant, he is not a passive or lazy native and he has far more depth than any mindlessly violent native. The fact that we cannot pin down his personal history leaves an uncanny feeling. On the final page of the story Etta's young son tells his mother that one of the servants kept saying “that the Japanese will murder all the Europeans and burn down their houses” (Vuyk 1981, 488). We are left with the strong suspicion that it is not the Japanese, but Indonesians like Simon Arakian, already acquainted with violence and with a



growing resentment against the ruling class, who will burn down the entire edifice of European rule.

Although the narrator of “De laatste waardigheid” (‘The final dignity’) from 1962 is an *Indo* who bears a strong resemblance to Beb Vuyk, the main character is a Sumatran Batak called Doctor Nambela. While in his heart he remains an anti-colonial nationalist, he has been forced to choose for the Dutch side after his wife and daughter were tortured and killed in the most barbaric way by Batak nationalists in 1945. One of the characters comments on the invisible, festering resentments: “I could never have imagined that the revolution that would bring new ways, would bring so much filth and old pain to the surface” (Vuyk 1981, 454). In this story, Vuyk allows the subaltern to speak. For nearly three pages, Vuyk's narrator is the medium who relays Nambela's voice to the reader. We hear him tell his story, almost without interruption, explaining the deep humiliation that is integral to the colonial system for natives like himself. He explains why he still remains a nationalist despite the atrocious violence committed against his wife and daughter by fellow Batak nationalists. We can feel his resentment: “It is horrible to be a native, automatically the inferior of any random Dutch person. The feeling burns under your skin, it eats away at you” (Vuyk 1981, 457). We are led to conclude that the root of the mass violence of 1945 was not Japanese propaganda, but the complicated legacy of Dutch colonialism and the deep resentments that colonial inequalities bred.

“Full of sound and the fury” (Vuyk's title is in English) from 1958, is set in the Indonesian region of Borneo. Rob Nieuwenhuys (1982) acclaimed it as one of her most powerful stories, with its harrowing, dispassionate account of brutality (270-272). Here too, Vuyk's European narrator becomes the medium through which an Indonesian gets to tell his story. The narrator is a journalist who is travelling through the region as part of an official tour, organised by the new republic's ministry of information. The narrator is given two native guides, and these are the main characters in the story. We learn that one of them lost his father and older brother when the Japanese murdered the male nobility as well as Indonesian intellectuals (Vuyk 1981, 406-407). Deep in the jungle, they visit longhouses of Dayaks, where they see, hanging like trophies, the skulls of Japanese soldiers who had been captured, tortured and killed. A village elder tells the narrator how the Japanese fought well and endured torture admirably (Vuyk 1981, 412-415). Vuyk's narrator eventually gives the floor completely to one of the Indonesian characters, Tjondro, who enjoyed recounting his tales of war: “He told them because he had to tell them, to save himself. He needed me to listen to him, to rid himself of them, these terrible and bloody stories, full of sound and fury” (Vuyk 1981, 410). The Dutch narrator listens to Tjondro and becomes the medium through which the Indonesian nationalist gets to tell his side of events.

Eventually his voice fills the final four pages as he relates how he was captured and tortured by the Dutch, how he escaped and eventually used a Japanese sword to decapitate an informant (Vuyk 1981, 416-420).

These four examples suffice to demonstrate that Vuyk's stories offer more than one, colonial, perspective. In two of the stories, even minor Indonesian characters are named and portrayed with richness and depth. They are each in their own right complicated individuals. Within the confines of what is possible in a colonial situation, they each make assessments, make decisions and take actions to better their lives. In the other two stories, the main characters are Indonesians and the narrator in both examples gives these characters the opportunity to speak directly to the reader.

