The Search for Sensuous Geographies of Absence

Indisch Mediation of Loss

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Abstract

This article explores how the descendants of migrants expelled from their originary homeland engage with geographies of loss, and how travel serves as an active process of mediation. My focus is on Indies (Indonesian-Dutch) migrants and their descendants living in the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Drawing on rich ethnographic material I explore how migrants’ descendants associate colonial times and ancestral homelands with narrative strategies of exclusion and containment and tempo doeloe discourses (a nostalgic longing for the ‘good old days’) as generative of a collective victimhood. I seek to unravel how descendants explore agentic modalities of travel in order to reactivate, re-embody, and thus intervene in their families’ and collective histories. The article analyses how affective experiences of places of and far beyond the geographical locations of the Dutch East Indies have a potential to invigorate embodied Indies sensibilities. Thus, I write towards a theory of intergenerational transmission and felt dispositions in relation to old, multiracial diasporas such as the Indies. I argue that searches for sensuous geographies of absence are a specific modality of genealogy work that serves as a vehicle through which to move across and among different times in order to destabilize postcolonial temporalities.

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Keywords


Introduction

This article explores how the descendants of migrants expelled from their original homeland employ travel as an active contestation against the inheritance of loss. My focus is on Indonesian-Dutch (Indies) migrants1 and their descendants living in the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Indies people trace their family heritage to transgenerational interracial and intercultural mixing between Indonesian women and Dutch or other European men and/or Indies people themselves in the colonial Dutch East Indies. In the Netherlands, Indies people are generally regarded as ‘postcolonial migrants’ (Van Leeuwen 2008; Bosma 2009; Oostindie 2009) and are perceived here, as well as in Australia, Canada, and the USA as a ‘model minority’.2 The Indies people also refer to themselves as ‘Indo’, ‘Indisch’ Dutch-Indonesians, ‘the other Dutch’ and ‘Amer-Indo’.

Scholarly work on Indies identity politics in the Netherlands has been primarily based in the field of cultural studies (Pattynama 2000, 2003a, 2011a, 2014; De Mul 2011) and mainly focused on the analysis of *tempo doeloe*—a specific form of colonial nostalgia that implies a longing for the ‘good old days’ of the

1 Throughout the article I use the term ‘migrants’ to refer to adults who left the Dutch East Indies during the decolonization period in the aftermath of the Second World War and settled in the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and the United States. I use terms ‘children and grandchildren of migrants’; and ‘migrants’ descendants’ to refer to descendants of adults who left the Dutch East Indies during the decolonization period in the aftermath of the Second World War. The term ‘repatriates’ was initially used in the Netherlands; however, this term is problematic as it refers to persons who return to their country of origin, and while the Indies people whom I refer to as ‘repatriates’ were Dutch citizens before moving to the Netherlands, some of them had never been to the Netherlands before, and for many, the Dutch East Indies was their home. The terms ‘migrants’, ‘children and grandchildren of migrants’, and ‘migrants’ descendants’ avoid the problems of terms such as ‘first-, second-, and third-generation’, as these are imprecise terms and people often do not neatly fit into such categories in everyday life. These generational conceptualizations are the subject of ongoing cultural and political discussions.

2 For the Australian context, see for example Coté and Westerbeek-Veld 2005 and Duyker 1987; for the Netherlands, see Pattynama 2000.
Dutch East Indies in Dutch postcolonial literature and film. With the recent ‘history turn’ in the Netherlands (Hurenkamp, Tonkens and Duyvendak 2011), there has been much interest from historians and anthropologists, who are mainly concerned with larger-scale institutional and political developments (Bosma 2009), historical approaches to the acquisition of citizenship (Oostindie 2009), and Indies communities’ interactions with Dutch society at large (Van Leeuwen 2008). Scholarly work on Indies people outside of the Netherlands is scarce and focused mainly on documenting the particularities of Indies people’s migration and settlement processes (Côté and Westerbeek-Veld 2005).

This article contributes to the burgeoning field of Indies studies by drawing scholarly attention to the need to expand the analytical focus on what constitutes Indies-ness. Furthermore, I address the larger question of how descendants of migrants engage with geographies of loss, and how travel serves as an active process of mediation.

This article is a part of a larger project on Indies genealogy and memory work. My methodological approach is based on transnational ethnography focused on the collection of life narratives told in semi-structured, open-ended interviews over a period of several years by Indies people of different socio-economic backgrounds living in the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and the United States. Participants were initially solicited through community networks and social media such as Facebook, followed by a snowball method, which ultimately garnered 147 participants. This approach allowed me to develop rich ethnographic material on the complexities involved in the construction of coherent narratives of the self (Dragojlovic 2011) and transgenerational constructions of family narratives, both highly pertinent in the context of a historical, multiracial diaspora. Furthermore, closely following the dynamics within 23 Indies families over a period of four years allowed me to develop...
some insight into the transnational complexities that these families faced and included people in my research who are not active participants in Indies identity politics in local communities or via social media, but whose lives are situated in an ongoing contestation of the geographies of home and belonging.

Regardless of their country of citizenship, my interlocutors’ interest in the colonial past is predominantly framed by a lack of knowledge about their parents’ and grandparents’ lives which, many are convinced, profoundly influenced their lives. Descendants’ notions of self and belonging are saturated by ambiguous histories of other peoples’ experiences of the colonial past, mediated through the stories and silences of their immediate family members, relatives, and Indies history-production enterprises both in the Netherlands and across diasporic spaces. Significantly, the notion of *tempo doeloe* has strongly informed the life narratives of all of my interlocutors, being a matter constitutive of Indies cultural traditions. I use the word ‘matter’ to refer to narratives about the past as well as materialities of the past—such as photographs or other objects brought back from the Dutch East Indies. It is important to stress that migrants’ descendants used the phrase *tempo doeloe* in two main ways. Firstly, to refer to the time prior to the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies (1942) and their ancestors’ longing for the lost homeland. Secondly, and most importantly, *tempo doeloe* discourses were associated with narrative strategies of exclusion and containment and as generative of collective victimhood.

