

File ID	uvapub:86977
Filename	Final published version
Version	final

SOURCE (OR PART OF THE FOLLOWING SOURCE):

Type	conference contribution
Title	Circular journeys: on going native in postcolonial studies
Author(s)	M. van Kempen
Faculty	FGw: Instituut voor Cultuur en Geschiedenis (ICG)
Year	2009

FULL BIBLIOGRAPHIC DETAILS:

<http://hdl.handle.net/11245/1.316688>

Copyright

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content licence (like Creative Commons).

Michiel van Kempen

Circular Journeys

On Going Native in Postcolonial Studies

1. This story begins very simply. I am sitting at the breakfast table and look at my ten-year-old son. He is not eating his sandwich, he keeps his head still and looks out into the garden, but his eyes see nothing. Now, I could ask him what he is thinking about and he might give me a limited rendering of his thoughts in words. But what exactly is happening in his head, I will never know. He dreams, eyes wide open and no dream can ever be retold exactly enough. I could have him undergo a brain scan, but the print of his brain structure still wouldn't furnish me with sufficient information to understand him. Moreover he doesn't carry my genes. He is completely sovereign with only me there to make him eat on time.¹

2. In 1883, in the "illustrated people's magazine" *Eigen Haard*, infantry captain G.P.H. Zimmermann wrote the following on the Aruhuacs and Caribs, the original peoples of Suriname and the Guyanas:

Abhorrent to any effort, the Indian confines himself when working exclusively to hunting, planting and the making of arrows, bows, baskets and water jugs. Although hospitable by nature, he refrains from any social intercourse, so we cannot think of any development of his intellectual skills and little is to be expected as far as the future of the Indians is concerned, regardless of the capacities they might seem to have.²

Only a couple of weeks before Zimmermann wrote these words, twenty-eight persons "belonging to the two tribes of Amerindians, the Bush negroes and the Creoles" ("behoorende tot de beide stammen der Indianen, de Boschnegers en Creolen") gath-

1) What follows is a reworking of two essays published earlier in Dutch: Van Kempen 2004 and 2007a. The same issue of the cultural gap I earlier discussed in Van Kempen 1990 and in my inaugural lecture Van Kempen 2007b. I thank Joyce Goggin and Elisabeth Leijnse for their critical reading of my text.

2) Dutch original: "Afkeerig van alle inspanning, bepaalt de Indiaan zich bij den arbeid uitsluitend tot het jagen, het beplanten van den kostgrond en het maken van pijlen, bogen, mandjes en

ered in the harbor of Paramaribo. At that time, however, Suriname was no longer a place from which profits could be extracted by exporting products such as coffee, which had left the harbor by the shipload. There was no ship sailing for Europe and the group left on April 4, 1883 on their way to Martinique, from where the French mail would then be shipped out to Saint-Lazaire. Europeans used this route to make their trip home. This was a time when overseas people were surprised by the unusual company of Surinamers, and among the Europeans

many a lady ... was terrified and looked fearfully at how the Indians and common people took their places on the deck. Weren't they savages? Who could guarantee her that during the journey these people would not in a hungry mood scalp the entire crew and put them on the spit?³

Op April 24 the group arrived in Brittany. The journey continued by train via Paris to Amsterdam, where they arrived on April 26 and the Surinamers were put on display at the International Colonial and Export Exhibition.⁴

The exhibition was meant to be as illustrative as possible by exposing groups of living people. The "Surinaamsche Inboorlingen" (Surinamese natives) were given a place in a big round tent in the southwestern corner of the museum grounds. The public could enter only with a special ticket. Although the price of a quarter (of a guilder) was substantial, large crowds chose to come and see, for the first time in their life, a group of people from Suriname. The *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* wrote on May 13, 1883:

Not only for reasons of their great rareness, but also from a genuine scientific and ethnographic point of view, the group of Surinamese indigenous people ... deserves great interest by scholars and layman alike. ... the skulls of several of these natives have already been examined in great detail by experts.⁵

3. In 1995 my wife Elisabeth and I decided to adopt a child in Suriname. Once all the paperwork was done, we were put on a waiting list of the Surinamese Office of Judicial Family Affairs. By the end of 1997 we had made our way to the top of the list: the next child would be left in our care, so I moved back to Suriname, where

waterkannen. Hoewel gastvrij van aard, houdt hij zich buiten alle maatschappelijk verkeer, zoodat aan geen ontwikkeling zijner verstandelijke vermogens is te denken en er weinig voor de toekomst der Indianen kan worden verwacht, hoeveel aanleg zij ook mogen bezitten."

