Beyond Petrified History
Gender and Collective Memories

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In the field of history we are currently observing a 'memory wave' and a 'veritable industry in scholarship on memory'. There is a growing bulk of publications on memory. Specialists in history and theory even say the linguistic turn has been replaced by a memorial turn.[1] The success of memory studies stems at least from two phenomena.

First, dramatic social changes in the last two centuries have pushed the past further away: traumatic events such as revolutions and world wars; socio-economic processes such as industrialization and the emergence of a mass society; cultural phenomena such as secularisation and political emancipation. Old collective identities – particularly Christianity and nationality – have been undermined or replaced by new ones. The intensity and speed of change in Western society have led to social disorientation and perceived ruptures in time. The sense of forever being denied access to a time in the past has invoked a nostalgic longing for a past world. This longing has been transformed into a desire to know, to study, to objectify and to commercialise the past.[2] Nowadays there is an urgent need to find communal points of historical reference. Western countries seek to revitalize their national identities in the face of a growing diverse population. According to Pierre Nora, memory is no longer a natural extension of a group's or nation's sense of identity; it requires external 'lieux' or 'sites' whose meaning is in constant flux.[3] Thus the memorial turn both reflects and compensates a cultural crisis: the societal awareness that a canon of historical knowledge as an important pillar of the nation-state is no longer self-evident.

Second, the emphasis on memory is part of a cultural transformation in the history of historiography. This field was traditionally concerned with the development of history as a science and the study of well-known historians. Under the influence of cultural anthropology, comparative literature, gender studies and media studies, the history of historiography has begun to question the discourses, styles and standards it employs. This change has led to the rediscovery of, for instance, forgotten women historians, and consequently to a fundamental critique of what has been considered the historiographical canon.[4] By now it is acknowledged that the story of historiography comprises several circuits of historians and their readers, and several competing claims and contested assumptions. Moreover, although the canon has by no means disappeared, its idea is questioned as well. Besides documents and other written sources, historians have started to investigate images, statues, buildings, movies, oral histories and rituals. A key feature of these works is that they revolve around the *relationship to the past* in the past. This meta-historical approach implies the study of both scholarly and non-scholarly production, distribution and reception of historical representations.[5] Historical culture is the umbrella concept for the growing number of fascinating studies devoted to various treatments of the past, including popular culture in which the general public integrates and processes history into everyday life.[6]

This paradigmatic shift in the history of historiography offers new possibilities for the study of gender differences in historical representations. Unfortunately, most theorists of memory have not paid much attention to gender, whilst, surprisingly enough, relatively little has been published on memory by gender specialists.[7] Yet, without a gender perspective the dynamics of collective memories cannot be fully understood. Examining the ways memories are shaped by specific notions of femininity and masculinity can provide us with significant

knowledge about how a society - particularly a nation - is constituted.[8] It enables us to understand how gender helps to define national identities, how, for example, in the nineteenth century military masculinity contributed to the process of imagining the nation.[9]

In this article I shall outline some intersections of gender and collective memories within the Dutch historical context. The assumption is that collective memories - whether it is in the form of commemoration rituals, symbols, books or the exposure of historical objects in museums - are both product and producers of gender. As a kind of framework I use a heuristic model of Wulf Kansteiner which he recently presented in his article 'Finding Meaning in memory' in *History and Theory*.[10]

According to Kansteiner most memory studies focus on representations of specific events without reflecting on the audiences of the representations in question. As a result past and present historical cultures cannot be linked conclusively to specific social collectives and their historical consciousness. He argues that the history of collective memory is a complex process of cultural production and consumption that acknowledges the persistence of cultural traditions as well as the ingenuity of memory makers and the subversive interests of memory consumers.[11] With regard to gender this means we should distinguish on the one hand gender specific producers and consumers of collective memory (for instance collective memories of women's movements or labour movements), on the other hand gender specific traditions of remembering and appropriations of memory (for instance gender stereotypes in historical images and commemorations). I shall use Michel de Certeau's term 'appropriation' to emphasize the possibility that the receivers in the process of reception do not remain passive.[12] Memory participants sometimes integrate and use the received meanings and values in their own culture, and might disturb the larger mnemonic community to which they also belong. From this point of view culture consumption is also culture production.[13]

To clarify my argument I shall analyse some images of a famous female Dutch icon. She evokes for many Dutch and I suppose also German people nostalgic memories of 'the good old days', while she emphasizes at the same time the 'whiteness' of 'authentic' Dutch men and women.