Refusing to be associated with victimhood and discourses of loss, migrants’ descendants actively intervene into the past in order to alleviate the feeling of absence and to allow for new perspectives and understandings of the past to emerge. They ascribe a particular value to personal experience, which Teresa de Lauretis (1984:159) persuasively argues is a ‘[p]rocess by which […] subjectivity is constructed’. Thus I ask: What modes of being and affective experiences do subjects seek in order to make reconnections with the past imaginable and meaningful? Drawing on Hirsch’s notion of postmemory—memories that are once removed from an original source and experienced through mediation (Hirsch 2008:111)—I seek to unravel how descendants explore agentic modal-

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6 It is important to note that the children and grandchildren of Indies migrants living in Australia, Canada, and the United States are rarely fluent in Dutch, and they have to negotiate language barriers in their consumption of Indies cultural production. The question of translation and fluency in the Dutch language, or the lack thereof, is an ongoing topic of discussion in Indies virtual communities such as ‘The Dutch Indonesian Community’ (https://www.facebook.com/groups/Dutchindocommunity/?fref=ts) and the ‘Old Dutch-Indonesian Community’ (https://www.facebook.com/groups/old.dutch.indonesian.community/?fref=ts).
ities of travel in order to reactivate, re-embody, and thus intervene in their families’ and collective histories. I explore how affective experiences of places of and far beyond the geographical locations of the Dutch East Indies have a potential to invigorate embodied Indies sensibilities. Thus, I write towards a theory of intergenerational transmission and felt dispositions in relation to old, multiracial diasporas.

Growing up with the impression that Indies people came from a geographical environment with radically different smells, sounds, and tastes, many descendants search for geographical locations where the postmemory of sensuous geographies—senses related to the human experience of environment (Rodaway 2011: ix)—can be evoked and experienced. Building on scholarship that stresses the importance of sensuous geographies for mobile peoples (McKay 2005) and calls from the anthropology of absence (Bille, Hastrup and Soerensen 2010; Meyer 2012) for the exploration of how the perception of absence—things, people, places—informs social relations, I have developed a new analytical lens termed ‘sensuous geographies of absence’. Thus, searching for sensuous geographies of absence serves as a specific modality of genealogy work that emphasizes personal experiences of geographical locations associated with Indies historical landscapes. Here, colonial recollections7 are located in concerns with the exploration of geographical places capable of producing affective feelings associated with unique Indies sensibilities that can be traced back to the colonial times. I contend that this search for sensuous geographies of absence serves as a vehicle through which to move across and among different times in order to destabilize postcolonial temporalities.

In order to do so I engage with scholarly literature on genealogy and memory work in the wake of forced migration and historical trauma (Kuhn 1995; Hirsch 1997; Hirsch and Smith 2002; Stein 2009); colonial nostalgia (Bissell 2005; Pattynama 2011a, 2011b; De Mul 2011; Stoler and Strassler 2000; Sastramidjaja [this issue]); anthropology of absence (Bille, Hastrup and Soerensen 2010; Meyer 2012); affective experiences of sensuous geographies (Casey 1997; Rodaway 2011); intergenerational transmission (Gordon 2008; Bell 2007; Cho 2008); and embodiment (Connerton 1989; Narvaez 2006; Mackie and Stevens 2009; Paterson 2009) in order to problematize the temporal and spatial preoccupation with absence and the ways in which subjects make a connection between experiences of place and embodied Indies sensibilities.

7 Like other articles in this special issue, this article explores modalities of colonial recollections in the present.
The article is divided into three sections. The first part offers information about the method of inquiry used, and provides a brief background about the formation of Indies cultures. Furthermore, I discuss situate scholarly debates about *tempo doeloe*—the conventional memory trope of nostalgic yearning for the Dutch East Indies—in order to provide a background to how migrants' descendants engage with what has been set out for them as a ‘memory community’ (Pattynama 2011a, 2014; De Mul 2011). The second part focuses on Indies genealogy work and scholarly studies on intergenerational transmission and embodied disposition as a theoretical background for the analysis of Indies active contestation against the inheritance of loss. The third part discusses Indies migrants' (un)intentional search for sensuous geographies of absence.

**Ethnographic Context**

The ethnographic material on which this article is based was collected during extended ethnographic research (2009–2014) among Indies people living in the Netherlands, Australia Canada, and the United States as part of a larger project on Indies practices of genealogy tracing. The interest of Indies people in the past necessitated that a transgenerational ethnographic inquiry be carried out in order to scrutinize how those of multiracial descent mobilize conceptualizations of the legitimizing rules of the colonial empire, postcolonial nation-states, self, ethnicity, and race (Clarke and Thomas 2006). I have relied on ethnographic techniques, including recording genealogies, past and present family relationships, and current social and cultural engagements. My interlocutors narrated their family histories to me in the form of semi-structured interviews and informal conversations at family gatherings or Indies cultural activities we attended together. An integral part of each semi-structured interview was the inquiry into the interlocutors’ possession of legal documents such as birth certificates, residency permits, and proofs of citizenship, and visual material such as family photographs and drawings related to the family’s history as selected by the interlocutors. In addition, the interlocutors drew family trees, which in most cases turned out to be a difficult and, at times, daunting task revealing stories of past suffering, bitterness, suspicion, and betrayal during the Second World War, the Indonesian struggle for independence, and the subsequent decolonization. For most, these events were an integral part not only of the ways in which they understood their families’ histories, but also as ‘critical event(s)’ (Das 1995) that were profoundly important for the ways in which they positioned themselves in the present (Dragojlovic 2011).
Almost without exception, interlocutors’ narratives about the difficult past commenced with their emphasis on ‘I/we Indies people are not victims’. I suggest that, by specifically rejecting notions of victimhood and emphasizing that the self is not defined by past violence and suffering, subjects engage in a creative appropriation of the past through explorative practices of the absence of knowledge in which they grew up. The following section provides a broad framework about developments of Indies cultures in order to provide a broader framework for an analysis of the migrants’ descendants’ contemporary attempts to locate and experience sensuous geographies of absence.

The Formation of Indies Cultures

The formation of Indies cultures began in the colonial Dutch East Indies, present-day Indonesia (Bosma and Raben 2008). From the early seventeenth century onwards, Dutch men took Indonesian women as their companions, either as legitimate wives or as so-called nyai (housekeepers/bed partners), which resulted in a large Indo-Dutch population. Over the centuries this practice was normalized (Taylor 1983; Locher-Scholten 2000) and these interracial intimacies were accepted as long as they followed prescribed gender, race, and class patterns. Indies individuals and communities in the Dutch East Indies occupied an ambivalent space. On the one hand, their hybridity granted them privileges reserved for Europeans; on the other hand, they were able to move between European and Indonesian worlds (McClintock 1995; Stoler 2002).

Despite the fact that the population of the Dutch East Indies was classified into three categories—Europeans (Europeaanen), natives (Inlanders), and Foreign Asians (Vreemde Oosterlingen)—each of these classes was multilayered, and the category of ‘Europeans’ was particularly multifaceted (Stoler 2002:51–101). Prior to the ethische politiek (hereafter: ethical policy) enunciated in 1901, the Europeans were divided into two main categories: permanent and temporary residents. The permanent colonial residents (Blijvers) included people of mixed racial descent and ‘pure’ whites (Blanda totok). Indo-Europeans (Indo-Europeanen) acquired the juridical status of ‘European’ only after they had been formally acknowledged by their European father (Pattynama 2000). Following the ethische politiek, a new group of ‘white’ colonizers—the so-called ‘passers’ (trekkers)—arrived in the Dutch East Indies and formed a new upper class.8

8 The ethical policy was established in response to nineteenth-century criticisms of the Dutch
Their arrival significantly diminished the social and economic status of the long-term residents of mixed descent (Gouda 1995:24–9).

