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Worlding Dutch Literary Studies

Hans Demeyer

School of European Languages, Cultures and Society (SELCS), University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Whenever we start worlding Dutch literary studies, we find ourselves in the compartment. Once we move beyond the metropolitan centre(s) of Dutch literature, we encounter the compartments of literatures from or related to Indonesia, the Antilles, South Africa, Suriname, Congo, immigration to the metropolitan centres. This essay discusses ‘worlding’ as a possible method that can undo the compartments while also tackling the racialized logic that underpin them. After a general description of ‘worlding’, the essay discusses three recent publications that deal with the colonial past of the Low Countries: *De postkoloniale spiegel*, *De nieuwe koloniale leeslijst* and *Zwarte bladzijden*. Whereas all include aspects that world the discipline, a distinction can be made between the first two projects that involve a recentring on the nation and leave the compartments intact and the third one that offers a more oppositional strategy of worlding that addresses the racial grammar that subtends the discipline of Dutch literary studies and that invites us to imaginative acts of worldmaking.

KEYWORDS

Worlding; racialization;
Dutch literary studies; (post)
colonialism

Whenever we start worlding Dutch literary studies, we find ourselves in the compartment. That is the problem: what should be expansive is actually an encounter with categorizations, borders, enclosures. Once we move beyond the metropolitan centre(s) of Dutch literature, we encounter the compartments of literatures from or related to Indonesia, the Antilles, South Africa, Suriname, Congo, immigration to the metropolitan centres. What should create a more comprehensive account of Dutch literature, cannot but seem to underscore the ‘status aparte’ of those literatures that are not part of its main narrative.¹

This is one layer of compartmentalization that Lisanne Snelders discusses in her study of the Dutch colonial memory of the Dutch East-Indies, now Indonesia. The institutionalization of the literatures and histories of the former East and West colonies of the Netherlands sets them apart from the main Dutch literary history: they have their own separate journals and histories; they are not studied in relation to one another and they are mostly marginalized from Dutch literary histories, and one could add, from journals for the study of Dutch literature.² Within the compartment of Indonesia, Snelders distinguishes three other compartments: white Dutch, coloured Dutch and Indonesian perspectives are differentiated from one another. The effect hereof, Snelders argues, is making the colonial history both present and absent. The compartment of white Dutch

canonized literary works like *Max Havelaar* (1860), *De stille kracht* (1900) and *Oeroeg* (1948) make the colonial history present in Dutch literary history, and this in a proclaimed and praised self-critical manner, yet it simultaneously marginalizes, conceals, and silences non-white perspectives and voices. In these layers of compartmentalization, whiteness functions as the lever between the compartment and the main literary canon: white authors can move between both, or their (post)colonial dimension can be discarded if they are discussed as part of the main literary history – think of *Max Havelaar* being read for its formal innovations or in the light of Multatuli's oeuvre.

A similar logic pertains to the relation of Flemish literary studies to the (post)colonial literature from Congo. Luc Renders and Jeroen Dewulf suggest that on the basis of aesthetic norms little to no attention has been given to the Flemish literature on the Congo, while due to the segregation and French language policy in the Congo, their anthology of Flemish prose on the Congo only contains white perspectives that predominantly mute the colonized.³ Yet again, some authors, like Jef Geeraerts, can easily be incorporated into the main Flemish literary history in the light of the secularization and sexual emancipation of Flanders. Liesbeth Minnaard recently discussed the peculiar compartmentalization of Dutch – but a similar dynamic can be found for Flemish – migrant literature as both separate from Dutch literature and from (post)colonial literature.⁴ This one-two punch not only silences colonial history once more, but it also keeps whiteness as the undiscussed norm: an ideology of colour-blindness promotes a celebration of an exotic ethnic diversity and implies a ban on discussing racial difference.

Exposing these compartments does not undo them; it confirms that these enclosed literatures have been institutionalized as a distinctive subdivision of the main narrative or have been perceived as simply irrelevant to scholarly work.⁵ That means we are trapped: to study these literatures in order to go beyond their compartmentalization and to not treat them as an atypical object of study in the field of Dutch literary studies, one needs to start from this compartmentalization that always already separates them out as not ordinary; wanting to treat them as any other literary text, involves starting from a position in which they are in need of special attention.

In what follows, I will propose 'worlding' as a possible method that can undo the compartments while also tackling the racialized logic that underpin them. The first section starts with a general description of 'worlding' after which I will discuss some recent publications that deal with the colonial past of the Low Countries and of which several aspects involve 'worlding' the discipline. Whereas those projects seem to involve a re-orientation on the nation and as such leave the compartments intact, in the third section, I will specify, making use of another recent publication, a more oppositional strategy of 'worlding' which tackles the racial grammar that subtends⁶ our discipline, and which invites us to imaginative acts of worldmaking.

