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*European Journal of Women's Studies* 2006; 13; 277

DOI: 10.1177/1350506806065757

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# Narrative Accounts of Origins

## A Blind Spot in the Intersectional Approach?

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**ABSTRACT** This article uses a study of the life-story narratives of former classmates of Dutch and Moluccan descent to argue that the constructionist approach to intersectionality, with its account of identity as a narrative construction rather than a practice of naming, offers better tools for answering questions concerning intersectional identity formation than a more systemic intersectional approach. The case study also highlights the importance of the quest for origins in narratives. It demonstrates that theories of intersectionality are not justified in subsuming the issue of belonging under the identity marker of ethnicity, when all identities are performatively produced in and through narrative enactments that include the precarious achievement of belonging. The case study demonstrates that if narrative accounts of a (singular or collective) life fail to achieve narrative closure regarding *roots*, attempts to trace *routes* are seriously hampered.

**KEY WORDS** class ♦ constructionism ♦ Dutch ♦ ethnicity ♦ gender ♦ identity ♦ intersectionality ♦ life stories ♦ Moluccans ♦ roots

Twenty years ago I leafed through a small booklet compiled to celebrate the 65th anniversary of my former primary school in a village in the north of the Netherlands. The booklet contained a series of portraits of school classes. Some are part of my family history: in a 1929 photograph I find my five-year-old father, while a 1963 picture shows me with my classmates. But whereas my father's class is all white, more than half my classmates are black. The difference signifies the symbolic passage from the colonial to the postcolonial era and the material passage of thousands of soldiers of the Royal Dutch Indies Army (the KNIL) who, in 1951, were shipped from the island of Java and housed in camps throughout the Netherlands.

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*European Journal of Women's Studies* Copyright © 2006 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), 1350-5068 Vol. 13(3): 277-290; <http://ejw.sagepub.com> DOI: 10.1177/1350506806065757

I decided to go back to my Dutch and Moluccan classmates to find out to what extent our life trajectories had been marked by our early childhood experiences with the ethnic and cultural 'other'.<sup>1</sup> What kind of life-story would each of us produce? How had our lives been affected by axes of difference and inequality such as gender, ethnicity, class and religion?

In this article, I make a distinction between systemic and constructionist interpretations of intersectionality. I argue that the constructionist approach offers the better tools for answering the above questions. Yet in my classmates' accounts, I stumbled across a narrative that I was unable to connect to the markers generally included in the list of possibly intersecting social categories, i.e. the quest for one's roots. I argue that this issue of origins can be elaborated within a constructionist perspective of intersectionality, without relapsing into either essentialist or systemic understandings of ethnicity or identity.

#### INTERSECTIONALITY, THE SYSTEMIC AND CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACHES

When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality', it was welcomed by many as the refreshing rearticulation of an insight that had already been put forward by several Black scholars such as Angela Davis (1981), Audre Lorde (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (1991). They had argued that systems of domination systematically glossed over the experience of marginal groups in the US, such as Black women, by implicitly taking white, middle-class women or black men as the exemplary victims of systems of sexism or racism. Since the early 1980s the idea of the intersectional workings of different categories of social inequality has been acknowledged and meticulously researched. British scholars like Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1992), Paul Gilroy (1987), Stuart Hall (1991) and Beverley Skeggs (1997) emphasized how particular identities are lived in the modalities of other categories of identity, such that gender is always lived in the modalities of ethnicity and class, nationality in the modalities of gender and race, and class in the modalities of gender and nationality. The US and British approaches share an anti-essentialist perspective on identity, without relapsing into the 'anti-categorical' perspective of radical deconstructionism (McCall, 2005). Intersectionality constitutes a critical alternative to identity politics insofar as, next to differences *between* groups, it also takes into account *intra*-group differences (Crenshaw, 1991: 1242). Intersectionality can also be perceived as an alternative to 'additive' or 'multiplicative' claims that Black women are worse off than white women because they suffer from both sexism and racism, or that working-class Black women suffer from 'a triple jeopardy' (Beal, 1970) because they have to deal with poverty as well.

