Colonial Re-Collections

*Memories, Objects, and Performances*

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*Colonial Re-Collections* is a critical response to a range of theoretical and empirical problems that shape individuals’ multifaceted engagements with colonial pasts. Among these engagements there is a remarkable fascination with the colonial, visibly present since at least the 1990s, both in formerly colonized and formerly colonizing societies. Scholars have defined this fascination as nostalgia that is ‘colonial’ (Werbner 1998; Bissell 2005), ‘imperial’ (Rosaldo 1989), or ‘structural’ (Herzfeld 2005). While these scholarly definitions differ, in a broad sense they all refer to a diverse range of material and immaterial phenomena—not only memories of times passed, but also an apparent desire, visible in the private and the public sphere, expressed by people of different generations or promoted by the consumer industry, for things, styles, and notions associated with the colonial era: from the recycling of colonial postcards to the wealth of movies addressing the colonial past; the rise of grand, colonial hotels to nostalgic colonial travel tours; the return of colonial-design advertisements to colonial furniture at home; and the laments about lost, colonial city quarters to memories of colonial quietness and peace.
Most of the scholarly literature on ‘colonial nostalgia’ has tended to focus on the fields of literary and film theory, and architecture (for instance, Peleggi 2005; De Mul 2011). Inspired by this scholarship, we were convinced that the phenomenon deserved more sustained empirical scrutiny from anthropological and historical perspectives. Focusing on historically and empirically informed specificities of postcolonial engagement with colonialism in both Indonesia and the Netherlands, this special issue aims to further problematize notions of nostalgia and colonial and postcolonial temporalities. Most of the articles in this special issue were originally presented at a workshop titled ‘Colonial Nostalgia: Memories, Objects and Performances’, held at the Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land-, en Volkenkunde (KITLV, Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies), in Leiden in October 2011.1

Over the last decade, a number of large-scale projects concerned with the legacies of the colonial past in postcolonial Dutch society have been carried out by Dutch universities, research institutes, and cultural institutions,2 with a focus on ‘postcolonial cultural heritage’ (Ter Keurs and Hardiati 2006; Oostindie 2008) and ‘postcolonial migrants’ (Van Leeuwen 2008; Bosma 2009; Oostindie 2009). More or less at the same time, with the fall of the New Order regime (1998), which used to control the study of Indonesia’s past, a new historical interest became visible in Indonesia, both in public and scholarly domains (Van Klinken 2001; Zurbuchen 2005). The primary focus of this burgeoning body of scholarship has been on the violence that took place between 1965 and 1968 (for instance, Farid 2005; Hadiz 2006; Hill and Dragojlovic 2010; Dragojlovic 2012; McGregor 2012). Scholarly work on engagements with ‘the colonial’ in Indonesia received less attention, with the exception of a book by Rudolf Mrázek (2010) that explores Jakarta’s intellectuals’ memories of the colonial,

1 We wish to thank Remco Raben, Michael Herzfeld, Patricia Spyer, Pamela Pattynama, Paul Bijl, Maurizio Pelleggi, Natalie Scholz, Bart Barendregt, and Matthew Cohen for their participation at the workshop, which sparked an engaging and inspiring discussion.

2 A large-scale project, titled ‘Bringing History Home: Postcolonial Identity Politics in the Netherlands’ (2006–2009) was the result of the collaboration between three large research institutions: KITLV, International Institute of Social History (IISH), and Meertens Instituut, generously funded by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO, Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research).

The exhibition Indonesia: The Discovery of the Past, held in De Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam in the period from December 2005 until April 2006, was the result of the cooperation between the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde (RMV, National Museum of Ethnology) in Leiden and the Museum Nasional (MNI, National Museum) in Jakarta on the project ‘Shared Cultural Heritage’.