- 3) Dutch original: "menige dame [was] nochtans ... in angstige stemming en had met vreesachtigen blik de Indianen evenals de gewone menschen op het dek zien plaats nemen. Het waren toch wilden. Wie stond haar borg, dat die lieden, op de reis, in een hongerige bui niet de gehele bemanning zouden scalpeeren en aan het spit braden?"
- 4) A report of the Surinamers on the World Exhibition is to be found on <http://esf.niwi.knaw.nl/esf/1996/project/surinam.htm>. Pictures by Prince Bonaparte are to be seen on <http://www.buku.nl/habitants.html> and on <http://www.buku.nl/indiens.html>.
- 5) Dutch original: "Niet alleen uit het oogpunt der groote zeldzaamheid, maar ook en vooral uit algemeen wetenschappelijk en ethnographisch oogpunt, verdient het gezelschap Surinaamsche inboorlingen ... groote belangstelling van geleerde en leek. De groep trekt dan ook reeds nu de aandacht van ethnographen en andere geleerden en de schedels van verscheidene inboorlingen zijn reeds door deskundigen met veel belangstelling onderzocht."

I had worked in the nineteen eighties for five years as a teacher. While waiting for the newborn, whom my wife and I had given the codename Kwi-Kwi, I busied myself by working on a history of Surinamese literature.

In October 1997, at the end of a seemingly endless dry season, the head of the Office of Family Affairs called to tell us that a pregnant Amerindian woman had put up her child for adoption and that the parents had made it clear they wanted to meet the adoptive parents beforehand. "Do you have any objections?" I was asked.

4. In one of the most beautiful books ever published on Suriname, *Les habitants de Surinam* (1884), Prince Roland Bonaparte portrayed the group of Surinamese that started their journey on April 4, 1883 to be displayed at the exhibition in Amsterdam. The Amerindian delegation consisted of thirteen Caribs and two Aruahuacs. The organizer of the group, W. Mackintosh, himself a native Surinamer educated in Holland, had had a good deal of trouble in convincing the participants of the meaningfulness of the project. He had persuaded them "to leave their relatives for a considerable time, to leave their *kondre* [country], and to make that journey over the big sea to a remote, unknown *bakra-kondre* [land of the whites], where who knows what fate awaited them."⁶ The convincing argument turned out to be that they would see the king of the Netherlands with their own eyes. Mackintosh's other trump card was the Indian Kajaroe, who already had been outside Suriname in the service of the French government. His wife Alahakama and their six-year-old daughter Awarahenne accompanied them. One Aruhuac, Colle, would not live through the journey and passed away in Amsterdam on July 21, 1883.

The person who really caused a stir, however, was Elisabeth Moendi. She was twenty-three years old and born in Calcutta in what, at the time, was still British India. Given that Elisabeth Moendi had lived in Suriname for ten years, she had to have come to Suriname as a thirteen-year-old girl in 1873. The British-Indian fact files of the *Historical Database Suriname* list only one name that comes close to Elisabeth Moendi, that being the family name Moondy. Only one fact is known about this person: that she arrived in Suriname on the ship *Bengal*. Since the beginning of indentured labor, the *Bengal* was the second ship to drop British-Indian contract workers in Suriname. With five hundred people on board it arrived on July 8, 1873 on the roadstead of Paramaribo, a good month after the first ship, the *Lalla Rookh* (the tulip-cheeked). By the time Moondy joined the group of the World Exhibition her name had been changed to the more Dutch-sounding Moendi. Her first name, Elisabeth, does not occur in the historical database, so it is possible that she arrived with a much more Indian-sounding first name such as Ela, Ilika, or Eshita. In Bonaparte's book, she is depicted in a sleeveless and strapless white dress. She looks the viewer straight in the face, frankly and perhaps somewhat suspiciously but without fear. Only her hand, fingering a thin necklace, might suggest that she is not entirely at ease. Her black

- 6) Dutch original: "om voor geruimen tijd afscheid te nemen van hunne betrekkingen, hun *kondre* [land] te verlaten, en de reis te maken over die groote zee naar dat verre onbekende *bakra-kondre* [land der blanken], waar wie weet welk lot hen wachtte."