Let us start with a picture from the General Dutch Press Agency which recalls the Netherlands of the 1960s: a photograph of a press conference by the Beatles when they came to visit the Netherlands for the first time in 1964. Behind the pop stars on the left there are five excited men in suits, very likely journalists; directly standing behind the Beatles are four smiling girls in traditional Vole dam costume.[14] At that occasion the Vole dam girls offered the Beatles cheese and herring as a Dutch welcome gift. By the way, the Beatles turned up their noses only at the smell of the herring. They did not like it at all! The encounter between modern male pop musicians and the Netherlands was staged by the impresario with the deliberate use of anti-modern female icons of Dutch culture: peasant girls. Obviously this picture represents ambiguous stereotypes on gender, the Dutch nation and rural life, relying on a continuous production of historical images of the Netherlands in which farm daughters and peasant girls often appear either as timeless figure-heads of conservatism and narrow-mindedness, or as hard working and energetic women with blushing cheeks and many healthy children.[15]

During the nineteenth century a great interest in folk culture developed in Europe. According to Dutch historian Ad de Jong the impulse to preserve traditional ways of life in the Netherlands emerged from a growing national awareness.[16] Parts of Dutch folk culture were brought together into museums, on a local and a national level. Particularly the industrial and applied art exhibitions stimulated new ways of exhibiting in museums. Folk culture was set up at both national exhibitions and world fairs. Next to the machines, equipment, arms, inventions

and objects, thematic historical exhibits with life-size puppets in traditional costumes represented the history of a country or region.[17]

This 'museumisation' or *Musealisierung* through exhibits of historical objects and folk culture in museums and pavilions, was also extended outside the museum walls in the 1870s. The image of the Netherlands as the land of farm houses, mills, wooden shoes and woman farmers came to be cultivated in particular under the influence of the Hague School painters and its followers, such as Vincent van Gogh and Josef Israëls.[18] They were impressed by the simplicity of country-life, and painted the 'authentic' rural life of their country. These paintings had an enormous effect on the large public. City dwellers discovered the countryside and took initiatives to rescue the remnants of Dutch folk culture. Foreign tourists flocked to the Netherlands to visit Marten and Vole dam, and to watch 'real' peasants, farm girls, and fishermen dressed in traditional costumes. Soon these villages were transformed into historical sites of rural life. Both forms of museumisation inside and outside the museum walls formed the basis of a 'preservation drive' in the Netherlands which established its organization structure around 1900 in the form of folk culture associations and the founding of the Netherlands Open Air Museum in 1912.

After the 1910s and 1920s Dutch people became bored with the anti-modern representation of their country. Yet, for political, commercial and nostalgic reasons the image of peasants and particularly farm girls was (and still is) used over and over again. One of the reasons is that women often symbolize the supposed roots or essence of the nation. They embody continuity and tradition in contrast with progress and modernity.[19] It is no coincidence that the young queen Wilhelmina travelled through the Netherlands with her mother - the regent queen Emma - while she was sometimes dressed in traditional costume, representing a specific Dutch province. By showing the Dutch heiress in this way they hoped to strengthen the cohesion of the nation.[20] This spectacle evoked indeed intense national emotions. In the course of the twentieth century the original icon for the Netherlands 'Liberty' (Vrijheid) since the Dutch revolt against the Spanish king in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries - symbolized by the Dutch heroic Virgin or 'Nederlandse Maagd'[21] - was gradually replaced by a young girl in traditional costume, referring to pre-modern rural life.

At the same time the Dutch cliché of these 'peasant girls' such as 'Zeeuwsch meisje', 'Volendam girl' and the cheese girl Frau Antje in Germany began to figure in advertisements which had an explicit erotic dimension to attract buyers. Nice peasant girls symbolized simplicity and purity. They also responded to fantasies about power and sexuality, about differences between the bourgeois Self in the modern city and the working Other at the backward countryside. In this way these nostalgic images supported the growing confidence of Dutch middle classes.[22]

How did Dutch feminists respond to this phenomenon? Interestingly enough they playfully appropriated the image for their own purposes. One of the festivities during the influential congress of the International Woman Suffrage Alliance held in Amsterdam in 1908, was a Dutch clog dance in traditional costumes. A young enthusiastic clog dancer, Rosa Manus (daughter of a wealthy upper-middle-class Jewish family in Amsterdam), attracted the attention of the American feminist Carrie Chapman Catt. It was the beginning of a long lasting friendship between the two. Manus became an important feminist and pacifist, well known in international circles.[23]