Later, during the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies (1942–1945), Eurasians were classified as ‘Asians’. While the majority of the European population was interned in prison camps, those of Eurasian origin were given the opportunity to stay outside of the prison camps if they were able to prove that their ancestry was Indonesian enough. Approximately 100,000 Dutch and Eurasian individuals were interned, while approximately 220,000 Eurasians stayed outside of the Japanese prison camps (De Jong 2002:305). Living conditions were especially harsh for women and children, both in and outside of the prison camps. Many Eurasians suffered terrifying brutalities during the initial period of the Indonesian independence movement between 1945 and 1946, known as the bersiap period (Anderson 1972; Bussemaker 2005), meaning to ‘get ready’ or ‘get prepared’.

Following Indonesian independence in 1949, those recognized as Dutch citizens were forced to leave the country and many moved to the Netherlands, the USA, or Australia (Bosma, Raben and Willems 2006:26). The Netherlands in the 1950s was dominated by the struggles and suffering of the Second World War and focused on economic reconstruction and the development of the welfare state. In this climate the colonial migrants found little room for public or personal reflections on the colonial past (Locher-Scholten 1995:3–9). The cultural-assimilation politics framed by structural racism and discrimination informed many social policies, including social housing, which was not granted to families that appeared to be ‘too Asian’ or ‘too oriented towards the east’ (Mak 2000:250).

Pamela Pattynama (2000, 2003b) has shown that literature by Indies writers during that time, and the launching of the journal Tong Tong in 1958, were central in the formation of the Indies imagined community during the post-war years. The Tong Tong journal became the main platform for repatriated people of Indies descent, largely focused on themes from the Dutch East Indies. The journal has since been retitled Moesson, and under the current editorship of Marjolein van Asdonck and Geert Onno Prins is more concerned with Indies contemporary life in the Netherlands and the diaspora rather than the exploitation of its Indonesian possessions. Thus, the ethical policy proposed to deliver better health care and more schools for Indonesians, and to bring about political decentralization. The policy proposed that Dutch individuals in the Dutch East Indies assumed the role of ‘voogdijschap’, meaning they should act as moral guardians (Gouda 1995:24).

For more details on Japanese captives in Asia during the Second World War, see Blackburn and Hack 2008.
Dutch East Indies, even though the latter theme is still represented to some extent.10 This editorial policy also reflects migrants' descendants' identity politics, which strive to know and respect the colonial past, but are more concerned with the present and the future. It is important to mention that the journal had been distributed across diasporic spaces much before its online instalment, playing an important role in the production of Indies transnational connectivities.

**Tempo Doeloe and Narrative Strategies of Exclusion**

Based on an analysis of Indies literature (Pattynama 2003a, 2003b) and the Indies photo collection of the Indies Wetenschappelijk Instituut (iwi), Pamela Pattynama (2011a) has argued that *tempo doeloe* has been crucial in constituting a ‘memorial community’ of Indies people in the Netherlands.11 Stressing the diversity and complexity of Indies engagements with a nostalgic longing for *tempo doeloe*, Pattynama refers to it as a ‘contradictory nostalgia’. She further argues (Pattynama 2003a) that a distinction can be made between the first-generation Indies migrants who felt *kesasar* (dislocated), as they firmly believed that their home country was ‘there’ and ‘then’, and second-generation migrants. Pattynama (2003a) suggests that second-generation Indo’s identity politics in the Netherlands are preoccupied with uncertainty. Developing Pattynama's argument, Sarah de Mul in her analysis of Indies literature argues that the understanding of *tempo doeloe* has to be distinguished along lines of age and ethnicity (2011:58–60). While De Mul provides an important contribution towards the multiplicity of *tempo doeloe* discourses, an overemphasis on generational and ethnic distinctions is problematic, as people of multifaceted ethnic origins rarely fit neatly into ethnic categories. Equally problematic are presumptions that a clear identification can be made along lines of generational affiliations. Moreover, it is crucially important to reiterate that multiple forms of remembrance and nostalgic imaginations coexist and often contradict each other (Bissell 2005), regardless of Indies generational, ethnic, and citizenry affiliations. While both Pattynama (2003b) and De Mul (2010) have rightfully stressed the centrality of memory and remembering in Indies iden-

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10 Interview 11-6-2011.

11 While *tempo doeloe* was primarily associated with people of Indies descent in the 1950s, since the late 1990s it has come to refer to a profitable industry in both the Netherlands and Indonesia (Stoler and Strassler 2000; Sastramidjaja [this issue]). Furthermore, Lizzy van Leeuwen (2008) has persuasively argued that traces of Dutch East Indies culture have been incorporated into the Dutch cultural and public space, extending far beyond the people who have family histories connected to the colonial Dutch East Indies.
tity politics, the focus of their analyses is not on the complexities of reception and consumption across different socio-economic and citizenry affiliations. Furthermore, the conceptualization of ‘memory community’, partially due to its focus on textual and visual representations rather than the everydayness of lived experience, does not pay sufficient attention to the ways in which descendants repudiate, contest, and subvert the conventional tempo doeloe trope.

As my analysis is based on a rich transgenerational and transnational ethnographic material I collected during my ethnographic research among Indies people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds living in the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, and the USA and their transnational interactions, my work diverges from Pattynama’s and De Mul’s not only in its methodological approach, but also in its expansion of what constitutes Indies-ness. I argue that narratives of rootlessness and dislocation prevail regardless of age, gender, or ethnic affiliations (for instance, Indies, Indo-Chinese, Indo-Japanese, Eurasian with a Dutch, German, and/or Swiss and Indonesian background). I agree with Lizzy van Leeuwen’s important argument that tempo doeloe cultural production ignores the multiplicity of Indies voices in the Netherlands and serves to create a hegemonic discourse about Indies people, particularly through the popular TV show Tante Lien (Van Leeuwen 2008:17). However, while stressing major problems with tempo doeloe cultural production, Van Leeuwen perpetuates the problematic categories of ‘high’ versus ‘popular’ art, as well as the exoticization of folklore (see also Legêne 2011), and a sharp distinction between the Indies cultural elite and the lower classes. My contention is that boundaries of class are much more porous, and hegemonic tempo doeloe discourses are frequently embraced, discarded, or appropriated to serve different goals by people of different generations and socio-economic backgrounds. Tempo doeloe cultures—cultural production that celebrates the period of the Dutch East Indies as ‘the good old days’—are present also in Australia, the United States, and Canada, but they are almost exclusively endorsed by elderly Indies migrants. These gatherings often include the participation of Indies artists from the Netherlands who maintain a tempo doeloe orientation (for instance, performances by Wieteke van Dort, a protagonist of the Tante Lien show) and are occasionally attended by migrants’ children and grandchildren as a gesture of loyalty and of solidarity with ancestral loss.