Elisabeth Moendi
(Collection du Prince Roland Bonaparte / Phototypie Roche)

straight hair is braided in two pigtails. Judging by her looks, Elisabeth Moendi could as easily be an Amerindian as a British Indian.

The most striking fact about this woman was that she was married to an Amerindian, with whom she led "the usual Amerindian nomadic life" ("het gewone indiaansche nomadenleven"), so this must have been a remarkable step for somebody of the first generation of immigrants from India. The mixing of Hindustanis and people of different ethnicity only became an accepted phenomenon long after World War II — although still not always in all families. Establishing mixed relations between Hindustanis and Amerindians is — notwithstanding their similar appearance — up to this very day unusual. Elisabeth Moendi might have been the very first to do so.



Wilfred Pranawaré

5. On Monday, October 13, 1997, I met an Amerindian couple in front of the Office of Judicial Family Affairs in Paramaribo. The mother looked Amerindian, with high cheekbones, while the father looked less genuinely Amerindian and had a ponytail. They did not have the strong mestizo features of the Caribs of their region or their curly hair. They already had five children, and they were accompanied by two of them, the oldest girl aged twelve and the youngest boy two years old. The mother had an impressive belly and the birth was announced for December. I spoke Surinamese with them, Sranantongo. But once in the office we switched to Dutch, a linguistic particularity suggested by the fashionable blouse of the department head, the oak writing desk, and the enormous office calendar. Strangely enough, this immediately contributed to a silent alliance between the Carib couple and me. The father, Wilfred Pranawaré, had a medical insurance card and the department head immediately asked if he worked for the government, and yes, he did indeed work for the Department of Forestry. The family was not really well off, but they weren't starving either. So the question remained as to why they would give their child up for adoption. Because they wanted to see at least one of their children get a good position in society, explained the father. In a loud voice, as if they were hard of hearing, the department head pointed out the consequences of their step: that this would not be a provisional arrangement, that my wife and I would become the child's guardians and, therefore, the new father and mother. They were also instructed that the judge who would make the formal assignment, would ask them the same question and then they should not show any sign of hesitation, she warned. But the decision had already been made.

6. In her Ph.D. dissertation *De koloniale vertoning* (The colonial show) Marieke Bloembergen writes the following on the Amsterdam World Exhibition of 1883:

Although the desire for completeness called for showing all the aspects and peculiarities of this Native world, ultimately the variety of cultures within this world as such did not matter. What mattered was the primitiveness or otherness of it all, compared to the level Dutch civilization had already reached. In this way the exhibition could provoke a reflection on the own worldview, or the own view of the Netherlands.⁷

When writing *A History of Surinamese Literature* I opted for a radically different point of departure, but the consequences of this starting point had, remarkably, little effect.⁸ I was thinking in terms of the inner dynamics of Surinamese literature, placed within a Caribbean context. What is significant for the region was the starting point, not the comparison with the Western world. I tried to depict Caribbean literary events as little as possible as something that is deviant from a norm from outside. Doing this is less obvious than it may seem, for the simple reason that a lot of the typical qualities of the Caribbean have always been portrayed from an external point of view. For this reversal, literary theorist Jack Corzani invented the term *recentrage*. As he explains,

Recentralizing, means before all deriving the analytical principles from antillean-ity, it is describing the creative process from within, it is not only about observing (even when it is still that), it is reliving and bringing back to life.⁹

According to Corzani, one cannot approach culture with Western glasses and Western technical equipment, but one must try to get to know the native patterns of Caribbean culture and try to reason logically from these. Not to look down from Europe and America at the Caribbean bean, but from the Caribbean outward to what is happening around it. However appropriate this seemed to me as a starting point, it could not hide the fact that no human being is ever able to break away from his own ideology, taste, and selection criteria. During the process of writing a history of Surinamese literature, I was inescapably confronted with my own worldview, along with the Western way of thinking and Western concepts of culture.