### **A variety of victims**

In *Het hout van Bara*, the chief government authority, Bouts, is ignorant and uncouth, "a little island lord who made life unbearable for Indonesians and Europeans" (Vuyk 1981, 271). He exploits the locals, eventually coming up against the *totok* Eli and her *Indo* husband Hajo. Eli is appalled at how he treats the natives and admits that "you can feel embarrassed at being a European" (Vuyk 1981, 283). During a conversation with a local woman, Eli is made to understand that some form of justice can be achieved by Europeans, but for natives there is no chance of achieving justice through the colonial authorities (Vuyk 1981, 308). Hajo informs Eli that he has complained to the resident in Ambon about Bouts, and the resident agrees to transfer Bouts to another island. But, Eli asks, is this justice? As Europeans, they can get rid of Bouts, but what about the native population – could they have achieved this result too? And what awaits the natives on the island where Bouts will receive his next posting? (Vuyk 1981, 353). Hajo tells people that the colonial administration is just, but Eli asks, "Isn't it time to undo these lies?" (Vuyk 1981, 361). Clearly, Vuyk's novel indicated that in colonial society, there was little chance of due process through legal means against the abuse of power. Furthermore, there was a hierarchy of rectitude. It was the native peoples, consequently, who were most victimised by colonial abuse, not *totoks* or *Indos*.

In Vuyk's work after 1945 there is no clear division between "us" and "them," as there is in a traditional colonial perspective. Her stories are free from any one-dimensional stereotype of the enemy. All sides are caught up in a surge of cruel violence that is unleashed once the colonial edifice begins to totter. The *Yearbook of the Society of Dutch Literature* described her work as deviating from the norm in Dutch literature because her representation of "this dirty war that was fought by the Netherlands in Indonesia" portrays atrocities but provides "no stereotype image of the enemy" (*Jaarboek* 1993, 181). "Verhaal van een

toeschouwer" ('Story of a spectator') first appeared in 1950. The narrator tells the reader that terrible brutalities had been inflicted by both sides, the Dutch as well as the Indonesians (Vuyk 1981, 374). We learn that Japanese prisoners of the Dutch are promptly shot dead (Vuyk 1981, 368). The main character in the story is Hermans, an *Indo* who has been a prisoner of war of the Japanese, working on the Burma railroad. In 1945, Hermans is liberated. His *Indo* wife had been imprisoned in a camp by the Japanese as well, and in 1945 she too was liberated. However, when she leaves the camp, she is murdered by a band of *pemuda*, one of the first victims of the *bersiap*. And yet, Hermans admits that his sympathies lie with the nationalists, because the war that ended in 1945 only accelerated a process that had been building for decades, namely of Asia liberating herself from colonial rule (Vuyk 1981, 371-372). In other words, the fictional character of Hermans had a better insight into the situation in 1945 than the real-life colonial experts like Visman (1945), who were taken by such surprise. Furthermore, while the violence of the *pemuda* is not justified, the resentment that provokes this violence is acknowledged. Dutch soldiers are seen to be victims, but so too are Indonesian nationalists, Japanese soldiers and *Indisch* civilians.

In "De laatste waardigheid," Vuyk does not dwell upon the suffering of the Europeans, whether *totok* or *Indo*. Instead, she leads us into seeing the effects of terrible violence from the perspective of natives of Sumatra. We learn that 1945 embodied not just a violent upheaval for the Europeans, but that the Declaration of Independence had ignited a social revolution in parts of Eastern Sumatra. Amidst great violence, the old aristocratic authorities and the sultan families became the targets of a cruel reckoning. As Vuyk (1981) writes: "Their palaces were burned down, they themselves, their multiple wives, children and grandchildren and their feudal vassals were murdered. The Chinese met the same fate" (450). The power vacuum that had briefly appeared in 1945 had seen the lid lifted from decades-old resentments. Now, violence and cruelty burst forth. Conflicts were not merely nationalist versus colonialist, but they encompassed a series of tribal and intertribal wars – Batak versus Batak, Batak versus Malay, Bataks and Malays versus Javanese (Vuyk 1981, 448-450).