My interlocutors clearly and keenly wished to distinguish their search into their families’ and collective Indies histories from tempo doeloe. This presents us with a clear generational demarcation in which descendants do not see themselves as subjects longing for the Dutch East Indies, as for many this represents a morally unacceptable longing for racial, cultural, and socio-economic
superiority. Rich ethnographic data suggest that migrants’ descendants are more interested in what has been omitted, excluded, and concealed, rather than visibly presented, encouraged, or celebrated through a romanticized longing for the colonial past. On the one hand, colonial life is far removed from the lives of migrants’ children and grandchildren. On the other hand, longings for the forever lost Arcadian home and an unattainable past are frequently approached with feelings of unease and discomfort, as they are generative of a collective victimhood from which many wish to be disassociated. Moreover, such longings are often understood to be questioning, or even denying, the possibility of rightful, cultural citizenship for Indies people beyond the colonial empire. Heavily involved with Indies identity politics and concerned for its future, many Indies descendants are engaged in regenerating Indies culture and forging new futures for transnational Indies cultures—futures that are not entirely focused on the inheritance of loss associated with victimhood. The association between tempo doeloe and narrative strategies of exclusion and containment about the colonial past focuses on three main narrative themes—the racial, socio-economic, and gendered hierarchies that were continuously repressed and silenced.

The most frequent association with tempo doeloe is the representation of a life of leisure in the tropical climate of the Dutch East Indies which is unproblematically embedded in the celebration of an opulent lifestyle and economic and racial hierarchies that distinguished the colonizers from the local population. Memories of domestic violence, bitter family intrigues, and social, economic, religious, and racial inequalities prior to the 1940s occasionally seep through the parental wall of silence, standing in sharp contrast to romanticized memories of colonial life. Such contradictions, as well as the presumed right to racial and socio-economic privileges, commonly produces feelings of discomfort, shame, or embarrassment among descendants struggling to position themselves within larger family histories.

The romance of the past is entrenched in a denial of the gendered racial hierarchies, interfamilial disputes, and increased stigmatization that characterized the lives of Indies people in the late colonial period (Meijer 2004:10). What is omitted from the normative modalities of remembrance—not only by the Dutch colonial elite but also by those Indies people who actively participated in the production of hierarchies based on economic and social class—are various forms of exclusion. While the normative memory trope tends to celebrate female beauty, it is oblivious to that part of it which celebrated lighter skin colours, obliging such women to enter unwanted marriages in order to bring socio-economic advancement for the whole family. Painful memories of such marital arrangements are the basis of contemporary Indies gender poli-
tics concerned with gender inequality across different cultural and ethnic settings.\(^\text{12}\)

Most children and grandchildren of migrants are acutely aware of the tremendous difficulties, betrayals, exclusions, and intrigues that their parents experienced but then repressed and silenced over the years (Dragojlovic 2011). From this perspective, the celebration and longing for an Arcadian home that never existed is perceived with unease and with a need to personally detach oneself from them. Thus, from the perspective of many Indies descendants, the normative *tempo doeloe* discourses are best seen as what Svetlana Boym refers to as ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed [...] a sentiment of loss and displacement [that] is also a romance in one's own fantasy’ (Boym 2001:xiii, xiv).

Simultaneously, however, many descendants are torn between the sentiments of duty and obligation to be the carriers of Indies histories and memories and their own struggles over how to reconcile contradictions between idealized memories of colonial life and their parents’ grievance for lost homes, suffering during Japanese occupation, and *bersiap*. These struggles are to some extent similar to the struggles of Holocaust memory workers for whom remembering is a process employed as an act of solidarity with parents and other family members who suffered traumatic experiences (Hoffman 2010; Kuhn 1995; Hirsch 1997; Hirsch and Smith 2002). However, as Eva Hoffman (2010:412) has pointed out:

> The suffering of others [...] poses emotional and moral challenges. How to acknowledge another’s grief without being swallowed up by it oneself; how to gain one’s own autonomy without abandoning those who need us; how to offer compassion without reducing the other to the status of ‘victim’.

In these instances, searching for sensuous geographies (directly or indirectly) of absence is a personal and political act which aims to establish solidarity with ancestral grief and loss, but is simultaneously an investment in forging one’s own pathway in relation to the inheritance of loss. Travel has a potential to re-activate, re-embody, and thus intervene in the sense of absence. The underlying logic here is that by bringing oneself to geographical locations that are capable of producing affective feelings associated with unique Indies sensibilities, the children and grandchildren of migrants can rely less on interpretative under-

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\(^{12}\) Ingrid Marijcke Dümpel has been one of the most prominent activists in the field.
standings of what it means to be Indies and instead engage in the production of their own subjective forms of knowledge and, potentially, in the transformation of Indies cultures, which are mindful and respectful of the tempo doeloe cultural traditions of their predecessors, but not overtly determined by them.

Indies Genealogy Work and Embodied Sensibilities

Postmemory’s connection to the past is [thus] not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation.

MARIANNE HIRSCH 1997:306–7

Crucial for Indies genealogy work are investments in taking agency over memories that one did not personally live through. Migrants’ descendants, like the children of Holocaust survivors, are once removed from the original source of pain, and experience it through processes of mediation via their parents—thus it is constituted as postmemory (Hirsch 2008). Equally relevant in the context of Indies migrants’ children and grandchildren’s memories of the past is Alison Landsberg’s (2004) notion of prosthetic memory. Like Hirsch (2008), Landsberg argues that memories of events which one did not live through, but which one experienced as mediated memories, are crucial in constituting subjectivities in the present. Unlike postmemory, which is mediated primarily between parents and children, Landsberg (2004) argues that media technologies have the power to produce memories. In this view, the rich visual productions of feature films and documentaries about the Dutch East Indies and the rich literary production about life in the colony are active contributors to the production of memories of the places and events which the migrants’ descendants did not live through.

It is important to acknowledge that, in some ways, Indies genealogy searches are part of a common middle-class pursuit in the West emerging in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century making family-history-related tourism a very important niche in the international tourist market (Basu 2006). Politically and historically informed, genealogical searches range from the pursuit of ethnic belonging aligned with a particular place or nation state, such as ‘Irishness’ (Nash 2008), to adoptees searching denied genealogical knowledge (Carsten 2007), and post-Holocaust genealogists (Stein 2009). Based on ethno-
graphic data and cultural analysis, my understanding of the Indies practice of genealogy includes: (a) consumption and production of numerous novels, fiction films, theatrical productions, and pop music with Indies themes that value bonds based on kinship; (b) cultural and/or legal, individual, and collective claims of belonging based on ancestry; (c) forms of cultural and political activism that rely on genealogy in order to make legal claims; and (d) the relationship between wider socio-political frameworks and the individual and collective practice of genealogy (Dragojlovic 2011). I argue that Indies genealogy work should be seen as a complex matrix of active, dynamic, and performative engagements with the past.