Intersectionality instead emphasizes that the complexity of processes of individual identification and social inequality cannot be captured by such arithmetical frameworks. Categories like gender, ethnicity and class co-construct each other, and they do so in myriad ways, dependent on social, historical and symbolic factors.

There are, however, significant differences in how intersectionality is treated on either side of the Atlantic. The US approach foregrounds the impact of system or structure upon the formation of identities, whereas British scholars focus on the dynamic and relational aspects of social identity.

According to Crenshaw (1991), the location of women of colour at the intersection of race and gender makes their experiences structurally and 'qualitatively different than that of white women' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245). Gender, race and class are conceptualized as systems of domination, oppression and marginalization that determine or structure identities. And when Mari Matsuda (1991) explains her method of asking 'the other question', she does so in systemic terms: 'When I see something that looks racist, I ask, "Where is the patriarchy in this?" When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, "Where is the heterosexism in this?"' (Matsuda, 1991: 1189). The significance of social identity categories is thus exclusively identified with the performative effects of social subordination and discursive disempowerment. Adherents to what I from now on refer to as the *systemic* approach to intersectionality use it both to expose the detrimental effect of the subordinate poles of gender, race and class, and simultaneously to problematize the dominant poles of these binary oppositions, such as masculinity, whiteness and middle-classness (Wekker and Lutz, 2001). In her insightful exploration of the ways in which the gendered and racialized discourse of 'family values' contributes to the construction of US national identity, Patricia Hill Collins, referring to the work of Michel Foucault, defines disciplinary power as 'that by which people are classified and located on a knowledge grid' (Collins, 1998: 79 note 5).

In doing so, Collins makes selective use of the Foucauldian vocabulary. According to Foucault, modern power is indeed intimately connected to the power/knowledge configurations of the human sciences. Discipline and normalization work to shape human bodies and enable forms of life. Power, however, is not to be conceived of as a property, but as a relation. Power relations are constantly shifting, marked by conflicts and points of resistance. Power does not merely suppress, it also produces subjects. It involves strategic games that can only be played so long as the parties involved have a certain amount of freedom, in which the relations between them are reversible and unstable. It is only in cases where the 'infinitesimal mechanisms of power' have become reified into static structures with totalitarian traits that we may speak of domination and oppression (Foucault, 1984).

The British approach to intersectionality has adopted this more relational and dynamic view of power. It has elaborated a *constructionist* interpretation of intersectionality. Its conception of intersectionality builds upon Gramsci's view of power in terms of ongoing struggles over hegemony, and his notion of articulation as 'any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice' (Laclau and Mouffe, 2002: 105). Conflations of identity categories such as race with a system like racism are rejected on the basis that they assume a static view of both the meaning of the category of race, and of racism as a single system in which Whites dominate Blacks, thus ignoring the various ways in which Irish people, Jews or refugees from the Third World have been negatively racialized and subjected to racism.

Their foregrounding of structure does not mean that adherents of the systemic approach discard the perspective of agency. On the contrary, their critical analyses are meant to contribute to the empowerment of subordinated groups. Thus Crenshaw observes that processes of categorization are not unilateral since members of marginalized groups are able to challenge and subvert existing social categorizations: 'there is nonetheless some degree of agency that people can and do exert in the politics of naming' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1297). And Collins notes how African-Americans have challenged dominant tropes of kinship by their creative reappropriation of the rhetoric of family – by, for instance, identifying Africa as the 'homeland', and addressing one another as 'brother' and 'sister' (Collins, 1998: 78). Still, intersectionality predominantly aims to reveal the unilateral power of social representations, e.g. the detrimental symbolic and material consequences for those groups whose lives are situated at the crossroads of different identities (Saharso, 2002: 22).