How much the image of the 'pure' pre-modern farm woman or cheese girl functioned in the feminist movement as an invented tradition, becomes apparent from the propaganda tours of several suffragettes between 1908 and 1919 (the year when Dutch women got the vote) who

were dressed in traditional costume. Very famous in this respect was Kee Groot. This daughter of a banker disguised herself in the traditional Westfries costume of the province of Holland, visited on card and horse several villages, acted like a farm daughter and made jokes in the Westfries dialect. While using this dialect she bridged the distance between herself and the public: she was able to make sharp statements on women and politics, yet at the same time the public felt encouraged to make comments. In this way she succeeded to win her audiences to support the women's vote.[24]

Hobsbawm's famous concept 'invented traditions' refers to a set of practices, governed by accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition. Characteristic of invented traditions is the fact that they automatically imply continuity with the past. Where possible, they attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. The suffragette cause embodied a disturbing aspect of the rapid transformation of society: the emancipation of women. The image of the farm daughter reassured the public on three levels: despite the intended liberation of fixed gender roles, feminists in the Netherlands were women, they were Dutch, and what's more, these healthy and sturdy girls were white.

At the end of the nineteenth century ethnic differences became more and more important - also for Dutch feminists. In this period the Netherlands occupied the Indonesian Archipelago and developed into one of the most powerful colonial powers. It was no coincidence that the colonial exhibits at the National Exhibition of Women's Labour in 1898 had attracted many visitors. Particularly the set-up of an artificial kampong with 37 Javanese men and women on display stimulated feelings of national and white superiority. Whereas the butter- and cheese-making was not so much important at the 1898 exhibition - feminist organizers had contracted only a pale female cheese maker[25] - the 1900 world exhibition in Paris combined both the image of the traditional rosy-cheeked farm girl and the Dutch colonial 'possessions'. A picture shows a Zeeuwsch peasant girl serving two gentlemen Dutch geneva against the background of the large colonial exhibit of the Dutch East-Indies.[26] Peasant girls were often part of the strategy to construct a Dutch myth of unity, based on historical, cultural, and ethnic criteria.

Up to now I have spoken about a specific image, which has become part of the Dutch collective memory. But what do we exactly mean with collective memory? Is it possible to refer to 'the' Dutch collective memory? Indeed we are dealing with a collective phenomenon, but it only manifests itself in the actions and statements of the individual. On the other hand, as Kansteiner rightly argues: 'there is no such thing as individual memory'.[27] Individuals always remember within social frameworks with specific languages, values, and ideologies. Collective memories refer to a body of historical images and sensations within a community, articulated through texts, songs, rituals, memorial days, monuments, statues, and so on. It is the heritage of a nation, movement, group or family, based on shared experiences, that is generally acknowledged as such by the members of the community involved. Large collective memories consist of several mnemonic communities, which often compete with each other. Therefore we cannot speak of 'the' Dutch collective memory.

Another characteristic of collective memories is that they transcend time and space of the original events to which they refer or are supposed to refer. Although they are coloured by the present, collective memories also tend to freeze. This is especially the case when isolated minorities remember, when they have no access to large collective memories and there is an intense identification with the constructed past. A striking example are the deeply religious Amish in the United States, a community that has adamantly opted out of the fast pace of the Western world. The women's starched caps and long skirts and the men's dark suits of the

eighteenth century suggest that time has been made to stand still. The Amish make a living by farming, they use horse-drawn wagons for transport and they disapprove of electricity, running water, television, and computers.[28] Here, the past is preserved, history seems to be petrified. Yet, by deciding not to be modern - by rejecting the sway of progress - the Amish have ironically acted quite modern.

But what happens when groups want to be part of the larger collective memory but do not have the means to express their vision? What if they cannot identify with historical representations? Particularly women have a history of exclusion from large mnemonic communities, such as the nation-state.[29] What are the consequences for boys and girls, men and women, when gender stereotypes dominate large collective memories? Individuals need a chance to reflect on their historical position within the larger collective memory. Otherwise it becomes difficult to avoid a servile repetition of the constructed or invented past. Then, indeed, there is also a risk that history becomes petrified. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur proposes to struggle against the tendency to consider the past only from the angle of what was done, and the unchangeable: 'We have to reopen the past, to revivify its unaccomplished, cut-off - even slaughtered - possibilities.'[30] Therefore, I would suggest, the challenge to memory experts, museum specialists and historians - gender historians as well - is to keep 'the future past' dynamic, to remain open to an unknown or unrecognisable past.[31] This will also give the present new perspectives.