The question that intrigues me is: why do people write so easily on texts from their own culture, while hesitation creeps in when writing on other cultures? Isn't it

7) Hoewel de volledigheidstrang met zich meebracht dat alle facetten en eigenaardigheden van deze Inheemse wereld aan bod moesten komen, deed de onderlinge variëteit van culturen binnenden die wereld er niet echt toe. Het ging om het primitieve of andere ervan, ten opzichte van het niveau dat de Nederlandse beschaving inmiddels bereikt had. Aldus kon deze tentoonstelling ook een reflectie teweegbrengen op het eigen wereldbeeld of het zelfbeeld van Nederland (Bloembergen 2002: 71).

8) On the theoretical and ideological implications of writing a history of literature of Suriname I reflected in Van Kempen and also extensively in part I, *Theoretische bespiegelingen bij literatuurgeschiedschrijving* of my Ph.D. dissertation Van Kempen 2002.

9) "Recentrer, c'est donc avant tout puiser dans l'antillanité les principes de l'analyse, c'est reconstruire le processus de la création de l'intérieur, ce n'est plus seulement observer (même si ce l'est encore), c'est revivre et faire revivre" (Corzani 1985: 62).

just as arrogant to think you might be able to give a solid, reliable interpretation of a Western text? So isn't it a bit gratuitous to be reluctant when it comes to a "foreign" literature? Or, in other words, is the distance to *any* text not principally the same? It is not because I live in Europe that I might read the texts of Péter Esterházy, Alexander Solzjenitsyn, and Rainer Maria Rilke with appropriate insights, while those of Pablo Neruda, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, and Zhao Yi remain alien to me, is it?

There is no such thing as an uninhibited, neutral approach to an alien culture, simply enough because human beings are not transparent, colorless beings. Skin color, education, birth, nationality, standard of living, and nature: everything counts and everything counts very conspicuously. In the case of the postcolonial relation this problem is even more complicated: two people who meet, one from a former colony and the other from the former colonizing country, do not only have different personalities, but are of course, whether they like it or not, bearers of their mutual history. This history is a history of unequal power relations. Idealistically none of these — from skin color to history — should matter, but the reality is that they *do* matter.

7. Bigi Poika is a Carib village on the savannah, a three-hour trip from the capital in a four-wheel-drive.¹⁰ The Caribs call their village Akarani, but in a creolized world they have become accustomed to the Afro-Surinamese name Bigi Poika. Wilfred Pranawaré is from Bigi Poika. Everybody calls him Baba, because he looks like a Hindustani. He turns out to be a real *kulturu* man: he is an expert on Kalintha, the Carib language, and he serves as an informer for the Summer Institute of Linguistics. He also has a broad knowledge of Amerindian culture. Baba tells a funny story about two boxes offered by God to mankind. The Amerindians took the box with food and smoking materials, the *bakra* — the whites — took the box with books. To my utter amazement Baba turns out to have read a book of mine, *Sirito*, a collection of oral stories from Suriname.

Baba was the first to start a *kawina* group in Bigi Poika. *Kawina* or *kawina* is in fact an Afro-Surinamese way of making music that came into being when small groups of bored young boys started to rattle on pots and planks, accompanied by singing in fortissimo. The real art consists in getting as many family members as you can to participate — brother joins in, nephew joins in, cousin joins in, uncle joins in — so that music groups always consist of sixteen to twenty members. Their music sometimes sounds very nice and it has become very popular to the degree that even in Amerindian villages *kawina* bands were formed. *Ingi kawina*, Amerindian *kawina*: Afro-Surinamese rhythms and percussion, but with Carib song texts.

8. We know that it is mainly Dutch scholars who study Dutch-Indonesian, Surinamese, Antillean, and Aruban literature. (Without a doubt as a consequence of the long boycott, this is not the case in South African literature, where South African

¹⁰ In the Ph.D. dissertation of Elizabeth Mohkamsing-den Boer 2005 the village of Bigi Poika is predominant; I am grateful for supplementary information provided by Mrs. Mohkamsing-den Boer.

scholars are on top.) Most scholars studying texts from the former Dutch colonies are not happy with this tendency. What they often miss is a "native" touchstone. Therefore, they adopt the position that every published text has become property of the reading public and that, as a result, everybody may say whatever he or she likes on any given text. They feel like pioneers, adventurers, promoters of dialogue, missionaries, defenders of a better level and higher conscience, do-gooders, publicity experts. They are doubters, or they "just do their job" without caring about the complexity of their postcolonial position, but they rarely feel comfortable in their professional field. For no matter what they think, they are never "at home." In the Dutch circuit they thrash about in the margins and few can estimate the meaning of their work, while within Dutch-Indonesian, Surinamese, Antillean, and Aruban circles their work is neglected or overestimated: underestimated because it is written by a Dutchman; overestimated for precisely the same reason.