A second distinction between the systemic and the constructionist approach is that the first assumes a notion of the human subject as primarily constituted by systems of domination and marginalization. To become a subject means being positioned in more or less privileged social locations that shape one's experience. Individuals are taken to be the passive bearers of the meanings of social categories. According to the constructionist perspective, on the other hand, the processes by which individuals become subjects do not merely involve 'being subjected to', in the sense of being subordinated to a sovereign power or anonymous system. It also implies that the individual is 'becoming a subject', i.e. made into a source of his or her own thinking and acting. Markers of identity such as gender, class or ethnicity are not merely exclusive and limiting forms of categorization, but simultaneously provide narrative and enabling resources (see also Appiah, 2005).

Third, within the systemic approach issues of social identity and identification are predominantly perceived as matters of categorization

and naming. When Crenshaw stresses that identity is also an important site of resistance, she illustrates this by judging two forms of self-categorization. The claim 'I am a person who happens to be Black' is disqualified as foregrounding universal personhood and suggesting that a person's race is merely a contingent part of her identity. The alternative statement 'I am Black' represents the better resistance strategy because it reappropriates the category of race that the dominant framework imposes upon Black people (Crenshaw, 1991: 1297).

Within the constructionist approach, identity is not perceived as a matter of naming but of narration. We are both actor in and co-author of our own life-story, our (individual and collective) actions can be perceived as enacted narratives. Identity cannot be grasped by a list of characteristics that informs us about the 'what' of a person. It is about 'who' someone is, and that, as Hannah Arendt (1998) aptly remarked, can only be shown through storytelling. The narrative approach fits with the communitarian view of the embedded self, and with the psychoanalytical view of the non-unified subject. On the one hand, our stories of our selves and others are only partly of our own making: we enter upon a stage already set, and our lives for the most part follow the course of already available narrative scripts. On the other hand, our stories are multilayered and contradictory; the scripts of gender, race, ethnicity and class play a constitutive role, but never in the same way, never as mere determining factors. Stuart Hall reminds us of the *lack* and *excess* accompanying processes of identification: we are simultaneously less and more than the sum of the social categories with which we are identified (Hall, 1996).

## AGENCY AND COMPLEXITY

Both the systemic and the constructionist approaches to intersectionality adhere to an anti-essentialist view of identity. However, the systemic approach simultaneously holds that the meanings of social identities are determined by racism, classism, sexism, etc., which are taken to be static and rigid systems of domination. This focus has two unfortunate effects.

First, the systemic approach tends to ignore the agency of individual subjects by interpreting identity constructions as not only made and as such contingent, but as made by the powers-that-be and as such false. However, constructionism defends the first claim, but rejects the latter: constructions of identity are not ideological distortions of a suppressed and authentic experience, but the (symbolic-material) effects of performative actions (Butler, 1990). The systemic approach has adopted the notion of 'construction', while holding on to the epistemological assumptions of theories of ideology.

Second, the complexity that emerges from systemic intersectional

analyses boils down to the complexity of ever more layers of oppression and domination. The 'interlocking', or 'intersection', of frameworks of gender and race is highlighted not to grasp the various ways in which social identity categories modify one another, but to highlight how, as different systems of oppression, they 'converge' (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245). The list of identity variables functions as an indicator of the measure of oppression suffered: the longer the list, the heavier the burden. One of the reasons for this reductionist tendency may be that the typical systemic case study focuses on groups who are positioned on the fringes of society, for whom mechanisms of social power have indeed become reified. But it is highly questionable to base one's general framework of identity upon such 'extreme' cases in which power works in a near totalitarian way.

In more 'ordinary' cases differences in power cannot be simply added up to a singular picture. Rather than exposing predictable plots of one party dominating the other, a constructionist approach, as I show in the remainder of this article, promises subtler accounts in which the effective operation of multiple axes of inequality can only be accounted for by the narration of multilayered stories.