From this point of view the humorous performance of Kee Groot as a farm daughter in the Dutch suffragette campaign in the 1910s can be considered as a subversive strategy to disturb the rigid presentation of the nation's memory, to make fun of that rosy-cheek farm girl, and to bend this stereotype to her own feminist goal.

Notes

1. Kerwin Lee Klein, 'What was the linguistic turn', *Clio* 30 (2000) 1, 79-90.
2. F.R. Ankersmit, 'The sublime dissociation of the past: or how to be(come) what one is no longer', History and theory (October 2001) 295-323.
3. Pierre Nora, 'Between memory and history: Les lieux de mémoire', *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989) 7-25.
4. For instance Joan W. Scott, 'American Women Historians, 1884-1984', in Idem, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York 1988) 178-198; Maria Grever, *Strijd tegen de stilte. Johanna Naber (1859-1941) en de vrouwenstem in geschiedenis* (Hilversum 1994); Maria Grever, 'Die relative Geschichtslosigkeit der Frauen. Geschlecht und Geschichtswissenschaft', in W. Küttler, J. Rüsen und E. Schulin (Hrsg.), *Geschichtsdiskurs 4: Krisenbewusstsein, Katastrophenerfahrungen und Innovationen 1880-1945* (Bielefeld 1997) 108-123; Nina Baym, *American Women Writers and the Work of History 1790-1860* (New Brunswick 1995); Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History. Men, Women, and Historical Practice* (Harvard 1998). On the canon concept see Siep Stuurman, 'The Canon of the History of Political Thought: Its Critique and a Proposed Alternative', *History and Theory* 39 (2000) nr. 2, 147-166.
5. Hermann Lübbe, Der Fortschritt und das Museum: über den Grund unseres Vergnügens an historischen Gegenständen (London 1982); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), The Invention of Tradition (Cambridge 1983); Pierre Nora (ed.), Les lieux de mémoire 7 Tm. (Paris 1984-1992); David Lowenthal, The past is a foreign country (Cambridge 1985); Idem, The heritage crusade and the spoils of history (Cambridge 1996); Pim den Boer et Willem Frijhoff réd., Lieux de mémoire et identités nationales (Amsterdam 1993); Aleida

Assmann, Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses (München 1999).

6. Jan Assmann distinguishes between communicative and cultural memory: between everyday communications about the meaning of the past, and the body of reusable texts, images and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image. See Jan Assmann, 'Collective Memory and Cultural identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 32; Kees Ribbens, *Een eigentijds verleden. Alledaagse historische cultuur in Nederland 1945-2000* (Hilversum 2002) (with English summary).
7. Exceptions are for instance Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini and Paul Thompson (eds.), *Gender and memory. Special edition of the International Yearbook of oral history and life stories* vol. 4 (Oxford 1996); Maria Grever, 'The Pantheon of Feminist Culture: Women's Movements and the Organization of Memory', *Gender & History* 9 (1997) 364-374; Lucy Noakes, *War and the British: gender, memory and national identity* (London 1998); Afsaneh Najmabadi, *The story of the daughters of Quchan: gender,and national memory in Iranian history* (Syracuse/New York 1998). One article in the special issue 'Sites of memory' of *German Quarterly* (2001) is devoted to gender. See Friederike Eigler, 'Engendering Cultural Memory in Selected Post-Wende Literary Texts of the 1990s', *The German Quarterly* 74 (2001) 4, 392-406. Charlotte Tacke wrote a wonderful paragraph on 'Nationale Stereotypen und Geschlechtscharaktere' in her book *Denkmal im sozialen Raum. Nationale Symbole in Deutschland und Frankreich im 19. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen 1995) 44-50. In Dutch language also: Jolande Withuis, *De jurk van de kosmonaute. Over politiek, cultuur en psyche* (Amsterdam/Meppel 1995); Mariette van Staveren, 'Moraliteit, sekse en de Natie. Een geschiedenis van het Monument op de Dam en de oorlogsherinnering, 1945-1969', *Jaarboek voor vrouwengeschiedenis* dl. 15 (Amsterdam 1995) 94-116; Esther Captain, *Achter het kawat was Nederland. Indische oorlogservaringen en -herinneringen 1942-1995* (Kampen 2002).
8. Glenda Sluga, 'Identity, Gender and the History of European Nations and Nationalisms', *Nations and Nationalism* 4 (1998) 1, 87-111.
9. Stefan Dudink, 'Imagining a Nation without Heroes? The Trouble with Masculinity in Nineteenth Century Dutch Political and Military History', in *Potsdamer Studien zur Frauen- und Geschlechtsforschung* 4 (2000) Heft 1/2 'Männlichkeiten. The Dark Continent (?)', 111-124.
10. Wulf Kansteiner, 'Finding meaning in memory', *History and Theory* 41 (2002) 163-178.
11. Idem, 179.
12. Michel de Certeau, *L'Invention du quotidien. Tome I: Arts de faire* (Paris 1990) (first print 1980), in English: *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley CA 1984).
13. W.Th.M. Frijhoff, 'Toeëigening: van bezitsdrang naar betekenisgeving', *Trajecta* 6 (1997) 2, 99-118, 112 and 115.
14. Ad de Jong, De dirigenten van de herinnering. Musealisering en nationalisering van de volkscultuur in Nederland 1815-1940 (Nijmegen 2001), 178; see also the pictures is Henk van Gelder en Lucas Ligtenberg, The Beatles in Holland (Amsterdam 1989) 19. Ringo Starr was ill and replaced by drummer Jimmy Nicoll.
15. Margreet van der Burg, 'Geen tweede boer'. Gender, landbouwmodernisering en onderwijs aan plattelandsvrouwen in Nederland, 1863-1968 (Hilversum 2002) (with English summary) 11.
16. De Jong, De dirigenten van de herinnering, 41-100.