Worlding as Method and Critique

Worlding is an invitation to take on the world in a geographical sense while also to make worlds in an imaginative sense. It consists of a reflection on the sociohistorical and epistemological territories that inform our reflections on literature, while simultaneously

conceiving of worlds that forego the violent and exclusionary aspects of those territories, asking ourselves how that can instruct literary studies.

In disciplinary terms, ‘worlding’ involves the denaturalizing of the ground of a scholarly field, which for Dutch literary studies is foremost the Netherlands and/or Flanders – the Low Countries. Although a supranational area, it is however the nation of the Netherlands or the region of Flanders that is the unquestioned and unspoken context of scholarly inquiry; research that takes the Low Countries as an integrated area is rather exceptional.⁷ From this perspective of methodological nationalism (Dutch) or regionalism (Flemish), geography creates compartments: what is either far away, or arrived from far away, gets put in a box. This needs further specification. Worlding draws our attention to the social, economic, and political production of geographic scales. What is deemed ‘far away’, what can get compartmentalized, cannot be disentangled from histories of colonialism and the (global) colour line.

To world then is not leaving all grounding behind and arriving at some universal world that absorbs difference,⁸ but rather to think along other scales that are sub- or supranational: the local,⁹ transnational, ecological or global. These scales can be post-colonial, but the process of globalization has also created different flows and relations of inter-connectedness. These may to a certain degree retain (neo)colonial imprints, but the inclusion of other power-relations is required to fully describe them. Other lines can be drawn for these scales than ones that take colonial ‘centre-periphery models of the world.’¹⁰ Worlding furthermore requires a particular entry point into and vantage point on the scale of inquiry; positions which should not be limited to the West. This positionality requires a critical reflection on that position as deriving from ‘the social, historical, and epistemological contests over territory – this includes nationalism, identity, narrative, and ethnicity – so much of which informs the literature, thought, and culture of our times.’¹¹ To world is to take into account the many uneven encounters of the global and the local, especially for those regions where the global came from without, but it is also being attentive to new relations that develop from for instance immigration or social movements that cannot be captured by typical hierarchical models of centre-periphery or local-global.

Some have developed worlding as a countertactic to globalization. The latter is conceived of as a top-down process of homogenization or McDonaldization, presided over by U.S. hegemony, that connects places in ‘a field of activity and exchange’ through the flows and circulation of finance, goods and ideas.¹² Worlding instead involves a bottom-up orientation: to world a person or a place would be to locate it in relation to the whole which in turn would imply a recreation or re-imagining of ‘the whole that opens to the part’: re-imagining the world through the specificity of its manifold connections to a particular place.¹³ Worlding is then involved in an imaginative process of worldmaking, in an act of caring for the world and building worlds.¹⁴ Worldmaking could be the creation of a counterworld but that should not be taken as a given. In the second and third part of this essay, I will address different kinds of worldmaking: one that crosses borders but ultimately refolds upon a national imaginary and one that insists on the reimagination of another world.¹⁵

Yet, at this point, one may wonder why one should world: *what’s the point?* That is the question David Scott poses, following Ian Hacking, about critical strategies in general and postcolonial studies in particular in his essay ‘The Social Construction of Postcolonial

Studies'. His interest is the 'career of a critical strategy,' and especially the moment when such strategy 'begins to slide from criticism toward method, or (...) from a revolutionary paradigm toward a normal one.'¹⁶ Criticism changes 'our conceptual lenses in such a way as to bring new objects into view' and makes a critical point through this contrastive effect.¹⁷ When criticism gets normalized and institutionalized, it becomes part of normal scientific activity as one among many research strategies that accumulates meaning: each study 'making a contribution to the cumulative building up, stockpiling, and stabilization of a normal paradigm.'¹⁸

What determines if a research strategy belongs to a revolutionary or normal paradigm is the set of demands specific to a historical-ideological conjuncture. For Scott, informed by philosopher R. G. Collingwood and historian Quentin Skinner, research programmes do not get replaced because the new one would be intrinsically better than the previous, but because they offer answers to a different set of questions.¹⁹ As Scott's strategical interest is for criticism to understand and address 'the predicament of the present,' a care which I share, he presses us to ask if a set of research questions, propositions and methods still merit pursuing, or if the 'important or interesting or critical questions for our present have changed.'²⁰ For postcolonial studies, Scott argues that its epistemological project to 'criticize (...) colonial knowledge and its assumptions,' to interrogate or deconstruct its representations and narratives, responded to a real demand in the 1980s, but that the 'historical context of problems' today no longer yields, implying a shift from criticism to method, point to meaning.²¹