**Embodied Sensibilities**

Almost without exception, regardless of their country of citizenship, my interlocutors claimed to possess sensibilities that hark back to colonial times and ancestral homeland regarded as typically Indies (typisch Indisch), Eurasian, or Asian. Engaging with this ethnographic material I find it useful to turn to scholarship about intergenerational transmission. In her *Ghostly matters: Hauntings and the sociological imagination*, Avery Gordon (2008) calls for humanities researchers to focus on ideas, processes, and specific things that have been ‘marginalised, excluded or repressed’ (Gordon 2008:4). She makes an important shift from the Foucauldian approach to the genealogical study of historical discontinuities to urge scholars to focus their attention on specific aspects of historical continuities that are transmitted through silence, omissions, echoes, and murmurs (Gordon 2008:viii). Similarly, feminist cultural critics concerned with ‘second generation’ Holocaust memory workers argue that feelings of loss are often transmitted intergenerationally and not necessarily through speech (Kuhn 1995; Hirsch 1997; Hirsch and Smith 2002). In her *Haunting the Korean diaspora: Shame, secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, Grace Cho (2008) offers a nuanced analysis of the intergenerational transmission of memory. She takes a phenomenon of ‘voice hearing’ as a modality of communicating and knowing that makes connectedness to the past and histories that are barely communicated but rather transmitted through silence and secrecy. Vikki Bell (2007) uses the concept of lineage to stress ways in which various forms of shame, trauma, and affect are communicated intergenerationally. Building on Paul Gilroy’s work on diaspora and critical race studies,
Bell emphasizes the importance of exploring the background of people’s felt dispositions, which she describes as ‘those relations that are neither of identification nor of alterity, that is, those of genealogical connection’ (Bell 2007:33). Drawing on Connerton, she argues that these connections are dispositions and relations transmitted by means other than speech—photographs, films, fiction, and more embodied practices of remembering (see also Blackman 2012).\(^\text{14}\)

Paul Connerton (1989:102) makes an important point by arguing that memories are not just inscribed through the construction of cultural texts, but also sedimented in the body. In this way, bodies are containers and carriers of memory, which is unconsciously incorporated (Connerton 1989:72–104). Thus, we need to take into consideration the importance of ‘what bodies do’ (Mackie and Stevens 2009:263)—such as deportments, gestures, postures, and ways of speaking—and ‘how bodies feel the world’ (Paterson 2009:775) in intergenerational transmission, in particular in the case of historical, multiracial diasporas. While the emphasis on intergenerational transmission of specific dispositions is helpful in understanding how people carry ‘the strong presence of the past’ in their bodies, I find Rafael Narvaez’s argument that attention needs to be paid to how embodiment can also alert us to how subjects relate to the future and to an individual capacity to disentangle from ‘the requisites of the past’ (Narvaez 2006:59) crucially important to the discussion about the ethnographic material at hand.

Finally, a discussion about Indies embodied sensibilities needs to be observant of the spatiality of racialization, which features prominently in my interlocutors’ descriptions of how their body feels in the world. The process of racialization is best understood as the process ‘by which meaning is attributed to particular biological features of human beings, as a result of which individuals may be assigned to [or outside] a general category of persons which reproduces itself biologically’ (Miles and Brown 2003:76). Processes of racialization are not independent but, rather, constituted through spatial practices (Razack 2002; Peake and Kobayashi 2002).

**The Search for Sensuous Geographies of Absence**

In their recent volume on the anthropology of absence, Bille, Hastrup and Soerensen (2010) and their contributors argue for scholarly engagement with the experience of absence, whereby sensing things, places, and peoples that

\(^{14}\) Blackman 2012 makes a similar argument about intergenerational transmission.
have been obliterated and lost emerges as crucially important, particularly ‘after catastrophes of war, crime or the destruction of people’ (Bille, Hastrup and Soerensen 2010:2). Furthermore, taking Morgan Meyer’s (2012) argument that absence is something performed through relations, objects, and processes further, I argue that Indies (un)intentional tracing of absent sensuous geographies occurs through acts of mapping out contested geographies of belonging.

In broad terms, sensuous geographies relate to the human sensory experience of the environment (Rodaway 2011:ix). Similarly, places are understood as capable of producing specific emotions of fear, anger, sadness, distress, happiness, and so on. Human geographer Nigel Thrift (2004:64) makes an important point by arguing that senses generate affect through interactions with the environment and/or other people, wherein the affect is first experienced in the body and then articulated through social interactions (Levitt 1996:515). In the field of migration studies, Deirdre McKay (2005) provides a nuanced analysis of Filipina migrant workers’ return to their ‘homeplaces’ by examining the affective understanding of place and subjectivity. Constituted by a strong notion that the self is related to cultural and geographical elsewhere, mobility and travel are an intrinsic part of Indies explorative practices and narratives of belonging. While many migrants’ descendants travel with the specific intention of locating geographical places that might resemble, or produce affects associated with, ancestral originary places, others realize that such imaginary similitudes can occur while travelling for other purposes. However, the underlying logic is that travel and mobility provide the possibilities for explorations of contested geographies of belonging, reimagining, and reconstructing family memories and, thus, for the production of subjective knowledges.

In her seminal work Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities, Avtar Brah cogently argues that “home” and belonging may be integral to the diasporic condition, but how, when, and in what form questions surface, or how they are addressed, is specific to the history of a particular diaspora’ (Brah 1996:193). What came across in my transnational ethnographic material was that regardless of their countries of citizenship, descendants of Indies migrants share a notion of contested geographies of home and belonging. The following narrative introduces readers to the contested notion of home and belonging through an account of how bodies feel the world, providing a starting point for the discussion on how sensuous experiences of place are neither ahistorical nor

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15 In her Domicile and diaspora: Anglo-Indian women and the spatial politics of home, Alison Blunt (2005) makes a similar argument about Anglo-Indian women in Britain.
Furthermore, this narrative highlights how crucial spatiality of race is for multiraciality and Indies ‘sensibilities’. I understand multiraciality as a conceptual and analytical tool that ‘resist[s] a notion of a fragmented body as the product of an unnatural union between hierarchically conceived and incommensurable races’ (Haritaworn 2012:9–10). The critical conceptualization of multiraciality allows for specificity, yet is also aware of broader historical processes through which place has become associated with race (Razack 2002), making room for the possibility of multiple and divergent affiliations with imagined communities.