#### ACCIDENTAL CLASSMATES: A PECULIAR SITE

The life-story narratives of my former classmates highlight how the lives of people in an affluent Western European society are affected by axes of difference and equality, e.g. gender, ethnicity, class and religion.<sup>2</sup> As an unremarkable assembly of working- and lower middle-class people, my classmates do not attract much attention from mainstream policy-makers and researchers. They are neither part of an (economic or cultural) elite nor of an underclass of social dropouts. They neither cause nor represent significant social problems. Nor do they figure in the work of critical cultural studies scholars, who focus on popular subcultures and cultural representations celebrating hybridity and creolization, or on political practices of empowerment and progressive coalition building. The stories of my former classmates are considered 'ordinary', i.e. not interesting enough to recount to the larger public nor to preserve for future generations. Most of my respondents agree with these hegemonic accounts. Frequently, when I contacted them, their first response was: 'but I have nothing to tell you ...', 'but I don't know anything ...' However, as Nick Couldry claims: 'when so many people's lives are standardly judged not "interesting" enough to hear, cultural studies should operate on the principle that each person's voice, and reflexivity, matters' (Couldry, 2000: 58).

In addition, my respondents cannot be said to belong to one social 'group'. This is not to deny that we share characteristics. We were all

born in the mid-1950s, most of us in, or near, the village of Weemerloo (a pseudonym). We share working-class backgrounds, Protestantism and grew up in the same locality. But there are significant divisions among us. The most obvious is ethnicity: we clearly differ in culture, history, language and race. These differences might easily be summarized in dichotomous pairs such as Western vs Far Eastern, colonizer vs colonized, white vs black, or dominant vs oppressed. However, even those of us who are white and Dutch were not members of the 'majority' in some ways, both because we are predominantly from working-class backgrounds, and because our first languages are not Dutch, but Frisian or Stellingwarf.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, we did not inhabit the culturally and economically dominant centre of the Netherlands called Holland, but an impoverished rural periphery of the province of Friesland.

To complicate things further, my Moluccan classmates cannot be simply categorized as belonging to the formerly colonized group. In the Dutch East Indies, Moluccans had occupied a privileged position. As inhabitants of the previously rich and Christian Spice Islands, since the 19th century they were welcomed as useful soldiers to the Royal Dutch Indies Army. Their loyalty to 'God, fatherland and [the royal house of] Orange' lasted up to the Japanese occupation and the subsequent Indonesian struggle for national independence. Consequently, most Moluccan soldiers refused to become part of the Indonesian federation, and in 1950 proclaimed the independent Republik Maluku Selatan (RMS) (Smeets, 1992; Steijlen, 1996; Wittermans, 1991).

This particular history made the predicament of my Moluccan classmates more complicated than ours, their Dutch classmates. When in the 1970s they reached adulthood, they not only had to deal with economic recession and unemployment, but also with the inheritance of the political ideal of a free RMS. Frustrated about the way the Dutch government had betrayed their parents, young Moluccans engaged in violent protests, e.g. the train hijackings of 1975 and 1977, in which several people, both hostages and hijackers, were killed. At that time, relations between the Dutch and the Moluccan population were strained. In the longer run, however, the hijackings had beneficial effects: their dramatic endings forced Moluccans to recognize that a free RMS was unlikely, and triggered the beginning of Dutch policies of multiculturalism.

## LIFE-STORIES

My research population consists of 48 individuals, who had been among my primary school classmates between August 1962 and June 1968. By the time I started the project in spring 2001, three of them (all Moluccans) had died. The remaining group consisted of 25 Dutch (14 women, 11 men) and



20 Moluccans (nine women, 11 men). Between 2001 and 2004, 36 people were interviewed: 14 Moluccans (five women, nine men) and 22 Dutch (13 women, nine men).<sup>4</sup> On educational and employment status they were predominantly working class and lower middle class.

The life-story narratives of my classmates furnish abundant evidence that individual identities are constructed at the crossroads of different axes of social difference and inequality, and that these positions are not static and given, but sites of constant struggle and negotiation. To illustrate this, I present fragments of the stories of two of my classmates: Sietse, a Dutch man, and Betty, a Moluccan woman.