Scott's essay, part of postcolonialism's long-standing tradition of self-interrogation, ends with a question which is also an invitation: 'how colonialism ought to be understood for the present we live in has always to be a question we formulate and argue out.'²² Critical strategies are not necessarily doomed to become a normal paradigm but can retain or regain a critical point if we persist asking to which historical-ideological demand our propositions and methods offer an answer. Nor necessarily, I would add, does a new research field by default offer a critical point as it may just follow from extensions in 'theoretical inclusiveness or ethnographic broadmindedness.'²³

To which historical-ideological demand, then, does a strategy of worlding Dutch literary studies offer an answer? And, in the phrasing I used earlier, which world does it purport to build in that intervention? Or is worlding just an expansion of our 'normal' discipline but more extensive in its perspectives and more inclusive in its research objects? These are the questions I ask with respect to several current research projects that, in several respects, world our discipline.

Worlding as Recentering

On several occasions in recent years, Geert Buelens has advocated for a 'Comparative Dutch Literary Studies,' which at its core involves a geographical decentring of the discipline: 'the radical decoupling in our discipline of Dutch language, nation-state the Netherlands, Dutch territory and literature written in Dutch.'²⁴ Endorsing the proposition of Sarah de Mul and Elleke Boehmer to replace 'Dutch' with 'the umbrella term neerlandophone to refer to the manifold Netherlands languages variations spoken by persons, groups or localities across the globe,'²⁵ he suggests a comparative research agenda that both develops from and takes as its subject the political, cultural, linguistic,

and social differences and diversity in that neerlandophone area, opening up the scales at which we study Dutch literature and broadening our understanding of what possible research objects could be. Buelens' examples are manifold: how authors circulate and get canonized as a local or even national author in different countries; how some literary texts only become meaningful in a context beyond the Dutch nation; how various literary representations of an international event gets dialogically constructed with the local. Formulated as such, Buelens' proposal contributes, in Scott's terms, to a multiplication and accumulation of meaning, although each particular research project may obviously constitute itself as 'criticism'. Decentring the field is in any case a central prerequisite for any meaningful worlding of Dutch, or better neerlandophone, literary studies.

Interestingly, Buelens situates his proposal partly in the context of the declining number of students for Dutch studies in the Netherlands and Flanders, and its overall 'imago problem.'²⁶ Among various reasons, that decrease is politically informed: the rise of far-right nationalism taints the study of Dutch in Dutch as an illiberal and nationalist preoccupation. This points to a larger crisis of the nation, haunted by both an aggressively avowed 'white innocence' as well as the increasing volume of the voices that want to readdress the colonial past and its aftermath, which has its repercussions on a disciplinary field that for a long time could legitimize itself because the nation did its legitimizing²⁷: Dutch studies in the singular, implying a coherence between the country the Netherlands and the language and culture of that country. If the nation is in crisis, the legitimation of the field also finds itself in an impasse.

I would argue that this national crisis is the particular historical-ideological conjuncture that informs several current projects that aim to re-evaluate (post)colonial literary history. These projects share a pattern. After a first step of decentring in which the scales of inquiry become transnational, follows a scaling-back onto the borders of the metropolitan centre: worldmaking in this instance reverts to nation-making, creating the loss of the other possible worlds envisioned in the first move. In this double movement, compartments are not necessarily undone as the decentring is contained within the national history of the metropolitan centre.

Recent publications as *De postkoloniale spiegel: De Nederlands-Indische letteren herlezen* (2021; edited by Rick Honings, Coen van 't Veer and Jacqueline Bel) and *De nieuwe koloniale leeslijst* (2020; edited by Rasit Elibol) offer a critical reflection on the literary (post)colonial heritage of the Netherlands. Focusing exclusively on Indonesia, the editors of *De postkoloniale spiegel* present their collection as 'a self-critical research into how literature engages with the colonial past' in an attempt to review 'the colonial history and its representation in Dutch-Indonesian literature from the present and the past.'²⁸ Rasit Elibol echoes such aims when he presents *De nieuwe koloniale leeslijst*, which focuses on the literatures of both East and West, as a revision of the canon: 'It is about time to revise the traditional canon, so that everyone can recognize themselves in those stories. It is not reserved for a specific group.'²⁹ Both books offer self-critical and postcolonial readings of canonical (post-)colonial works as well as lesser-known literary works, interpretations by non-white authors and include literature from non-Dutch perspectives. All, and especially the latter two, characteristics are means to decentre the white Dutch self-perception of the colonial history and to break the silence of the colonized in Dutch literary representations.³⁰