As I already mentioned, this feeling of discomfort can first and foremost be traced back to the uneasiness felt by descendants of colonial rulers, who try to immerse themselves in the culture of the formerly oppressed. Now, the analysis of a text from the former colonies is in itself no different from unraveling a text from the culture familiar to the scholar and, in the end, one is always placed before the ultimate incomprehensibility. But here is the major difference: the incomprehensibility of a work of art by the "Other" is generally attributed to the cultural gap, not to the nature of the work of art in itself, the logic being that if one does not belong to the group it is impossible to really understand the literature that it produces. Let me provide some clear illustrations.

On January 30, 1970 the pageant play *Opus I* by Bonairean Pacheco Domacassé premiered in Centro Pro Arte on Curaçao. The next day the show was reviewed in the daily *Amigoe di Curaçao* by Pim Heuvel, a Dutch critic who had been living on Curaçao for a number of years. He judged the piece to be very untidy and incoherent and wrote that the experiment was a failure. Domacassé reacted as if jolted into action: "Perhaps, such a brutal, ill-mannered attack would hit you as an European differently from me as an Antillean. Well, that's why we are different altogether" (Broek 1994: 7).¹¹

Fifteen years later, Surinamese Edgar Cairo came up against theater critic Maarten van Nispen. He had reviewed Cairo's play *Het Koninkrijk IJmond* (The kingdom of IJmond) not entirely according to the intentions of the author, and Cairo vented his opinion in *Het Parool* of September 16, 1985:

Nobility, intelligence and flourishing competence permit me to say only one thing, and that is that as a human being I may not hate you, filthy, racist whites. But apart from that I cannot have but CONTEMPT for your kind of reviewers, white Bwana's in the Dutch bushbush! The only thing you are good enough for is to be spit at with words and after that they may fill up the dirty, black-stinking canals with you! Parasites of human liberation, that's what you are!¹²

11) "Misschien zou zo'n brutale, ongemanierde aanval op u als Europeaan anders aankomen dan bij mij als Antilliaan. Tja, daar zijn we nu eenmaal [een] ander soort mensen voor."

The last sentence of course implies the extra accusation that one who contradicts or criticizes the work of blacks, automatically maintains the colonial yoke the black author so eagerly wants to shake off.

These kinds of problems also occurred in South Africa between blacks and whites. The novel *Die swerffare van Poppie Nongena* (1978) (English translation: *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, 1980) by Elsa Joubert aroused fierce discussion: could a white author evoke the experiences of a black woman in the black quarters near Cape Town after Sharpeville and during the children's rebellion of 1976? For her novel Joubert used the New Journalism technique of the life report, leading to a special mix of fact and fiction. And this, of course, raised questions as to whether psychologically, artistically, and especially ethically, this could be done (Lenta 1998; Van Niekerk 1999: 407-408).

In the relationship between Dutch readers and Dutch East-Indian writers the story isn't any different. The relations between all varieties of *Indische Nederlanders* (East-Indian Dutchmen) are extremely complex, as one of their essayists, Tjalie Robinson, pointed out: in the "fatal triangle" ("fatale driehoek") of *totoks* (whites), Indonesians, and *Indo's* (people of mixed descent) there is always "a lot of misunderstanding, bitterness, hostility and manslaughter" ("veel miskenning, bitterheid, vijandschap en doodslag") (Willems 2001: 240). On the contrast between East and West, understanding and misunderstanding, Tjalie Robinson emptied half of his inkpot. Anyone who wants to know how things went between *Indo's* and *totoks*, has to be mindful of the debates around *Het Oostindisch kampsyndroom* (The East-Indian camp syndrome, 1982) of Rudy Kousbroek, who was thrown out of the Indo house by Henk Leffelaar: "Really knowing [the Indo reality] is completely out of the question" ("Van werkelijk kennen [van de Indische werkelijkheid] kan geen sprake zijn") (Snoek 1999: 76). The occasionally difficult relations between mestizos and the Dutch again played a role in debates at the beginning of the nineteen nineties on Indo mestizo literature (Serie 1992).