**Home, Belonging, and Elusive Elsewheres**

Marianne, a highly successful professional woman in her mid thirties, had been deeply involved in Indies cultural activism for about seven years at the time of our open-ended conversations in 2011 and 2012. She grew up as a ‘Dutch girl’ in the Hague, always aware that ‘[m]y parents were not from here’ (*Mijn ouders zijn niet van hier*). However, regardless of the rich Indies cultural production associated with the city since the late 1950s, her childhood and youth were void of any interest or engagement with *tempo doeloe*. Marianne, like many other interlocutors, has a strong feeling of being related to elsewhere, but these elsewheres are elusive, obscured in histories of violence and forced expulsion from the Dutch East Indies, and thus seemingly unreachable and utterly absent. However, what is present is a strong sense of being Dutch but at the same time possessing sensibilities best described as a matrix of mannerisms, unspoken assumptions about cultural practices, affects, and physical appearances that can be traced back to the colonial Dutch East Indies. A preoccupation with ruptures in cultural continuity caused by the decolonization and subsequent assimilation across diasporas informs the lives of many migrants’ descendants, and is a major motivating force for their genealogy work.

Never considering the possibility of visiting Indonesia, but heavily preoccupied with a feeling of belonging to elusive elsewheres, Marianne undertook many journeys in her early twenties. It was an extended holiday in Spain that

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16 In her work on the creation of ‘home’ through smell and cooking by Filipino immigrant women in Hong Kong, Law 2001 cogently argues that rather than perceiving senses only as an intrinsic property of the body, we need to explore how practices that bodies engage in are connected to spaces of power and economy, thereby proving an important argument against the presumption that research focusing on senses provides data that are ahistorical and depoliticized.

17 Throughout this article I have used pseudonyms in order to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.
generated a deep feeling of attachment with the people and its culture—a sentiment of similitude that for her had been absent from her life in the Netherlands. She instantly felt at ease and quickly felt at home with the exuberant, lively local culture. These feelings compelled her to quickly progress through Spanish language courses and, after completing the advanced level, she sought employment in order to immigrate. Being offered a job and finding an apartment in her favourite part of Barcelona, Marianne had to make one more trip to the Hague in order to complete her relocation. On the flight to the Netherlands, she had a vision of an elderly Indonesian woman dressed in simple clothing who told her, ‘You are not Spanish. You are an Indo’ (Jij bent geen Spaanse. Jij bent een Indo). Marianne immediately knew the old lady was one of her nyai, her Indonesian foremothers, even though she had never before seen an image of her. This poignantly realistic experience had a profound effect on Marianne. It brought about an acknowledgement that for many years she had been denying her Indo background, and this realization urged her to abandon her claims to cultural and corporeal similitude with Spain and its people, and move back to the Netherlands. As she concluded:

I realize we, people born after the 1960s, do not need all that tempo doeloe stuff to be Indies. We are not victims! (emphasis in original) We need to find our own way of being Indies.

Subsequently, Marianne became one of the most prominent leaders in the descendants’ cultural politics. While a discussion of their activities is beyond the scope of this article, it is worthwhile mentioning that they are entirely focused on the present and future of Indies identity politics, while intentionally marginalizing, or completely avoiding, the tempo doeloe practices and discourses which focus on the colonial past.

Marianne’s narrative of self-actualization closely resonates with the narratives of my other interlocutors and is important for three main reasons. Firstly, it makes a clear connection between tempo doeloe and victimhood. Secondly, it values the experience of place and its ability to evoke feelings ascribed to unique Indies sensibilities. Thirdly, it stresses the inevitability and centrality of recognizing one’s Indies background and is suggestive of the commonly ascribed mysterious and powerful qualities of Indonesian origins, which are often voiced through visions or dreams articulated by little-known or long-forgotten Indonesian foremothers.

18 Marianne could not recall for me which language the old lady had spoken, but assured me that she understood what she said.
Journeys to Indonesia—Places of Realization, Emotional Catharsis, and Disappointments

A number of scholars (among them Captain 2000; Loriaux 2003; Paasman 2003; Pattynama 2003a; De Vries 2009) have reflected tangentially on the importance that Indisch migrants and their descendants place on visits to Indonesia. These travellers visit places in which they were born, where their parents or grandparents once lived or were imprisoned, or the graves of those who tragically lost their lives, or to visit family members still living in Indonesia. Almost without exception, my interlocutors ascribe power to former colonial geographies—lost ancestral homelands with a capacity to produce strong emotions and have transformative qualities. What is important in the case of Indies travellers is that the capacity of places to produce affects is always interpreted through the lens of personal postmemory, providing them with a feeling of actively participating in the destabilization of postcolonial temporalities. In what follows I discuss individuals’ travels to Indonesia, which were undertaken in order to explore the centrality of experiencing affective possibilities associated with ancestral geographical locations.

Travellers to Java

Richard, a man in his late thirties, grew up in Canada. While well aware of his Indies background, he never paid much attention to the Indies publications his parents, uncles, and aunties read regularly. Thinking that he already knew all that there was to know about the colonial history, and not being interested in ‘all that tempo doeloe stuff’, he presumed that such popular literature would only include topics related to the Dutch East Indies. One day, however, he accidently saw a page of the Australian-based Indies journal Bambu, containing information about the activities of migrants’ descendants. The text provided information about an established network of Indies people born long after the disintegration of the Dutch East Indies. Feeling surprised and excited to learn that people who had had a somewhat similar life trajectory to his own were exploring their Indies heritage, Richard contacted the organization and went on his first trip to Java a year later.

Keen to experience the places where his ancestors once lived, Richard took a month off work in order to ‘relive as much as possible the life my ancestors lived in Java’. He went to Java armed with old maps and photographs of hospitals, schools, and the houses where his parents were born, went to school, and once lived. He was delighted to be invited to stay at some of the houses in which his ancestors had lived. Well aware that more than five decades had passed since his parents had left Java, his ‘reliving’ of the life of his ancestors was based on
an immersion in local everyday life with the hope that such experiences could facilitate a perception of proximity to absent sensuous geographies.

What featured most prominently in his narrative about staying in Surabaya were sensuous experiences of tastes, smells, and mannerisms. He was overwhelmed when he observed the striking similarities in mannerisms between the local people, his relatives in Canada, and himself. Furthermore, the ways in which local people interacted with him contained for him a fascinating resemblance to the interactions he had with elderly members of his family in Canada and the Netherlands. While never being able to directly relate to his ancestral past in the Dutch East Indies, Richard realizes how habitual memories sedimented in the body (Connerton 1989:102) lingered on as reminders of life in other places and times. Notwithstanding a presumed major rupture in intergenerational transmission between Indies migrants and their descendants, it seems that specific practices, regardless of intentionality, had nevertheless been incorporated and had become a dimension of the socialized body (Narvaez 2006:62) of descendants. In this way, bodies are containers and carriers of memory unconsciously incorporated (Connerton 1989:72–104). Richard’s expectation that the ancestral places would produce affective feelings resulted in a major realization:

Java was so much more than a fascination with a new tourist destination. It is in my blood [...] it was buried deep inside of me, but this trip helped me to reconnect with what was intuitively always a part of me.