Yet, this deterritorialization is followed by a reterritorialization upon the national memory of the metropolitan centre as the use of ‘self-critical’ and ‘revise’ indicate: the critical perspective is directed inwards, not outwards. Both books position themselves as a contribution to the roaring public debate about the nation’s colonial past.³¹ The editors of *De postkoloniale spiegel* situate their project in what they term the Dutch ‘*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*’: the attempt of the Dutch to process and to come to terms with its colonial past. Breaking the Indonesian silence then only amps up the volume in the Netherlands: ‘In the context of the Dutch *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, it is crucial to also pay attention to the Indonesian experience of the colonization of their country.’³² The Indonesian voice is given a compartment in the larger frame of the Dutch historical revision. The canon – the object of scrutiny and remaking in *De nieuwe koloniale leeslijst* – has always been a technique of nation-building, and the book says little about which nation it aims to build except for one in which each can recognize itself. There is quite a dichotomy between the title’s claim of being *the* new colonial reading list and the little critical reflection spent on the selection of its literary works, offering no ‘over-arching perspective in which the books are discussed in their connection with and opposition between one another.’³³ As a consequence, this relegates all literary books, at least in the presentation of the collection, to the status of commentaries on Dutch history and its present, holding on to a Eurocentric perspective.

As both projects continue a methodological nationalism and respond to a crisis in the Dutch national self-perception, one could conclude that these projects do not offer a form of criticism but instead build up meaning on the basis of an expanded sense of ‘theoretical inclusiveness or ethnographic broadmindedness’ within the normal paradigm of both Dutch literary studies and postcolonial studies. Again, individual contributions may point in other directions, but the critical-methodological framework rests upon the alignment between the sovereign Dutch nation and Dutch studies: this is the centre around which literatures from geographically distant countries circle and which holds them within its gravitational pull.

Take the contribution of Lisanne Snelders and Saskia Pieterse on (the inevitable) Multatuli for *De nieuwe postkoloniale leeslijst*. After criticizing the novel’s status as exemplary of how the Dutch incorporated colonial self-criticism in the national identity, they situate the emancipatory aspects of Multatuli’s work in a global context of activists, authors and thinkers. A centripetal impulse however follows upon this centrifugal dynamic: if we were to study Multatuli in this worlded manner, the authors conclude, then our image would not be one of the Netherlands ‘that, much earlier than the rest of the world, was ready for self-criticism, but one that actually keeps on needing that abundance of voices to arrive at a relation with the colonial past beyond complacency.’³⁴ Worlding gives way to recentering.

To be sure, I do not aim to dismiss these projects: even if they ultimately look inward, these books do let the centre, as is clear from the example above, be occupied by its former peripheries. Nor do I want to simply diminish nation-building. Questions of belonging and recognition are important as Theo D’Haen indicates in his take-up of David Scott’s discussion of postcolonialism achieving its end while wearing out its ends.³⁵ Questions of local, national and international belonging may well be the ‘real’ historical-ideological demand of our time, he wrote in the wake of Obama’s election and the *hausse* of Black British writing such as that by Zadie Smith. More recent collections as *Zwart*

(2018) and *Afrolit* (2021), which present Afro-Belgian, Afro-Dutch and other black authors, and *De goede immigrant*, which consists of essays reflecting on the experience of migration in the Netherlands, all in one way or another foreground the question of belonging and home. In a tone less optimistic than D'Haen's, indicative of changing times, the editors of the latter write: 'The central question for each generation remains: when are you allowed to call yourself Dutch, and is that something you would want anyway? When do you have the right to no longer be the subject of the debate, but to determine the debate?'³⁶

As the last question indicates, belonging requires de-compartmentalization: not being pigeonholed to represent an identity, but to speak in a sociality which is not racially ordered – or by any other axis of difference for that matter. Without addressing the persistence of 'race as an organizing grammar,'³⁷ nation-building may simply lead to the incorporation of alternative voices and histories according to a discourse of diversity and inclusion: a style of management aimed at adapting (some) minority subjects to existing power relations and aimed at keeping at bay any discussions of undoing or restructuring those relations. The danger of only building a more inclusive nation or building a more diverse canon, and perceiving that as an end rather than a beginning, is that it may block alternatives.³⁸ What else is possible if we resist that impulse to which we are all so conditioned by the institution of our discipline?