In "Ngawang," the final work of fiction that Beb Vuyk wrote, published in 1969, the protagonist witnesses a chilling scene (Vuyk 1981, 494-495). A crowd of Indonesians march silently towards a Chinese shop. The Chinese shopkeeper and his pregnant wife are passive onlookers of their own destruction. First, the people in the crowd help themselves to all of the goods in the shop. Then they strip the shop of the furniture, the window blinds are unscrewed and removed, as are the doors. Everything is taken away by the looters. A man deferentially bows towards the Chinese pregnant woman who sits on a stool, and politely apologizes. She stands up and moves to one side, and he walks away with the stool. With the

furniture and fixtures gone, some men and women quietly line up before a ladder and in turn they strip the tiles off the roof. With the shop emptied of its goods, furniture, fixtures and roof tiles, the crowd moves away, towards the next Chinese shop, the next helpless victims. It is a scene that despite its lack of physical violence creates an indelible memory. Most disturbing is the clinical precision of Vuyk's description along with the calm and organized manner in which the scene unfolds. It does not bode well for the future of the Chinese as a minority group who are resented by their Indonesian neighbours for their association with Dutch rule, offering us another glimpse of the reservoir of resentment that will spill over into the mass violence against the Chinese during the *bersiap* of 1945.

The story "All our yesterdays," from 1958, (Vuyk 1981, 391-397) is unique for being the only instance in which Vuyk draws upon her experience as victim. Vuyk spent most of World War Two in Japanese prison camps, including six weeks imprisoned by the *Kempeitai*, the Japanese secret police. During this time, she was tortured and interrogated. In "All our yesterdays" (the title is in English), a European woman is being treated in a hospital, but suffers from disturbing memories of torture. She is interrogated by a Japanese *Kempeitai* captain, remembering him having "a pale face and the unmoving eyes of a reptile" (Vuyk 1981, 392). None of her other stories are based directly on her experience as a prisoner of the Japanese. Perhaps, as a colonial, Vuyk did not want to self-identify primarily as a victim. She had no sympathy for Europeans who focused exclusively on their own suffering in the Japanese camps, describing them as people,

who are still obsessed with their time in the camps, with the suffering and injustice that they experienced [...] with the humiliation, against which they can only offer a small-minded feeling of superiority. The white who has been humiliated by the coloured race, that still eats away at many.<sup>4</sup>

(Vuyk 1981, 368)

One of the factors that distinguishes the colonial mentality from the postcolonial approach is the obsessive focus on one's own, unrecognized suffering. Frantz Fanon maintained that this, and the inability to recognise the suffering of the colonised, is the preeminent characteristic of the mind of the colonialist (Fanon 2004, 15). Thus, within the mindset of a colonialist paradigm, the greatest victims of Dutch colonization were the Europeans – victimized twice over, first by the Japanese in 1942-1945, and then, in 1945, maltreated by the ungrateful Indonesians. Take the poet Willem Brandt, who had been a prisoner of the

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<sup>4</sup> 'die nog steeds geobsedeerd worden door hun kamptijd, door het lijden en het onrecht hun aangedaan [...] door de vernedering, waar zij alleen maar een krampachtige meerwaardigheids-houding tegenover konden stellen. De door een gekleurd ras vernederde blanke, dat vreet nog steeds in velen door.'