Sietse, married with three children, works as a caretaker at a secondary school in Weemerloo. We communicate in the Stellingwarf dialect. As a working-class man, Sietse shows fierce resistance to suggestions that he is of 'lower' status. In Weemerloo his family name is often associated with antisocial behaviour and backwardness. He emphatically distances himself from other branches of this family: 'yes, sometimes they mix you up . . . if one was bad, you were all bad . . . and that is still the case today'. He illustrates this with a story about his son, who at that time attended the school where he works. Because of a traffic accident he was involved in as a child, the boy had become learning disabled and so was allocated to a special class. Sietse recounts a parents' evening at school:

. . . the principal entered, I got along with him very well, and he said to me: 'that 1-A class, how many parents were there?' 'Well', I said, 'two'. 'Yes, that's what you get with those anti-social folk', he said. And I got so angry! I said to him: 'now let me tell you something . . . !' He said . . . [Sietse here indicates that the principal tried to respond, but was interrupted by him]. 'No', I said, 'my own son is in that class!' 'O sorry', he said. I said: 'boy, you think first before you say anything'. Yes, I can say anything to him.

Sietse here articulates a strong form of class consciousness: an acute awareness that people like him are often looked down upon. But he turns this account of a humiliating experience around by mobilizing different modes of authoritative masculinity: he puts the principal in his place by addressing him as a little boy, thus assuming the position of a wiser father ('boy, think before you talk'), but also by intimidating him as an offended, and therefore easily provoked male opponent (the phrase 'now let me tell you something' comes across as a – barely – concealed threat). He also affirms masculine authority in accounts of his dealings with recalcitrant (male) students – which are ethnicized when he relates his encounters with 'foreigners': 'African', 'Yugoslav' (in his usage) and Antillean students. He reports frequent fights between boys and disrespectful behaviour towards himself and the teachers. When they give him a hard time, Sietse stands up to them:

... if, at a certain moment, you are faced with someone who has done something wrong, OK, and you want to explain that, and that person then immediately says: 'yes, but where we come from ...' 'What?!' And then I think: 'no, not "where we come from", where *we* come from. You should stick to *our* rules. I don't care about the rules you have at home.'

Sietse's masculine insistence on discipline, respect for authority and rules can be linked to his working-class background and the way he himself was raised: not with words but deeds. If you did something wrong, you got beaten and: 'we accepted that, yes, you deserved it, it's as simple as that'. Sietse has to negotiate his position in-between the teachers, who are of higher status than himself, and the pupils, who, though of various nationalities, mostly share his working-class background. What the teachers are expected to do inside the classroom, and what they are supposed to be trained and paid for, Sietse (who is not trained and is paid less) is expected to do outside the classroom, i.e. to keep these often difficult boys under control.

Sietse's account is an apt illustration of the insight afforded by intersectional theory of how class identity intersects with gender (i.e. masculinity) and ethnicity (i.e. Dutchness), and how the narrative scripts available for these different collective identities modify one another to produce a singular and unique life-story.

Betty is a Moluccan woman who now lives with her Dutch husband in a city 200 km from Weemerloo. To their regret they have no children. When she was 16 years old, Betty fled from Weemerloo because her step-father sexually assaulted her. She was never interested in education ('I always thought: I will become a housewife anyway'), and has worked in a factory most of her life. Her current job involves manufacturing gas heaters. She works only with men, expresses pride in doing a man's job and being just as strong as 'the boys' although she is very small and slim. She clearly enjoys outranking men who come to her for advice while being protective of her. The stories of her private life, however, revolve around violence. As a child she once watched her father hit her mother so hard that she was left with a permanent limp:

I always blamed my father for that. . . . If he starts talking about my mother, then I say: 'no, what you did to mummy' . . . I say: 'I will never forgive you'.

This, together with memories of her father beating up her sister and herself, is one reason she distances herself from other Moluccans, especially men: 'I always said: me marry a Moluccan? Never in my lifetime!' And, like her sister, she never did. Instead, she has become part of her Dutch family-in-law and usually speaks the Saxon regional dialect. However, her decision never to get involved with a Moluccan was no safeguard against violent relationships. In her early twenties, she lived

with a Dutch heroin addict. These were years full of tension and domestic violence – in this case with her as the perpetrator. There is a lot of aggression in her, she tells me:

I strike back . . . nasty business, because I know that I can't win. . . . Still, I strike back, I do try! It's not for nothing that I had my ribs bruised three times . . . I was a rebellious thing [*een opstandig ding*].