Worlding as Decentring

A similar book to *De nieuwe koloniale leeslijst* is *Zwarte bladzijden: Afro-Belgische reflecties op Vlaamse (post)koloniale literatuur* (2021), edited by Sibou Rugwiza Kanobana. The project is similarly driven by the recent debates about racism and the history of colonialism; it has a similar publication history with the essays first published in a weekly and then collected by a non-academic publisher; it also offers re-readings from (post)colonial literature but now from Flanders.³⁹ Yet, it differs in several significant ways. All authors are Afro-Belgian who mostly do not have a background in literary studies, and rather than literary analyses, the essays offer critical discussions about the significance of the cultural and literary heritage under scrutiny: not so much a revision of the canon, but a claim to having an equal voice in a debate about what we want to have in common in the common of our shared public space and heritage.⁴⁰ The book wants to be this recognition of black voices and presents itself as a 'modest step' in a struggle against colonialism's aftermath, felt in today's inequalities, and in a struggle for 'a postracial world.'⁴¹

Different from the works discussed in the previous section, *Zwarte bladzijden* does not start from a nation debating its ideological self-perception, but from the problem of racism. The introduction does not put colonialism and imperialism at a spatial and temporal distance but conceives it as constitutive of contemporary everyday life in which black lives are delegitimized and threatened. What the different contributors share is not a skin colour, not so much having African origins but, in Kanobana's *detournement* of the term Afro-Belgian, having a close relation to the white context of Flanders/Belgium, and having been racially stigmatized.⁴² In their discussion of the literary works as part of a common good, the contributors not only offer interpretations but emphasize what ideology these texts articulate and which world they create, and how that impacts them as

readers today. In articulating their disagreement, anger, and pain with these (post) colonial texts, too much still resembling today's reality, they expose its whiteness.

This offers a direction for a practice of worlding which is less Eurocentric and offers a more oppositional stance towards today's status quo. Worlding our discipline should involve a decentring of whiteness, as recently also advocated by Minnaard, and a stronger focus on what Olivia Rutazibwa, in her contribution to *Zwarte bladzijden*, calls 'the real protagonists' of racism and colonialism: 'they whose life chances and quality of living throughout the years and until this day are coloured negatively by racism.'⁴³ She continues how too many antiracist and anticolonial debates remain stuck in white-centrist perspectives. Those can help us address and map racism and colonialism, but other perspectives and voices are needed to topple those structures.⁴⁴ This is not about white and black as identities or skin colours but as structural positions that socialize bodies differently, along with other axes of difference (gender, class, sex), in terms of power, opportunities and exposure to violence.⁴⁵ Worlding is being attentive to those differences, to the violence that erupts from them, to counterworlds that work from within and against hegemonic notions of the world, to tensions between worlds – to energize those tensions rather than monumentalizing and solidifying different worlds in a canon.

In times of the ongoing structural crisis of capitalism since the 1970s, the expanding ecological crisis, and a politics of on the one hand white consolidation and on the other the racialization, precarization and ostracization of 'surplus populations', this is the historical-ideological demand of our time: whose lives are deemed valuable, whose lives are worth grieving, whose lives are disposable, whose lives are made vulnerable to premature death?⁴⁶ This is our world of destruction that however does not function indiscriminately. If that is the demand, then which research projects and research questions can we develop in response? If this is the distribution of life and death, can we, in a spin on Jacques Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible, ask the question what literary worlds make which lives and bodies valuable, and which not?⁴⁷ And if we already know (the) answers to that question, then how can we use that knowledge to develop the different aspects of our discipline into a tool that does not reproduce the status quo of this world but dismantles the many-headed face of its violence, starting with the violence embedded in our imagination and our thought – our cultural archive?⁴⁸

This begs for a stronger engagement with the tradition of decoloniality or decolonial studies, which I will leave for another time. For now, I want to go back to the historical moment of decolonization. In her book *Worldmaking after Empire* (2019), Adom Getachew goes against the standard account of decolonization as a 'diffusion' of Western liberal ideas of self-determination that took the shape of the nation-state. This account, which makes decolonization an inevitable consequence from empire, 'naturalizes decolonization' and hides the 'radical rupture' that Kwame Nkrumah and other Anglophone anticolonial critics and nationalists, the subjects of Getachew's study, propagated.⁴⁹ Getachew argues how these thinkers saw self-sovereignty not only embodied in an independent national state but in the remaking of the international order with institutions guaranteeing non-domination. European colonialism is here not only 'a bilateral relationship between metropole and colony,' as the standard notion goes, but is enabled by an international order that secured domination through the unequal

integration of states according to a racial hierarchy.⁵⁰ From this understanding of colonialism, Getachew can rearticulate ‘anticolonial nationalism as *worldmaking*.’⁵¹