Japanese. Liberated in 1945, his 1946 collection of poems dwelt upon the suffering experienced *Binnen Japansch prikkeldraad* ('Behind Japanese barbed wire'). Some of his images evoke the Jewish Holocaust in Europe, as the poem "Europeans-Transport" illustrates: "People and names were called/ there is a number written on my chest/ we were driven like herds along the way/ and pushed together in a cattle-wagon" (Brandt 1946, 15). In the introduction to the collection, Jan H. de Groot wrote: "The whites in the Japanese concentration camps were in a position comparable with the Jews in Westerbork, or even with those in Poland" (De Groot 1946, 5). The suffering experienced in the Japanese camps was immense and a justified argument can be made that this suffering remained underrepresented and unremembered in post-war Dutch society. But to compare the conditions in the Japanese camps with the death camps of Poland is inaccurate, to say the least. Nevertheless, during the following decades a steady stream of publications focused exclusively on the suffering of Europeans in *de Jappenkampen* ('the Japanese camps') and the misery experienced during the months of the *bersiap* period in late 1945. This led essayist Rudy Kousbroek, himself a survivor of Japanese internment, to lock swords multiple times with the likes of Brandt. Kousbroek used the term "East Indies camp syndrome," arguing repeatedly that while the camps in South East Asia were places of harshness, they were not sites of extermination (Kousbroek 2005, 411-414; 433-35; 503).

The true shock of 1945 for Dutch colonialists was that in 1942 they had been defeated, imprisoned and humiliated by an Asian people considered to be inferior in their eyes. Upon "liberation" in 1945, they found themselves to be the targets of an incomprehensible violence. The fact that this mass violence came from another Asian group, but one who they believed shared with them intimate ties stretching back centuries, made it all the more traumatic. In the following decades they coped with their puzzlement through a combination of nostalgic longing for the good old days and by nurturing a resentment towards Dutch politicians, historians and a public, all of whom, they felt, failed to fully acknowledge their suffering. Vuyk's stories embrace the broad perspective that all sorts of peoples suffered from the cruelties that overwhelmed thousands of victims during the final years of the Dutch East Indies. Yet they reflect little sympathy for any Europeans who identified themselves primarily as victims.

### Colonial relationships and intimacies

In *Het hout van Bara*, Vuyk provides a number of examples of the sorts of relationships that are never innocent, but rather have been scarred by the intimacy of colonialism. Vuyk's biographer, Bert Scova Righini (2004) praises this work for how it reveals "the deeply contaminating influence that the power of a few white

bureaucrats have on the psyche and inter-relationships among the native elite" (179).

As we have already seen, the chief administrator is an aggressive bully who uses his position to exploit and terrorize the people (Vuyk 1981, 271). The doctor is a Javanese who projects a sense of superiority due to his good Western education and his background in the upper tiers of Javanese society. The police inspector is a European who personifies the force of law, but his dark skin makes him feel inferior to the Javanese doctor. The police inspector is legally the superior, but the Javanese is socially the superior. The two hate each other, and that hatred has been born out of the colonial intimacy that the two share (Vuyk 1981, 271-272). The young regent, Abdoellah, as we have seen, received a Western education, although it was cut short by poverty (Vuyk 1981, 279). He realizes that he can never become a European, whom he considers to be "the master race" (Vuyk 1981, 293). The protagonist Eli's husband, Hajo, comes from an *Indo* family that has been part of the elite on the Moluccas for centuries (Vuyk 1981, 274). All these people are thrown together within an intimate colonial bubble on a little island. Jealousies, resentments and open hatred characterise their relationships as they navigate the complex web of colonial entanglements, with their subtle shades of racial and social superiorities. The entire novel can be read as a slow build-up of a reservoir of violence that is about to burst. The final sentence of the novel is: "A month later the war broke out" (Vuyk 1981, 361).

In "Huize Sonja" Vuyk attacks the entrenched and often articulated colonial idea that the Dutch and Indonesians have "many spiritual ties" (Broek 1943, 336). The actions of the servants in the story reveal that this is a colonial delusion. When Japanese troops land in Indonesia, and with most of the European men gone off to fight the invader (though there won't actually be much fighting), the behaviour of the local people suddenly changes and the protagonist of the story, the *totok* Etta, finds herself estranged "from her children, from herself and from the world that surrounded her" (Vuyk 1981, 487). The once obedient servants become strangers and their behaviour becomes unpredictable (Vuyk 1981, 486-488). The reader never quite learns if the servants are pleased with the coming of the Japanese. What is clear, however, is that for the servants, this is not their war. They have no vested interest in supporting the Japanese nor in defending the Dutch. They do not see the advantage in having the colonial system prolonged. And without the support of their servants, *totoks* like Etta are doomed. All it took was the arrival off the coast of a foreign military power, and the natives, with their resentments rising to the surface, withdrew their participation in a system in which they were exploited.