In the history of literary criticism of the Dutch East Indies, Suriname, the Dutch Antilles, and South Africa we find lots of conflicts, very frequently when reviewers from the so-called motherland were at arms with writers from the former colonies. What is crucial to me is not the cause or the subjects of these conflicts as such, but the stalemate and the impasse to which they lead: the lack of fundamental understanding on both sides. What is essential is the gap behind these conflicts, expressed by Pacheco Domacassé. As he wrote, this is "why we are different altogether," in "you" against "I" by Edgar Cairo, in the "fatal triangle" of Tjalie Robinson, and "really knowing [this reality] is completely out of the question" with Rudy Kousbroek. Four expressions of discomfort.

12) Adellijkheid, intelligentie en bloeiend meesterschap gebieden mij één ding te zeggen: n.l. dat ik jullie, vuile racistische blanken, als mens niet haten mag. Maar voor de rest heb ik niets anders dan MINACHTING voor jullie soort van recensenten, witte Bwana's in de Hollandse bushbush! Het enige waar jullie in mijn ogen goed voor zijn is om met woorden te worden bespuugd en daarna mogen ze van mij vuile, zwartstinkende grachten met jullie dempen! Parastieten van de menselijke bevrijding die jullie zijn!

Now, what is the nature of this gap? Can the gap be bridged? And does this have consequences for literary scholarly activities?

We are lucky: the boat has to cross the river to pick up some men in a van who want to return to the city after a weekend of hunting. People from Bigi Poika who want to cross the river can take the ferry, too. Wilma, heavily pregnant, is waiting on the other side with two children. The crossing goes fast. Tacitly interrogated by eyes that seem to ask what this *bakra* is doing with an Amerindian family in his jeep? This is how we start the return trip.

- 70 -

11. On her journey to Amsterdam for the World Exhibition, Elisabeth Moendi, the British Indian who married an Amerindian, was accompanied by her little daughter Henriette, who was just eighteen months old. The child must, therefore, have been born in 1881. It is important to note that the Surinamese language has words for all kinds of cross-breeds: *dogla* for somebody of Hindustani and Creole blood, *karboeger* for a mix of Amerindian and Creole, *mesties* for a child born out of a white and a mulatto. But for the blend of Amerindian and Hindustani there is no word in Sranan. Roland Bonaparte calls the little girl *Métisse Hindoue-Indienne*, while the mother is labeled as: "*Race: Hindous.*" He gives an anthropologically adequate description of mother and daughter, and thus provides a perfect example of the soul of an age when naturalist scientists examined the buttocks and labia of Khoisan women (Gilman 1984; Buikema 2004), and Cesare Lombroso applied craniometry to criminals following the methods of Darwin to see if they were inherently and genetically criminal. Along with race, tribe, age, and sex, Bonaparte also provides readings following his numeric indicator of skin color, hair, eyes, profile, nose width, and lip typology (*moyennes et renversées en dehors* for the mother, *moyennes et droites* for the little girl), height (mother: 1.46 meters; daughter: 81 centimeters), the diameter

of the head, and the *indice horizontal de la tête* (horizontal indicator for heads). These last two facts comprise the craniometric result.

12. The mechanism of exclusion — “we are different altogether” — is of course first and foremost a confirmation of one’s own uniqueness, of a deeply hidden essence never to be discovered by the Other. Whether this is an empirical truth or not, is of little consequence. National identity, as we have learned from Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), is both imaginary and fleeting. Community is a myth that enjoys all of the power inherent to myth.

Does this necessarily lead to the conclusion that we should avoid meddling in the art of the Other, or inflicting interpretative authority on texts we perhaps can never analyze adequately? Several thinkers have given short shrift to this notion. As early as 1986 Edward Said spoke of “possessive exclusivism,” therewith rejecting the idea that one must be part of a group in order to express an opinion about it and its culture (Said 1986: 229), and this view was supported by Gayatri Spivak (1987: 253–254). Said explored his ideas in *Culture and Imperialism*: if it were impossible to “represent” the Other, he argues, we would necessarily have to conclude that cultures are hermetically sealed. In postcolonial debates this raises the question of how, from a position of the colonized, one could then criticize a dominant colonial culture. If this were the case, colonial culture would be unassailable, sacrosanct. According to Said (1993: 31–32), however, cultures are anything but closed worlds. Cultural relativism — the principle that an individual human’s beliefs and activities should be understood in terms of his or her own culture — is, for Said, simply beside the point.