Many travellers visit one of the seven Dutch war cemeteries located across Java and maintained by the Oorlogsgravenstichting (Netherlands War Graves Foundation), where more than 24,000 civilian and military victims of conflict in the Dutch East Indies were buried (see also Captain and Jones 2010). Finding graves of family members or visiting camps where family members had been detained is often referred to as an ‘emotional catharsis’. This is how one woman describes finding her grandfather’s grave after a long search:

I stood in amazement in front of his grave marker. [...] This triggered a profoundly cathartic emotional response, as though I was faced with reality for the first time [...] standing there, on that hot, humid day, I finally understood their stories [...] I knew the trip to Indonesia would affect my life forever.

Here, personal experiences of ancestral geographical locations provide a descendant with the agentic possibility of intervening in the ruptures caused by histories of violence and expulsion from ancestral homeland.

Several interlocutors who had undertaken university courses and degrees on colonial history valued the importance of being in the places where their ancestors had once lived over gaining scholarly knowledge. James, an American citizen who went to Java for the first time in his mid twenties after finishing a master’s degree in Asian Studies with a specialization in Indonesian history, stressed that after three weeks in Java he realized that ‘[t]his is a part of me and I finally know why’. For him, as for many others, travelling to Indonesia was a turning point in his life. For example, one Indies-Australian woman with a PhD in Asian Studies said: ‘The trip was a turning point in my orientation.’ The emphasis on change of ‘orientation’ is ascribed to the affective power of place to provide the individual with the experience of ancestral geographical locations wherein feelings of knowing the place are no longer based solely on one’s imagination.

However, being in ancestral places does not always produce the expected feelings of closeness and proximity, but can also locate sensuous geographies of absence within feelings of strangeness, foreignness, disappointment, and distress. One woman permanently living in the Netherlands visited Java for the first time in her early forties. A year later, when I spoke to her, she was still trying to recover from her feelings of disappointment and sadness:

[The place] was horrible; so, so dirty. There were no beautiful white houses [as in her family’s album of colonial photographs]. It was too hot and muggy. I only wanted to go home, that place had nothing to do with me! Nothing at all!

Here, affective feelings produced by being in the place did not lead to a notion of proximity to ancestral heritage, but to feelings of foreignness and estrangement. The ancestral places failed to produce feelings of closeness for this interlocutor; instead, they allowed her to

finally stop thinking there is something special about Java [...] . That I should have a special connection to it. I do not! (original emphasis). And I am finally fine with that.

Another interlocutor travelled through Indonesia following a carefully planned route of all the places where his grandparents had lived and had been imprisoned. Perceiving himself as the most ‘Asian’ of all fifteen grandchildren in his
family, he saw the trip as a tribute to his grandparents. During his travels he took numerous photographs and made a short video that he distributed to all his family members. This three-month trip reinforced his conviction of possessing ‘Asian sensibilities’ and directed him to search for employment in Asian countries. Years after his travels to Indonesia, he lived for a period of time in India; he also travelled extensively through Nepal and China, which is where he ultimately decided to settled down.

**Travellers to Bali**

Bali, being a part of the Dutch East Indies where Indies people did not live (due to its late conquest), but also a place for holiday and relaxation, is often the final destination for Indies travellers to Indonesia. Sometimes Bali is the only destination for these travellers, particularly for those who do not wish to face sites of past violence or former homes. One traveller spent two weeks with two elderly relatives only in Bali. Armed with video equipment, she dedicated her evenings to interviewing her relatives. Being back for the first time in 2010 after they had left the country in 1950, the traveller’s relatives were able to recall memories of the period before the Japanese occupation and many details about the war years that they had never before shared. In this way, the affective experience of place has the power to bring back memories and to serve as a binding component between those who lived in the Dutch East Indies and those born well after its disintegration. Being together in close proximity to Indies historical places aids the mutual shaping of memories and the reparation of historical losses.

The Indonesian landscape seems to have the capacity to produce affects associated with descendants’ postmemories, even if travellers are not searching for them. Anneka, a woman in her early twenties who had never had an interest in exploring her Indies heritage in Java, decided to visit Bali. Unexpectedly, during a drive through Balinese rice fields, she rapidly developed feelings of unexplainable fear and anxiety:

I was mortified [...] suddenly so afraid that I could be harmed, attacked. It was strange. And then I remembered that my grandmother used to tell me how she hid in the rice fields somewhere in Java; she saw many people being killed and what I remember the best from her story was about lots of blood over that rice field [...] and her fear, fear for her life! I knew that was another time and place, but seeing the rice field I could not think of anything else. [...] I just couldn’t! I was completely overwhelmed with fear that I might be attacked.
For the rest of her stay, Anneka remained close to her resort and even though she met some nice people, ate good food, and had fun at the local nightclubs, she felt hugely relieved when her plane left Ngurah Rai airport. For her this journey was a confirmation that her connections to ancestral histories are far more prominent than she previously wanted to acknowledge.

Travellers to Indonesia ascribed specific, transformative capacities to personal experiences of ancestral locations in their (un)intentional exploration of contested geographies of belonging. This emphasis on personal experience of place closely resonates with wider scholarly literature that stresses important links between person, embodiment, and place. This line of thought is most notably present in the work of Edward S. Casey, who, following Merleau-Pontey, contends that place is the most fundamental form of embodied experience. As such, to be in a place is to be aware of one’s sensuous presence in the world (Casey 1997).

Contested Colonial Geographies

While mobility and travel seem to be an intrinsic part of Indies cultural narratives of belonging, not all migrants’ descendants see travel to Indonesia as the most obvious or appropriate choice. Due to their association of the country with the violence and terrifying brutalities committed against Indies people during the Indonesian war for independence and the subsequent forced migration from the homeland, for many migrants going to Indonesia is fraught with anxiety. Furthermore, some of my interlocutors intentionally played down their biological and/or cultural relatedness to Indonesia. However, what is common to these travellers is the cultivation of a sense of possessing ‘Asian’ or ‘Eurasian’ sensibilities which only fully emerge in geographical locations outside of the Netherlands, the USA, Canada, or Australia. Subjects are not preoccupied with an urgency to locate sensuous geographies of absence, but nevertheless actively participate in reconstructing their own postmemory and producing a continuum between past, present, and future, while actively refusing to visit Indonesia.