In his dissection of the complex entanglements and pathological relationships that emerge from colonial intimacies, Frantz Fanon described how his fellow

black West Indians form an attachment to whiteness. They regard themselves as superior to black Africans because of their closer proximity to white culture, being descendants of slaves. Clearly, this is a pathological perspective. Fanon called the futile and misjudged attempt of the colonised person of colour to pass for a white person "lactification" (Fanon 1986, 33-38). No matter how hard they try to collaborate with the imperial power, it is impossible to ever become white. Baldwin (1972) made this point: "Four hundred years in the West had certainly turned me into a Westerner - there was no way around that. But four hundred years in the West had also failed to bleach me - there was no way around *that* either" (42). The attempt of the black to be accepted as a white, like the attempt of the colonised to prove themselves worthy of the coloniser's trust, was not only futile, but misguided. In a warning to his nephew, Baldwin (1962) wrote: "There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you* [...]" (italics in original, 8).

But among people of mixed heritage, like the *Indo* in the Dutch East Indies, the colonial situation was even more complicated. As the ultimate in-between, they could find themselves distrusted by both sides, unable to fully gain recognition as an equal among colonised or coloniser. Theirs was the dilemma described by Homi Bhabha (1994) as "the anxiety of the irresolvable, borderline culture of hybridity" (225).

Vuyk herself knew what it was like to be an in-between, a person who always feels out of place. A Dutch-born dark-skinned *Indo*, she had experienced racial abuse while growing up in her native Rotterdam. Having emigrated to the Dutch East Indies, she claims to have encountered real racism in the colony. According to Vuyk, in colonial society, among those of mixed heritage, the presence of native blood "was something that one could not talk about, was something that one particularly did not want to be reminded of" (Vuyk 1981, 432).

Petra Boudewijn (2016) argues that Vuyk's work subverted the relationship between *totok* and *Indo*. Moreover, instead of trying to mimic the norms of Western civilization, the emancipated *Indo* "embraces their otherness and strives towards an own identity and position that is equal to that of the 'white' European in the East Indies" (279). The significance of racial discrimination in the Dutch East Indies is an issue of some discussion among colonial historians (Boudewijn 2016, 18). It is argued that those with dark skin could reach the top levels of government administration and skin colour alone was not decisive, but education, wealth and other factors also played a role (Bosma, Raben & Willems 2006, 155-175). However, in 1949 Wim Wertheim argued that issues like presentation or fluency in language were tools that were used to exclude Indonesians from top positions, with a tiny number of exceptions (Wertheim 1949, 82). Decades later he still

maintained that the Dutch East Indies, like all colonies, had been ruled by a strict "color-code" (Wertheim 1991, 367). In the social world as lived and experienced by individuals, skin colour as a social construct formed the basis for prejudice and discrimination, forming an integral part of public discourse. We find the clearest articulation of this in Vuyk's 1958 story "De jager met zijn schietgeweer" ('The hunter with his shooting gun').

This story offers an example of the pathology of "lactification" in action and the *Indo* obsession with skin colour. The *Indo* narrator and her *Indo* husband spend an evening with a dark-skinned *Indo* captain of a ship. The captain resents the rise of Asian nationalism and claims that the only way to deal with the Indonesian nationalists is to kill them all (Vuyk 1981, 400). Paul van der Veur (1968) argued that the only way for an *Indo* to gain the full prestige as a "European" was "to approximate the model as closely as possible" (201). However, we must bear in mind Bhabha's warning regarding mimicry; in the colonial situation, the Other always remains "subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 1994, 86).