However accurate these arguments may be, they do not weaken the conviction cherished by many from the former colonies that their culture ultimately remains unknowable for people from the outside. If this myth of the unbridgeable gap exists, literary scholars can spend their time no more fruitfully than by engaging the heart of the alien work of art, in hopes of gaining a profound understanding of the Other in some sense. In other words, I am arguing for hope, against myth. Logically, myth isn’t of any greater value than hope, because both are illusory — the myth of the gap because it is not the supposed cultural gap that determines that which is unknowable in the work of art, and hope because art, by its very nature, never reveals its deepest secrets. Nevertheless, both hope and myth have their own important role here: they are both bearers of self-confidence, however indefinable and mythical the foundation of this self-confidence might be. And self-confidence on both sides seems to me the strongest bridge over this great divide in postcolonial literary studies.

13. On November 13, 1997 a note is waiting for me in my house at the outskirts of Paramaribo: “born: 1 boy + 1 girl” (“geboren: 1 jongen + 1 meisje”). At first I don’t believe it, thinking it’s a joke. The world has become very strange to me. Twins! Two days later I see them for the first time. They lie in small hospital beds, next to them a card with some information, as if they were anthropological museum

pieces. The card states their hour of birth, birth order, weight, length, and skull size — numbers that echo the heydays of ethnography.

14. On Tuesday, April 4, 2006, it had been one hundred twenty-three years since a group of natives set sail for Europe to be displayed and examined as one of the many wonders of the world. For the first time Ruben and Monica are back in their country of birth. We are driving to Bigi Poika, the Carib village on the savannah, where an exceptionally warm reception awaits us, musicians banging on enormous Amerindian drums. Wilfred and his wife Wilma are very touched, although they don’t make a show of it. Wilma follows the children with her eyes and sometimes she smiles. Innumerable uncles and aunts come to embrace us spontaneously. To my wife and me it feels as if we have been adopted by this great Carib family, although of course we belong to a category of anthropologically interesting objects: with their hands, giggling children measure our size. But unlike the group of Surinamese natives on display in Amsterdam a hundred years before, we are not untouchable: a lady, about eighty years old and four and a half feet tall, comes to dance with me and gives me such a pinch that I cross the dance floor howling.

Sadly enough Ruben and Monica’s grandmother had passed away only two weeks before our arrival. The next morning we visit her white grave, just outside the village. Gathered around the shell-sand grave, grandfather breaks into a Carib lamentation in a high-pitched voice. Grandma is gone and he doesn’t understand why. But two of her grandchildren have returned to say goodbye to her.

On our return Wilfred points to another, older grave with a simple wooden cross. This is where grandfather’s mother rests, he says, Carolina Joeroemé. She was one hundred five years old when she passed away, the oldest woman the village has ever known. The name of her husband was Evert Pranawaré. He spoke Carib and Hindi, which his own mother taught him.

Elisabeth Moendi, born in Calcutta in 1860, married an Amerindian of Suriname and gave birth to a girl in 1881: Henriette, whom she took with her on her trip to Europe eighteen months later, the second big journey of her life. After Henriette, two more children were born, first a girl and later a boy, Evert, whose wife would become the oldest woman of Bigi Poika. Ruben and Monica are the great-grandchildren of Evert and his wife, and they are the great-great-grandchildren of Elisabeth Moendi, the woman exhibited in Amsterdam in 1883. So when I sit with my Amerindian son at the breakfast table, I am aware of the bridge that links him with that Indian woman of one hundred twenty-three years ago, and I realize that I am watching him without fully knowing him — but isn’t this true for any son? If only he eats on time.