This recasting of decolonization may inform our reading practice. As Jeroen Dewulf points out in his introduction to the co-edited volume *Shifting the Compass* (2013), postcolonial readings dominantly focus on the relation between the metropole and the colony. The book however shifts towards a discussion of ‘pluricontinental relations’ or ‘intercontinental connections’ which we could further develop within a frame of the world as one but unequal and racially differentiated.⁵² Dewulf mentions how authors as Anton de Kom, Cola Debrot, Albert Helman, and Tjalie Robinson have argued for such change in perspective that moves away from the centre.⁵³ Another form of worlding our reading practices may be to study these authors and many others not only for their critique on the metropole but also for their ideas about a global order delivered from (neo-)colonial forms of extraction and exploitation.⁵⁴

These studies should culminate in a transnational history of neerlandophone literature in which the centres and former colonies are approached as one analytical space. This history should not be a specimen of the multiplication of meaning. We should therefore avoid a reading of literature as autonomous of history as well as refrain from heralding a newfound cultural diversity, but situate literature in the context of modernity as inseparable from coloniality and empire. That context is internally differentiated through forms of racialization and other violent processes of othering. That is the analytical space in which neerlandophone literature should be historicized and contextualized along variable scales (local, national, transnational, global), including but also moving beyond those scales that draw a line between the centre and the periphery. That space should include reading non-neerlandophone works (whether or not in translation) from the former colonies for their ideas about both their former colonizer and the global order. This may decentre the Low Countries, forego compartmentalization and make this literary history into a tool that does not simply reproduce the current status quo. The conditional is crucial here as it will depend on our collaborative work.

Conclusion: De-compartmentalization

In 1992, Henk Maier discussed the compartmentalization of the ‘Indische letteren’, with reference to Salman Rushdie, as a literary ghetto – ‘and it is not exactly pleasant to reside in the ghetto and moreover, it is difficult to get out of it.’⁵⁵ To escape compartmentalization, Maier argues, one needs to create new families and new groups that, even though they may also create their own ghettos and exclusions, will generate new rules and new readings: ‘The less canon, the more richness.’⁵⁶ I am however sceptical about this proposition as it leaves the mechanism of racialization, which creates the compartments, untouched. Celebrating diversity implies smoothing over the internal differentiation of the world and of neerlandophone literature. This essay has argued that any practice of worlding our discipline, of undoing it of its compartments, needs to involve a much stronger engagement with the racial grammar of our status quo, meaning the distribution of value that creates white dominance and other racial inequalities. We therefore need to move beyond the methodological nationalism that implicitly structures most of our discipline as it functions as a strategy of distancing the former colonies, its aftermath in the present, and non-white perspectives. This is not to say that we need to dismiss the

nation as a scale for research, but that we need to get a better understanding of how the nation is embedded within a global scale. At the same time, worlding should be an imaginative process of worldmaking in which we may hope that each can speak for a context much bigger, shared and cared for by many, than the compartment one was once confined to.⁵⁷

Notes

1. Another problem is what can we understand to constitute the centre? As this essay mostly focuses on the racialized grammar of compartmentalization, I take the Netherlands and Flanders as the metropolitan centre(s) here, using the plural to indicate that they cannot necessarily be considered as one. There is a longstanding discussion about Dutch and Flemish literature as one or two literatures, with the latter mostly functioning as a compartment of the former in literary histories of Dutch literature, see for instance Brems, “Rond dezelfde tijd.” Gilles Dorleijn and Dirk de Geest have argued that one or two literatures is the wrong question and should be traced back to “what is (Dutch) literature?” This question allows for a radical reconsideration of each of its terms and that is the type of project “worlding” invites us to. Dorleijn and De Geest, “Nederlandse literaturen,” 201–202.
One may also find fault with the term “decentring” as it necessitates to firstly name a centre, even though that is the very thing one wants to displace. This essay argues that, especially written from a position in the centre, one cannot simply will such removal, and that the grammar that underpins the centre needs to be explicitly addressed.
2. Snelders, *Hoe Nederland Indië leest*, 341; for the absence of intercultural and (post)colonial discussions in journals of Dutch literature, see Minnaard, “Ras”.
3. Renders and Dewulf, *Congo*, 11–28. See also Renders, *Koloniseren om te beschaven*, 16–17.
4. Minnaard, “Ras,” 228–29.
5. In the last chapter of her PhD, Snelders discusses several metaphors, such as “exotic stepchild”, that aim to criticize the compartmentalization of Dutch-Indonesian literature, but in doing so affirm its special status. Snelders, *Hoe Nederland Indië leest*, 341–346.
6. The first three paragraphs offer a synthesis from reflections on “worlding” in Boehmer, “World,” Connery, “Introduction,” Dimock, “Planet,” Gledhill, “Worlding Cinema,” Said, “Globalizing Literary Study,” and Wilson, “Afterword.”
7. For a recent critique of “methodological nationalism” in Dutch studies, see also Korsten & Leemans “Zo gaat de molen,” 314–316.
8. A recurrent concern in discussions of World Literature. See Apter, *Against World Literature*; Boehmer, “World”; and Shih, “Global Literature”.
9. Christine Gledhill writes: “The notion of the local thus relativizes the idea of the national as an homogeneous entity, which is in fact made up of many locals, themselves in a here-and-there relationship with their national centres, as well as with each other.” Gledhill, “Worlding Cinema,” 7.
10. Boehmer, “World,” 305.
11. Said, “Globalizing Literary Study,” 68.
12. Hayot, “World Literature and Globalization,” 227.
13. *Ibid.*, 228.
14. I want to refrain here from defining the particular form such worldmaking should take as worlds can only be built collectively.
15. Yet, again, I do not intend to be exhaustive here.
16. Scott, “Social Construction,” 385, 386.
17. *Ibid.*, 392.
18. *Ibid.*, 393.