The captain in Vuyk's story, having spent a lifetime mimicking his white colonials, now fully identifies with European, colonial civilization. He cannot imagine life under a government run by natives, finding it hard to believe that the narrator and her husband have chosen for Indonesian citizenship (Vuyk 1981, 402). However, he realizes that he will also never be recognized as fully white; to use Baldwin's words, he will never be bleached enough. Instead of accepting that the attempt to be white is misguided, the captain internalises colonial oppression. In the final scene, in a gesture of pathological self-hatred, he plucks at his own skin and screams, "This black skin, my own skin that I'd like to tear off. It is the Asian in myself that I hate" (Vuyk 1981, 404-405).

Vuyk's story suggests that it was the injustice of colonialism, based partially on skin colour, shaped relationships and intimacies that was pathological. Furthermore, the story illustrates that *Indos* still had a choice. On the one hand, the captain had chosen to mimic the white colonialists, but the blurred and ambivalent self-image that he fashioned involved the denial of a part of himself. The result is parody. However, the narrator and her husband made a different choice, deciding for the Republic of Indonesia. The story can be interpreted in a way that shows that the ambivalence of hybridity can be a strength, allowing one to fashion one's self in different ways.

A great deal of post-war colonial literature focusses on the plight of Europeans inside the Japanese prison camps. This not only excludes the Indonesian experience but also silences the experience of the Dutch outside the camps, that is, the *Indos* outside the camps, the so-called "*buitenkampers*." Vuyk's story "Ngawang" goes against the grain by telling a story of *Indos* outside the



camps. Furthermore, as Pamela Pattynama argues, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many *Indos* found themselves in competition for government jobs with increasing numbers of *totoks* arriving on steam ships from Europe. Consequently, they tried desperately to rid themselves of Asian habits in order to make themselves as European as possible. Pattynama (2014) is correct to point out that “Ngawang” captures the way the Indo community had become “obsessed by the external characteristics of race” (62-64).

The story focuses on two sisters whose mother is a native Javanese. One sister, Ernie, is married to an open-minded *totok*. However, even for him, a native mother-in-law “was a difficult challenge” (Vuyk 1981, 492). When the Japanese invade, the Dutch army collapses in humiliation: “They hadn't even fought and hadn't even seen a Japanese” (Vuyk 1981, 497). Given that her husband is in a prisoner of war camp, Ernie moves in with her mother but her sister, Deetje, remains living in the capital city. Deetje reports that the Europeans have been moved into internment camps and she tries in vain to be interned with them, because “the natives become more brutal by the day” (Vuyk 1981, 506). When she refuses her sister's request to return with her to their hometown because, “no one lives there, only natives,” Ernie replies, “your native mother lives there,” but Deetje is scandalised by the idea, saying, “I am not going to live with my native mother” (Vuyk 1981, 508-09). Near the end of the story a local man attempts, but fails, to break into the house of their native mother. The final sentence of the story is: “That was the New Year's morning of the year 1945” (Vuyk 1981, 519). Thus, the ending, at the dawn of 1945, foreshadows the ending of the war that is rapidly approaching. The protagonists are not aware, but the reader can anticipate the coming storm – the explosion of anti-colonial violence of 1945 will overwhelm everything associated with colonialism. Deetje's attitude of mimicking colonial Europeans and repudiating her Asian roots, including her Javanese mother, will draw down the violence of the nationalists.

## Conclusion

In Vuyk's work, the Japanese are responsible for the greatest acts of atrocity prior to 1945. But, from 1945 onward, all sides engage in a frenzy of cruelty. In the story “All our yesterdays” it is the Japanese *Kempeitai* who torture Dutch civilians (Vuyk 1981, 393-396). In other stories, Dutch soldiers abuse and kill Japanese prisoners (Vuyk 1981, 368) and they torture Indonesian nationalists (Vuyk 1981, 416-17). Tribal groups kill other tribespeople (Vuyk 1981, 412, 448-450), and tribesmen torture and kill Japanese and preserve their skulls (Vuyk 1981, 413-14). Indonesian nationalists murder Indonesian informants (Vuyk 1981, 419-20). We know that for Vuyk personally, the fact that all sides had blood on their hands made a difference.