References

- Anderson, Benedict
1983 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Bloembergen, Marieke
2004 *De koloniale vertoning. Nederland en Indië op de wereldtentoonstellingen (1880-1931)*. Amsterdam: Wereldbibliotheek [2002].
- Bloembergen, Marieke (ed.)
2004 *Koloniale inspiratie. Frankrijk, Nederland, Indië en de wereldtentoonstellingen 1883-1931*. Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij.
- Broek, Aart G.
1994 *Onenigheid is een genoegen. Omtrent identiteit beneden de wind*. Curaçao: Amigoe.
- Buikema, Rosemarie
2004 "De verbeelding van Saartje Naartman. Van negentiende-eeuwse Europese freak-show tot eenentwintigste-eeuwse Zuid-Afrikaanse meidenrap," in Michiel van Kempen, Piet Verkruijsse, and Adrienne Zuiderweg (eds.), *Wandelaar onder de palmen. Verkenningen in de koloniale en postkoloniale literatuur en cultuur*, 299-313. Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij.
- Corzani, Jack
1985 "Problèmes méthodologiques d'une 'histoire littéraire' des Caraïbes," *Komparatistische Hefte*, nr. 11, *Neue Wege der Literaturgeschichtsschreibung*, 49-67.
- Gilman, Sander
1984 "Black Bodies; White Bodies; Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine and Literature," in Henri Louis Gates, Jr. (ed.), *Race, Writing and Difference*, 204-238. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kempen, Michiel van
1990 "Op zoek te gaan naar een nieuwe bron; schrijven en literatuurkritiek als ontmoeting der culturen," *De Gids* 153.10/11: 921-932.
- 1994 "Haken en ogen aan een literatuurgeschiedenis van Suriname," in Luc Herman (ed.), *The Empire Writes back (again). Vergelijkende literatuurwetenschap en post-koloniale literatuur studie*, 49-74. Antwerp: Vlaamse Vereniging voor Algemene en Vergelijkende Literatuurwetenschap (ALW-Cahier no. 15).
- 2003a *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*. Paramaribo: Okopipi. 5 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Amsterdam.)
- 2003b *Een geschiedenis van de Surinaamse literatuur*. 2 vols. Breda: De Geus.
- 2004 "Rigoletto in de tropen. Over het onbehagen in de koloniale en postkoloniale cultuurstudies," in Michiel van Kempen, Piet Verkruijsse, and Adrienne Zuiderweg (eds.), *Wandelaar onder de palmen. Verkenningen in de koloniale en post-koloniale literatuur en cultuur*, 29-41. Leiden: KITLV Uitgeverij.
- 2007a "Ziende, maar op de tast. Een verhaal dat 123 jaar wil overbruggen," in Inez van der Spek (ed.), *Vreemde aanrakingen. De kracht van het vreemde in religie, kunst en literatuur*, 44-72. Nijmegen: Valkhof Pers / Dominicaans Studiecetrum.
- 2007b *Welcome to the Caribbean, darling! De toeristenblik in teksten uit de (voormalige) Nederlandse West*. Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA (inaugural lecture).
- Lenta, Margaret
1998 "Goodbye Lena, goodbye Poppie: post-apartheid black women's writing," *Ariel* 29.4:101-118.
- Mohkamsing-den Boer, Elizabeth
2005 "Dreams and Transitions: The Royal Road to Surinamese and Australian Indigenous Society." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nijmegen, 2005.
- Niekerk, Annemarie van
1999 "Die Afrikaanse vroueskrywer — van egotekste tot postmodernisme," in H.P. van Coller (ed.), *Perspektief en profiel. 'n Afrikaanse literatuurgeskiedenis*. Vol. 2, 305-443. Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik.
- Said, Edward
1985 "Orientalism Reconsidered," in Francis Barker (ed.), *Literature, Politics, and Theory. Papers from the Essex Conference, 1976-84*, 210-299. London / New York: Methuen.
- 1993 *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf [a Borzoi book].
- Serese, Edy
1991 "Indische letteren als mestiezenliteratuur," in *Zes jaar Indische letteren (1986-1991). Verleden en toekomst*. Special issue of *Indische Letteren* 7.4 (December): 145-152.
- Snoek, Kees
1999 "Schaamte, spijt en verlangen. Het Indië van Rudy Kousbroek," *Ons Erfdeel* 42.1 (January-February): 75-91.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty
1987 *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York / London: Methuen.
- Willems, Wim
2000 *De uittocht uit Indië 1945-1995*. Amsterdam: Bert Bakker.

Studies in Dutch Language and Culture

Edited by
Margriet Bruijn Lacy

Volume 3

Margriet Bruijn Lacy (Ed.)
Dutch Studies in a Globalized World

Margriet Bruijn Lacy (Ed.)

Dutch Studies in a Globalized World



Nodus Publikationen
Münster