19. "Propositions always form part of question-answer complexes; and therefore to understand any proposition, it is necessary to read it not for its internal cognitive consistency, but for the question to which it purports to be an answer." *Ibid.*, 390.
20. *Ibid.*, 391.
21. *Ibid.*, 392.
22. *Ibid.*, 399.
23. *Ibid.*, 399. World Literature comes to mind, structured as it partly is by a prisoner's fantasy. See: North, *Literary Criticism*, 180–88; Demeyer, "Expansions," 281–82.
24. "de radicale loskoppeling in ons vakgebied van Nederlandse taal, natiestaat Nederland, Nederlands grondgebied en in het Nederlands geschreven literatuur"; Buelens, "Naar een Vergelijkende Neerlandistiek"; Buelens, "moeten", n.p.
25. Boehmer and De Mul refer to the following places: "the Netherlands, Flanders-Belgium, Suriname, the Caribbean island nations of Aruba, Curaçao, and Sint-Maarten, parts of France and Germany, Indonesia, South Africa, the United States, Canada, and Australia". Boehmer and De Mul, "Postcolonialism and the Low Countries", 18.
26. "imago probleem"; Buelens, "Naar een Vergelijkende Neerlandistiek," n.p.
27. Cf. Dimock, "Planet," 2.
28. "een zelfkritisch onderzoek naar hoe de literatuur omgaat met het koloniale verleden," "de koloniale geschiedenis en de representatie daarvan in de Nederlands-Indische letteren uit heden en verleden"; Honings et al., "Inleiding," 12.
29. "Het is hoog tijd om de traditionele canon te herzien, zodat iedereen zich kan herkennen in die verhalen. Hij is niet voorbehouden aan een specifieke groep"; Elibol, "Inleiding," 23.
30. Elibol, "Inleiding," 24; Honings et al., "Inleiding," 20.
31. Interestingly, neither refer to the resurgence of ethnonationalism by white extreme right parties in the Netherlands and Europe.
32. "In het kader van de Nederlandse *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is het cruciaal om ook aandacht te besteden aan hoe de Indonesiërs de kolonisatie van hun land hebben ervaren"; Honings et al., "Inleiding," 10. See also the essay by Pardoe and Arps in this special issue that discusses the limitations of this inclusion of Indonesian voices.
33. "overkoepelend perspectief waarin de boeken in samenhang en confrontatie met elkaar besproken worden"; Shamier, "Een aanzet tot multiperspectiviteit," n.p.
34. "dat al vér voor de rest van de wereld toe was aan zelfkritiek, maar een Nederland dat precies die veelheid van stemmen blijvend nodig heeft om voorbij een zelftevreden omgang met het koloniale verleden te komen"; Pieterse and Snelders, "Molen en palmboom," 39.
35. Theo D'Haen, "The Ends of Postcolonialism."
36. "De centrale vraag voor elke generatie blijft: wanneer mag je jezelf een Nederlander noemen, en wil je dat überhaupt wel? Wanneer heb je het recht om geen onderwerp meer te zijn van het debat, maar het debat te bepalen?" Nzume et al., "Noot van de samenstellers," 12.
37. Wekker, *White Innocence*, 20.
38. Maybe that is even what it is meant to do. I do not want to dismiss the importance of getting criticism and non-white voices acknowledged as part of the national memories of the colonial past, yet I also do not want to overstate its significance. Is being elevated from one compartment to the other not just another version of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call "the hold": a reference to the hold of the slave ship, but also a description of the ongoing condition of the descendants of the formerly enslaved as being contained and enclosed – as being compartmentalized. Yet, their politics is not one of emancipation out of the hold but, with reference to Frank Wilderson III, the "fantasy of the hold": "we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it." Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 94. They refuse a politics of emancipation that follows the rules and norms of the current political order, and instead want to "make, enjoy and prefigure another world in this one" through an aesthetic and social practice of "mutual aid and collaborative improvisation." Shulman, "Politics of Fugitivity," 278. Moten and Harney's focus is on "the surround": the sociality we're always already embedded in and that precedes processes of individuation and individualization