She tells us that 1945 marked a transition in colonial violence. Before 1945, violence was perpetrated “by strangers and enemies, by Germans and Japanese,” but from 1945 onward “cruelties were ... committed ... by our own people, Dutch and Indonesian (Vuyk 1981, 444).

The meaning of 1945 is clear for the Dutch in Europe – it meant liberation from German occupation. In the Dutch East Indies, the meaning of 1945 is more complex. A collection of international historians recently subtitled their study of the months that followed the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945 as the *100 days in 1945 that changed Asia and the world* (Chandler, Cribb & Narangoa 2016). The year 1945 marks an ending, but it also marks the violent birth pangs of something new: the independence of Asian colonies. For the nationalist Indonesians, 1945 meant a continuation of their struggle for national liberation, but this struggle entered a new, accelerated phase with the declaration of independence. For the Dutch, 1945 remains a tragic year. *Totoks* found themselves freed from Japanese internment but became the target of nationalists until they were finally repatriated. For most *Indos*, 1945 meant an even deeper tragedy – the loss of homeland, forced displacement and exile among strangers by the North Sea.

For Beb Vuyk, 1945 was also a watershed year. Along with two other survivors of the Japanese camps, sociologist Wim Wertheim and politician Jacques de Kadt, she issued a manifesto opposing the policy of Lieutenant Governor-General Van Mook and called for the immediate independence of Indonesia, free from any Dutch domination (Scova Righini 2004, 161-162). This marked a reorientation in her politics in which she chose to identify with Indonesia. Furthermore, 1945 marked a major shift in her literary style. Prior to World War Two she had sought inspiration at the source of ancient literature, the oral story. She tells us that she had consciously developed an epic style (Vuyk 1981, 435-39). After 1945, the romanticism and luminosity of the epic style faded. Her writing became pared-down and spare. She would never return to the romantic, perhaps colonial, epics of life in the tropics that she penned before the war. Beekman (1996) points out that World War Two had ruthlessly and violently “severed a world from its former inhabitants,” what he called “a historical amputation,” and Vuyk changed her style “in order to register it” (470).

Already in *Het hout van Bara* a new incisiveness enters her writing when analysing the pathology of colonial entanglements, with its build-up of a reservoir of violence. Her later work offers multiple perspectives – we hear stories told from the point of view of anti-Indonesian *Indos*, pro-Indonesian *Indos*, *totoks*, Indonesian republican nationalists, as well as a variety of tribal peoples. Only the Japanese are never given the floor. Joop van den Berg noted that

no other author in the Indisch-Dutch literature has given such a complete image of the colonisation and decolonisation of the Dutch East Indies as Beb Vuyk. In no other work are the dominant factors – impotence, ignorance and indifference on the side of those with power, vengeance, distrust and vexation on the side of the oppressed – so convincingly present.<sup>5</sup>  
(Van den Berg 1990, 85)

In Beb Vuyk's stories our faces are closely pressed to a window through which we are forced to glimpse the uncomfortable reality that is the death-throws of a colony and the birth pangs of a new state as experienced by myriad groups of participants. It will be a great loss if, in a process of unremembering, she becomes a forgotten author.

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<sup>5</sup> 'geen ander auteur van de Indisch-Nederlandse letterkunde heeft zo'n compleet beeld gegeven van de kolonisatie en dekolonisatie van Nederlands-Indië als Beb Vuyk. In geen ander werk zijn die dominante factoren – aan de kant van de machthebbers: onmacht, onwetendheid en onwil, en aan de kant van de onderdrukten: wrok, wantrouwen en ergernis – zo overtuigend aanwezig.'