Amanda, born in the early 1960s in the city of Arnhem in the eastern part of the Netherlands, left her family home as a young teenager to further her education in Amsterdam. Finding ‘family intrigues’ and the expected gender propriety too constraining and not a part of who she felt she was, she barely kept in touch with her family members after moving to the Dutch capital. Hearing about my research from a colleague, she volunteered to participate, frequently expressing her strong disagreement with various forms of current
Indies cultural practices and identity politics. This ranged from resentment about the centrality of \textit{tempo doeloe} themes in exhibitions, films, novels, and music, to tattooing practices containing Indonesian and Indies symbols. Over many of our conversations, she very strongly expressed her disassociation from Indonesia and its people.

However, as a travel agent who specialized in 'Asian tourism', she had spent a significant number of months living in Nepal, Japan, and the Philippines. She narrated her experiences of all the places she had visited or lived in through the lens of her exuberant Eurasian sensibilities, while in the process stressing the hierarchies of homely feelings, or the lack thereof. In those hierarchies, places that did not produce an affect associated with a hot and humid climate and the lush vegetation that commonly accompanies it; the strong flavours of shrimp paste or satay sauce; expressive emotions; or the visibility of multiracial bodies stood low on her scale, as was the case for Nepal and Japan. In contrast, she described her experience in the Philippines and Manila as ‘finally finding a home’. Here the homely feeling was produced by the city's cultural aura, which was for her a rich amalgam of Asian, Spanish, and American influences. After visiting the home of an affluent acquaintance, she reported feeling as if she were in one of her mother’s colonial photographs. The interior and atmosphere of the place brought about an instant association with a parental home in colonial Batavia.

In a similar way, Wim, a man in his early forties, insisted on participating in my research but continually reiterated that he had nothing in common with Indonesia and its people. His grandmother was a ‘cultured Dutch lady’ who happened to have some ‘Indonesian blood’. Working as a business consultant, for almost two decades his line of work had been focused on partners in South Korea and India, where he lived for many years. He relates his business successes to his family heritage, which provides him with knowledge on how to ‘handle Asians’, how to eat Asian food, and how to live in humid, tropical climates. Despite his many travels to Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia for both business and leisure, he has never visited Indonesia, stressing how dangerous and corrupt the country is. Drawing on the colonial ideology of a successful masculinity perceived as capable of handling spicy food and tropical climates, Wim does not represent his embodied memories of taste and sense of corporeal propriety through a lens of emotional vulnerability or a desire to reconnect with his Indonesian heritage, but through the pragmatism that for him characterizes a successful businessman. His sensory experiences are hierarchically ordered around axes of racial, social, and economic superiority\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{20} For more on how sensory orders are morally ordered see Classen 1993.
and entirely oblivious to the historical inequalities that gave rise to Indies multiethnicity.

Unlike Amanda and Wim, Helen, a woman in her mid forties with whom I had open-ended conversations in 2012, narrated how she had attempted to visit Indonesia with her older sister after they had completed their university degrees some twenty years earlier. The trip was planned around an initial stay in Thailand and a visit to the River Kwai, where their grandfather had worked as a Japanese prisoner of war. For them, the stay in Thailand was meant to be ‘a preparation for Java’. She continued: ‘We had no prior experience of Asia.’ However, Helen and her sister never made it to Java:

After we visited the River Kwai an unexplainable fear overwhelmed us both. I think this was because we began to recall all the horror stories we had ever heard [...] of suffering without food and water, exhausting heat [...]. We also became very sad after seeing where our grandfather was imprisoned. We could not take any more of that sorrow.

Helen and her sister remained in Thailand for some six weeks, greatly enjoying the food, climate, and local culture. Over the years, they both travelled back with family and friends as, in Helen’s words: ‘That’s the Asia we like. That’s the Asia we can take in and feel comfortable with.’ As I have argued elsewhere (Dragojlovic 2011), Indies genealogy workers are often confronted with a notion of failure to (re)connect with Indonesian cultural landscapes and its people. However, regardless of their intentionalities, my interlocutors are deeply invested in explorative practices of specific embodied sensibilities, which find unexpected and expected realization in and beyond ancestral colonial geographies.

Concluding Remarks

The present article has demonstrated how Indies preoccupations with absence are constituted in a conviction that the self is related to cultural and geographical elsewhere, making mobility and travel an intrinsic part of Indies explorative practices and narratives of belonging. I have shown that Indies travel and mobility serves as a vehicle through which subjects who have heritages linked to the Dutch East Indies can attain temporal proximity to embodied collective memories. My aim was not to discern or question the likeability or possibility of the values and claims ascribed to affective experiences of place. On the contrary, my goal was to see them as subjective, viable explications for
experiences that produce homely feelings of similitude and comfort. As the ethnographic data have shown, affective experiences of place can be located in and far beyond the geographical locations that once belonged to the colonial Dutch East Indies. For some travellers, Indonesian landscapes are haunted with potential danger, which makes Indonesia an undesirable travel destination. However, identifying with Eurasian and/or Asian sensibilities, subjects can search for affective experiences of places in which postmemories can be reactivated and re-embodied—from the Mediterranean to different countries in Asia. It is these, perhaps unexpected, claims that urge us to see beyond the predictable and somewhat naïve understanding of the Indies relationship to the past as a nostalgic longing for the Dutch East Indies. Rather than presuming that making meaningful connections between claimed Indies sensibilities, postmemory, and the power of affective experience of place is impossible, we should take subjective claims to the production of meaningful knowledges seriously, in terms of extended flexibility in how subjects relate to the past and how they strive to make such reconnections imaginable and meaningful.

Furthermore, it is important to stress that while affective experiences of place are valued as an active capacity to re-embodi and reactivate postmemories (Hirsch 2008) and, thus, to intervene into the inheritance of loss, it is important to note that the retelling and renarrating of these experiences has value in itself. These narratives, shared amongst friends and family members at social events, disclosed in private conversations or across social networks, are not focused on closure. On the contrary, each retelling ends with speculation about continuity—on how to embark on new travels with curiousness about exploring one's Indies sensibilities in new locations, or revisiting known ones; on how to locate as yet unmet relatives on the other side of the world, or to revisit those who are well known, or to travel together. These ongoing narratives are saturated with comparative possibilities and ongoing debates on what constitutes Indies sensibilities. In this way, narratives of absence and ambiguous locations of ancestral origins, as much as the possibility of situating sensibilities of being Indies far beyond the locations that once formed the Dutch East Indies, are not endings in themselves, nor are they nostalgic longings for the colonial past. Rather, they present productive possibilities of what it means to be Indies. Ultimately, both the explorative practices of travel and their narrations serve the creative process of regenerating and re-envisaging the present and future of Indies transnational cultures.
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