



Sarah de Mul, *Colonial Memory: Contemporary Women's Travel Writing in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011, 180 pp., ISBN 978 9 0896 4293 6).

Academics working in postcolonial studies address the material and cultural effects of colonialism in past and present. This is not to say that critical work on colonialism is absent outside the writings of those who sail under this particular flag. In order to maintain its critical edge, moreover, postcolonial studies needs to revivify itself regularly by breaking new grounds. In recent years, postcolonial scholars have started to forge connections with the field of cultural memory studies. It is to this new alliance that Sarah de Mul's *Colonial Memory: Contemporary Women's Travel Writing in Britain and the Netherlands* is a valuable contribution, written in a clear and concise style.

De Mul has several aims in this study. Firstly, she takes issue with the assumption of postcolonial studies that the former colonial metropolises in Europe are characterized by widespread colonial amnesia. While colonial mindsets and practices continue to exist, postcolonial critics have argued, the colonial period itself has sunk into oblivion. De Mul shows that this is far from the case by focusing on three women's travel texts that actively and consciously seek to recall colonial times. *Colonial Memory* is especially persuasive here as it emphasizes the often uneasy, ghostly position of the colonial past in Dutch and British society. In line with this, De Mul offers readings of travel accounts of Aya Zikken, Marion Bloem, and Doris Lessing from the 1980s and 1990s, showing a sharp eye for the many ambiguities in the ways in which these authors represent the Dutch East Indies and Rhodesia.

Secondly, *Colonial Memory* aims at broadening the strong Anglophone focus of postcolonial studies by comparing British with Dutch literature. This study, thirdly and lastly, states it aims at developing a postcolonial methodology from a comparative perspective, thereby taking into account recent reflection (e.g., by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) on the theoretical problems of comparison, which can run the risk of essentializing both sides of an opposition. It is not exactly clear to this reader, however, if and how it achieves this goal.

The first and second chapters of *Colonial Memory* provide theoretical and historical backgrounds to the argument of the book. De Mul combines theories on memory, literature, gender and the postcolonial to make her case. The third chapter, on Zikken,

demonstrates how simultaneity of nostalgic and sublime experiences in *Terug naar de atlasvlinder* creates a tension between a return to the Indies and an endless deferral thereof. Chapter four focuses on memory as a political strategy and investigates how Bloem, a second-generation mixed race author, constructs a self in *Mensen muggen olifanten* in relation to both Dutch and Indonesian postcolonial society. In chapter five, Lessing's *African Laughter* is read for its mimetic and diegetic impulses that make African voices audible, yet also overwrite them. De Mul's readings are nuanced, clear and rewarding.

This book rightfully emphasizes the importance of nostalgia and self-satisfaction in the colonial memories of both countries. Statements sometimes made that British and Dutch colonial memory can be characterized as a 'masculine heroic epic' and that women's writings offer an 'alternative archive' are too generalizing and imply the reification of femininity, in this case as the absolute other of masculinity. On the other hand, De Mul clearly shows in her analyses that the women's texts she discusses are both different from each other and from themselves. Still, more attention for the myriad of female voices and representations in colonial memory would have shown that it is far from only a militaristic white man's story.

This study could have provided a more historically specific account, yet missing from its bibliography are almost two hands full of books on Dutch colonial memory by historians from the last fifteen years. Cultural memory studies, particularly Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* and Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*, would have enriched this study with more conceptual rigor with respect to nostalgia and a crucial account on the relation between colonial memory and Holocaust memory. The key conclusion that memory is not an 'individual, isolated affair' had already been formulated in the works of the field's founder Maurice Halbwachs.

Within both European societies and universities much critical work still needs to be done to develop a thorough understanding of colonialism's aftermath. *Colonial Memory* is an important contribution to the exploration currently made into the ways in which Europeans look back on their nations' former empires, while crucially emphasizing that the legacies of these empires are still vital forces in European culture.

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