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### Réservoirs de violence : les récits postcoloniaux de Beb Vuyk

L'année 1945 marqua la fin de deux occupations pour le royaume des Pays-Bas. La première occupation se termina en mai après la capitulation allemande, et la deuxième en août après la capitulation soudaine du Japon. La conclusion de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale en Asie, cependant, plongea les Indes Orientales Néerlandaises dans une situation difficile et particulièrement instable. En effet, les Néerlandais nouvellement « libérés » se trouvaient confrontés à des troupes nationalistes et hostiles, loyales à la République d'Indonésie qui venait tout juste d'être créée. Puis, en 1949, après des années de conflits armés voire de guerre totale, les Pays-Bas cédèrent avec beaucoup de réticence leur colonie et reconnurent la souveraineté de la nouvelle république. Cet article examine brièvement les événements qui se produisirent en Indonésie vers la fin de 1945, et cherche à expliquer pourquoi les Néerlandais éprouvaient tant de difficulté à accepter la nouvelle situation. Les récits de Beb Vuyk offrent un regard unique sur la violence qui s'était accumulée avant 1945, sur la façon dont la violence change entre 1945 et 1949, et sur la violence telle qu'elle était vécue tant par les Indonésiens que par les Européens. Comme Vuyk occupait dans le système colonial d'avant la guerre la position de femme colonisatrice, j'estime que ces récits, publiés après la guerre, évoquent d'une manière plus nuancée l'histoire coloniale notamment en soulevant

des questions reliées à quelques-unes des pathologies engendrées par l'intimité du contact colonial, dont la répression et la violence. En intégrant dans ses récits, écrits entre la fin des années quarante et la fin des années soixante, des histoires locales, indigènes et spécifiques, elle évoque, en effet, une variété d'expériences qui se concentrent moins sur le vécu des victimes européennes que sur celui des Indonésiens.

### **Reservoirs van geweld: Beb Vuyks postkoloniale verhalen**

Het jaar 1945 betekende het einde van twee bezettingen in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden. De eerste bezetting eindigde met de Duitse overgave in mei. Aan de tweede bezetting kwam er een eind na de plotselinge capitulatie van Japan in augustus. De beëindiging van de Tweede Wereldoorlog in Azië bracht een onstabiele en complexe situatie teweeg betreffende Nederlands-Indië. De 'bevrijde' Nederlanders zagen zich omringd door vijandige, nationalistische troepen die loyaal waren aan de nieuw opgerichte Republiek Indonesië. Er volgden ettelijke jaren van geweld en een grootschalige oorlog voordat Nederland in 1949 schoorvoetend haar kolonie afstond en de soevereiniteit van de nieuwe republiek erkende. In dit artikel wordt kort ingegaan op de situatie die zich eind 1945 in Indonesië voordeed. Er wordt getracht uit te leggen waarom Nederlanders het moeilijk vonden om de nieuwe situatie te accepteren. De verhalen van Beb Vuyk bieden een uniek inzicht in het reservoir van geweld dat zich vóór 1945 had opgebouwd, alsmede de veranderde toon in het soort geweld dat plaatsvond tussen 1945 en 1949, en verder ook het door Aziaten en Europeanen ervaren geweld. Vuyks positie binnen het koloniale bestaan van vóór de oorlog was dat van een koloniaal persoon. Het is echter mijn stelling dat haar naoorlogse verhalen het dominante koloniale narratief enigermate aan de kaak stellen, met name door sommige van de pathologieën, die zijn voortgekomen uit het nauwe koloniale contact, waaronder onderdrukking en geweld, naar voren te brengen. Doordat zij zich richt op bepaalde plaatselijke en inheemse ervaringen, geven haar verhalen die zijn geschreven tussen eind jaren veertig en eind jaren zestig een verscheidenheid aan ondervindingen weer en worden de belevingen van Europese slachtoffers minder centraal gesteld dan die van de Indonesiërs.