Like Sietse's account, Betty's story illustrates the usefulness of the intersectional approach to identity. After finishing 'domestic school', anticipating the traditional (working- and middle-class Dutch) gender role that her mother followed, Betty now finds herself doing a 'man's job' – becoming 'one of the boys' while remaining a 'girl'. Because of her early experiences, gender and ethnicity are intimately linked in that she associates Moluccan men with violence, whereas men of all other ethnic groups in her story figure as grateful and protective friends.

These readings of Sietse's and Betty's stories offer examples of the kind of interpretations which a constructionist version of intersectionality may yield. Their accounts consist of multilayered, contradictory stories in which the social and symbolic categories of gender, ethnicity and class play a constitutive role. Both Sietse's and Betty's narratives contain elements of resistance against the push-and-pull of traditional categorizations: Sietse in his articulation of working-class masculine consciousness vis-a-vis representatives of the middle class, Betty in her (seemingly) unambiguous exit from her own ethnic community. At the same time, their accounts show that not all counter-narratives are politically progressive or empowering (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 59). This becomes even clearer if we further analyse Betty's narrative.

## ROOTS AND ROUTES

Betty's positioning at the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, etc. is not sufficient to explain her story. For one of the main themes in her account is her preoccupation with her origins. To begin with: Betty has a half-brother, Mark, who was fostered by a Moluccan family when her mother married Betty's father. Only in her teens did Betty learn about his existence, and it was to him she turned when running away from her violent stepfather. Second, Betty heard about rumours circulating in the Moluccan neighbourhood shortly after she was born, that she was really the daughter of a friend of the family. Third, years ago she found out that her grandparents were not really her mother's parents, but had adopted her. Betty's mother, who died 10 years ago, never managed to find out who her 'real' parents were. And just recently, Betty's father had made

cryptic remarks suggesting that Mark's supposed father (an old army colleague of his) was not his 'real' father. Now Betty has a nagging suspicion that Mark might be her full brother after all.

Hence, Betty has repeatedly been faced with suggestions that her reality was not what she thought. These betrayals by those closest to her have hurt her deeply. No wonder that a dominant leitmotif in her account is how (not) to forgive and forget, both in relation to experiences with (Moluccan) male violence and female complicity and to the secretiveness around the question of her origin. Her present way of dealing with it is to declare the issue of her origins 'a closed book'. Thus she has declined invitations to travel to the Moluccas, claims to have forgotten her first language, and lets her father know that his stories about relatives in the Moluccas do not interest her. But during the interview, she also suddenly tells me that she feels like she is carrying 'a time bomb' inside, one she feels could just explode one day. Hence, underneath her determined posture, uncertainties linger, obstructing her attempts to reach narrative closure about 'where she is from'.

The theme of origins was evident in the stories of many of my Moluccan classmates. Episodes about finding out about 'where they came from' or their 'roots' often constituted a turning point in the accounts of their lives. The 'roots' that they attempted to reconstruct take various forms. In Betty's case, it is her family lineage. Another classmate spends all his time and energy in gathering and spreading knowledge about indigenous Moluccan customs. A third relishes memories of her childhood in the Frisian countryside. Some have dedicated themselves to the current struggle in the Moluccas against poverty and attacks by Muslims. Yet another tells me that in order to become 'truly Moluccan', he needed to become an individual and step out of the Moluccan community. If these quests find successful closure, they signify a positive turning point in the narrator's life-story. But in some cases they prove more disturbing. Betty's story is a case in point, as is the story of a Moluccan classmate who, feeling pressured by his relatives and his ancestors during his first visit to the Moluccas, suffered a psychotic breakdown, which has left him in a permanent state of psychic vulnerability.