- into autonomous subjects, nations, or any other institutions. This is also the hold: already being held and touched by others. Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 19–20, 97–99. A similar project is foregrounded by Stephen Best and Saidiya Hartman when they point our attention to “black noise”: the political demands, hopes and desires that cannot be named and that cannot be repaired by the mechanics of the law and the state. Best and Hartman, “Fugitive Justice.” The Black Radical Tradition has a lot to offer for a practice of worlding.
39. A colleague asked if we need to consider the difference between the Dutch and Flemish examples in this essay as symptomatic or coincidental. On the basis of three examples, that is hard to tell, but I would think that the racial socialization of the contributors to each volume is more decisive than the national one.
 40. Barrie and Kanobana, “Congo”, 42, 45.
 41. “bescheiden stap,” “een postraciale wereld”; Kanobana, “Inleiding,” 28, 20.
 42. *Ibid.*, 12, 25.
 43. Minnaard, “ras,” “de reële protagonisten,” “zij wier levenskansen en -kwaliteit door de jaren heen tot op de dag van vandaag negatief gekleurd worden door racisme”; Rutazibwa, “Back to the future,” 51–52.
 44. Rutazibwa, “Back to the future,” 60, 62–63.
 45. I am continuing Rutazibwa’s line of thought here; *ibid.*, 60.
 46. Surplus populations is Marx’s term for the reserve army of labourers, Marx, *Capital*, 781–802. For grievability, see Butler, *Frames of War*; for disposable, see Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 66–92; for valuable, see Rutazibwa, “Back to the future,” 53; for vulnerable, see Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*, 28.
 47. Rancière, *Le partage du sensible*.
 48. Wekker mentions that there is a scepticism “that the supposed black-white binary of U.S. race relations makes it unfit as a model for studying European societies,” even though race as a concept finds its origin in Europe. Wekker *White Innocence*, 5. Indeed, there exists a certain distrust about the import of American concepts, developed in critical race theory and black studies, as epistemological tools in discussions about race in the Low Countries. Although the development of new concepts to understand the particularities of the racial order in any specific locality must be encouraged, one should also take into account how racism, as it was developed in the Americas, travelled to Europe as a means to solidify the colour line through identification with whiteness, and to socially discipline the no longer enslaved racialized populations in the colonies. Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 20–22.
 49. Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire*, 16, 17.
 50. *Ibid.*, 16.
 51. *Ibid.*, 2.
 52. Dewulf, “Introduction,” 2.
 53. *Ibid.*, 3.
 54. Most probably there is already a lot of scholarship out there. Yet, as our discipline’s attention for these matters have been rather peripheral or cyclical, a lot of institutional forgetting may have taken place. That is no different from the societies in which we are embedded, but we should always try to be better than that.
 55. “en het is bepaald niet aangenaam om in een ghetto te verblijven en bovendien moeilijk om er uit weg te komen”; Maier, “Indisch-Nederlandse literatuur,” 141.
 56. “Hoe minder canon, hoe meer rijkdom.” *Ibid.*, 144.
 57. Last line is inspired by Robbins, “Cosmopolitanism.”

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Notes on contributor

Hans Demeyer is Assistant Professor in Dutch & Comparative Literature at University College London. He recently published, together with Sven Vitse, *Affectieve crisis, literair herstel: De romans van de millennialgeneratie* (2021; Amsterdam University Press) [Affective Crisis, Literary Repair: The Novels of the Millennials], a study of twenty-first-century literature from the perspective of an affective crisis, and the edited volume *Woekering en weigering: Metamorfozen en identiteit in het werk van Jacq Vogelaar* (2018; Academia Press). He further publishes on post-war and contemporary literature, and on the affective, cultural and political aspects of the contemporary as a process of disintegration.

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