17. Maria Grever en Berteke Waaldijk, *Feministische Openbaarheid. De Nationale Tentoonstelling van Vrouwenarbeid in 1898* (Amsterdam 1998) chap. 2; Winfried Kretschmer, *Geschichte der Weltausstellungen* (Frankfurt/New York 1999); Alice von Plato, *Präsentierte Geschichte. Ausstellungskultur und Massenpublikum im Frankreich des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt/New York 2001).
18. This paragraph is mainly based on De Jong, *De dirigenten van de herinnering*, 167-189.
19. Tacke, Denkmal im sozialen Raum, 14.
20. Henk te Velde, 'Het "roer van staat" in "zwakke vrouwenhanden". Emma en het imago van Oranje', in C.A. Tamse (red.), *Koningin Emma. Opstellen over haar regentschap en voogdij* (Baarn 1990) 169-195; M.E. Verburg, 'Koningin Emma als regentes', in Tamse (red.), *Koningin Emma*, 196-221. Various local and national festivities were organized to coincide with the inauguration of queen Wilhelmina in 1898. Amsterdam staged a great Rembrandt exhibition which attracted thousands of visitors. There were pageants which recalled the nation's glorious past, while an exhibition of traditional dress from various regions displayed the uniqueness of Dutch cultural heritage.
21. Frans Grijzenhout, 'De verbeelding van de Vrijheid in de Nederlandse kunst 1570-1870', in E.O.G. Haitsma Mulier en W.R.E. Velema (red.), *Vrijheid. Een geschiedenis van de vijftiende tot de twintigste eeuw* (Amsterdam 1999) 253-286; Myriam Everard, 'Vrouwen voor 't vaderland: burgeres Van der Meer en de Bataafse politiek', *Historisch Tijdschrift Holland* 31 (1999) nrs. 4/5, 272-281.
22. See for this kind of analysis Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather. Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York/London 1995) 157-158.
23. Mineke Bosch with Annemarie Kloosterman (eds.), *Politics and Friendship. Letters from the International Woman Suffrage Alliance, 1902-1942* (Ohio State University Press 1990) 13-14, 38; picture of the clog dance group, p. 19.
24. Marja Borkus a.o., Vrouwenstemmen. 100 jaar vrouwenbelangen 75 jaar vrouwenkiesrecht (Zutphen 1994) 56-58.
25. Grever and Waaldijk, *Feministische Openbaarheid*, 76.
26. De Jong, *De dirigenten van de herinnering*, 260. The picture was published in *l'Illustration*, June 2, 1900.
27. Kansteiner, 'The Meaning of Memory', 185. He refers also to the influential French sociologist Maurice Halbwach, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Paris 1925).
28. Donald B. Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture* (Baltimore 1989).
29. Grever, Strijd tegen de stilte, 14-17.
30. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* III (Chicago/Londen 1988) 216.
31. See Veronica Vasterling, 'De rechte lijn en de lus. Heideggers onderzoek naar de tijd en de geschiedenis van het tijdbegrip', in Maria Grever en Harry Jansen (eds.), *De ongrijpbare tijd. Temporaliteit en de constructie van het verleden* (Hilversum 2001) 175-187, 187.