At first sight, origins did not figure as an obstacle to be dealt with, a void to be filled or a book to be closed, in the stories of my Dutch classmates. We are part of clearly delineated family networks, our grandparents and other relatives lived close to our homes and at school we learned proud stories about the Dutch, the Frisians and even the Stellingwarfs, as peoples that bravely and successfully fought for their freedom and independence. Hence, we did not show a specific urge to articulate our identity in terms of forefathers, family lineage, ancient customs, ethnic descent or national pride.

Still, it is remarkable how most of my Dutch classmates stayed

relatively close to home. Of my 14 Moluccan classmates, only one returned to Weemerloo. Eight moved elsewhere but remained in the north of the Netherlands, five live further away. In contrast, only two of my 22 Dutch classmates have left the north. Eleven moved to villages nearby, and nine still live in (or returned to) Weemerloo. In their younger years they studied, had work placements or jobs outside Weemerloo, but they always returned home at weekends: that was where their social life continued and where they helped their parents on their farms or in their households.

The life-story narratives of my classmates, Moluccan and Dutch alike, thus suggest, contrary to postmodern theories about us all becoming 'nomads' or 'migrants' with minimal and fragmented selves, that an attachment to one's 'origins' is important to many people's health and well-being.

#### BELONGING: A PRECARIOUS PREDICAMENT

The constructionist approach to intersectionality has emphasized that 'belongingness' is an essential ingredient of ethnicity. According to Anthias and Yuval-Davis, ethnicity revolves around the construction of a collective origin or destiny, and provides individuals with 'a sense of roots' which is often pivotal in their understanding of who they are (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992: 6). Thus ethnicity is effectively dissociated from its essentialist and racist references to ties of 'blood' and 'earth', and redefined to express the insight that we are all situated subjects.

It seems that in these redefinitions the issue of belonging is unjustifiably linked exclusively with ethnic membership. But in the narratives of my classmates, belongingness, a sense of rootedness or feeling 'at home', did not merely pertain to ethnic community. It was also related to attachment to, or identification with, social class, family, forebears, a particular region or the landscape of one's childhood. Belonging refers to an experience of 'fitting into' certain intersectional locations – locations that may be manufactured by hegemonic discourses of ethnicity, nation, culture and race, but also by articulatory practices around family, gender, age, religion, sexuality or class. Furthermore, belonging does not refer to a state of being, but to a desire to belong, a 'longing to be' (see also Bell, 1999: 1). Hence, because identities are performatively produced in and through narrative enactments, belonging is never given, but always a precarious achievement.

The desire for narrative closure, the quest for a life that is unitary and whole is like the longing for a lost paradise; it will necessarily remain unfulfilled. This impossibility of returning to one's *roots* incites human subjects (individually and collectively) to trace out their *routes* (Hall,

1991). Concerns for a (common) origin often tend towards essentialist and politically conservative conceptions of (common) destiny. At the same time, my classmates have taught me that if the quest for one's origins is frustrated, if the narrative of one's life lacks an account of the larger genealogy or collective identity into which it can be inscribed, this constitutes a serious obstacle to forging new routes.

## NOTES

1. By using 'Dutch' and 'Moluccan' I remain close to everyday usage in the Netherlands, where the terminology of white and black is hardly ever used by any ethnic group.
2. A similar research project has been undertaken by feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner, who refers to her project as a form of interview-driven, 'delocalized' fieldwork, which starts from the former existence of a classical anthropological site (the school) where people formed a face-to-face community, to enable the researcher to deal with longer stretches of time and larger areas of space (Ortner, 2003).
3. Frisian is spoken by about half a million inhabitants of the Netherlands. In 1970 it was recognized as the official language of Friesland. Stellingwarf is a Low Saxon variant of the Saxon dialect spoken by some 50,000 people in the north and east of the Netherlands.
4. Strictly speaking, I interviewed 35 of my classmates, as one interview was held with me (by Evelien Tonkens). My position in this project is therefore double: I am both the researcher and part of the group under research.

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