Recent trends in Indonesian history suggest a fruitful point at which two major fields of research might begin to converge: one is the growing body of literature on environmental history, the other is the abundant scholarship on social history and identity in colonial contexts. Studies of indigenous and colonial land-use patterns, conservation policies and practices, and Asian attitudes toward landscape and nature are some of the recent scholarly sojourns into Indonesia’s colonial past. However, few of these studies enlighten us on the attitudes of the governing elite (comprised mainly, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, of Dutch colonists) toward the distinctive landscapes of the tropics and the place of the elite within these landscapes. Social histories of the Netherlands Indies provide a detailed insight into the complex and often fluid relations between Europeans and Asians that were mediated by class, ethnicity and gender. Rarely, however, have social histories taken account of the nexus between nature, landscape and colonial identity – a surprising oversight, given the quantity of European sources on responses to the Indonesian environment, and given that the very motive for Dutch colonization of the Indies often centred upon agricultural profits and resource extraction. This article uses three colonial novels written during the first half of the twentieth century to examine how Indonesian nature and landscapes, which differed so profoundly from those of the Netherlands, affected the cultural identity of the Dutch in the Indies during the final decades of colonial rule.

‘Nature’ and ‘landscape’ are not used interchangeably here. I intend ‘landscape’ to denote topography (or images of it), and therefore as something that

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This is the place to expound on recent studies of Indonesian environmental history, but it bears mentioning that the work of Peter Boomgaard (1989, 1992a, 1992b, 1999, 2001) in particular, covers all the research fields mentioned. See also Boomgaard, Colombijn and Henley 1997.
is primarily visually perceived. ‘Nature’, on the other hand, encompasses broader features like climate and seasons, as well as topography, and commonly excludes built environments (although plantations and gardens, both of which are discussed here, certainly involve human intervention – which begs the question that has long bothered human geographers as to where ‘nature’ ends and the ‘built’ environment begins). It will become clear in this paper that Dutch colonists themselves imbued the concept of ‘nature’ with cultural values, such that it is more than scholarly pedantry to point out the difficulties involved in defining such concepts.

Colonial literature provides fruitful insights into the construction and maintenance of identities formed in relation to nature and landscape. Here, the following well-known novels are revisited: De stille kracht (translated as The hidden force) (1900) by Louis Couperus; Rubber (translated as Rubber) (1931) by Madelon Lulofs; and De tienduizend dingen (translated as The ten thousand things) (1955) by Maria Dermoût. These novels were all popular (or notorious, in the case of The hidden force and Rubber) in the Netherlands at the time of their publication, and also achieved wide acclaim among international readers. The fact that all three have been translated into English also makes them accessible to wider audiences of scholars with an interest in comparative colonial literature. The three authors not only wax lyrical about the grandeur of Indies nature in their work, and celebrate the imposition of colonial order upon wild frontiers; they also express doubts and concerns about what it meant to be Dutch in the Indies – Europeans in an Asian landscape. This sample of novels cannot, of course, claim to be representative of all Dutch colonial literature. It is intended only as a starting point for a line of inquiry that places nature and landscape at the centre of social history.

One of the fundamental paradoxes of Dutch rule in Indonesia during its final decades was that Europeans increasingly expected one another to live within and yet remain separate from the landscapes that they had transplanted themselves into, as well as from the Asians whom they governed (and, in many cases, shared homes with). This had not always been the case. Before the mid-nineteenth century, Europeans had integrated more closely into local cultures, often by marriage (Taylor 1983:3-113). Even in the late colonial period, the descendants of mixed marriages and of blijpers (‘stayers’, or long-term residents of the Indies) continued to constitute the culturally hybrid majority of colonial society. The fact that racial mixing persisted despite official attempts at social engineering complicated the definition of

2 For studies that problematize what is ‘nature’ and what is ‘culture’, see, for example, Cronan 1995; Descola and Pálsson 1996; Ellen and Fukui 1996.

3 Please note that while Lulofs hyphenated her name when she married her second husband, so that it became Székely-Lulofs, for the sake of simplicity I refer to her throughout simply as Lulofs.
what it meant to be a ‘European’ by loading the notion with cultural, not just biological, affiliations; as Ann Laura Stoler (2002:43) has so eloquently demonstrated, race was more than skin deep in the Netherlands Indies. Indeed, as Homi Bhabha (1994:3) argues in his work on colonial cultures and literature, identities in colonial contexts were not pre-formed but performed, ‘the signs of a community envisaged as a project’.

Nevertheless, during the late colonial period, growing European fears of immersion in the ‘native’ population and the consequent erosion of Dutch traits that was believed to accompany such immersion went hand in hand with older anxieties over lengthy exposure to the alien landscapes of the Indies. In some colonial novels, European responses to the altering effects of landscape and nature are discussed in great depth. The three authors whose work is reviewed here treat this theme of identity in response to environment in two distinct ways: either as a social concern that was mediated by the intervention of European women as monitors of racial purity; or, more subtly, as a personal, individual preoccupation that involved the negotiation of public and private identities. Both thematic approaches construe Europeans in a complex dialogue between themselves, with Asians, but also (and importantly) with the environment.

Women as mediators between culture and nature

Both Louis Couperus’s *The hidden force* and Madelon Lulofs’s *Rubber* feature characters who are confronted with an alien tropical environment, who are tempted by its seductive qualities to form relationships that transgress bourgeois European norms, and whose racial and moral integrity are ultimately defined by their ability to resist immersion and transformation within the landscapes of the Indies. Both authors attracted controversy within their lifetimes for daring to expose such sensitive issues in Dutch colonial culture, as well as for their own personal peculiarities.

Louis Couperus’s (1863-1923) early experience of the Indies came to him, as was typical of many Dutch in the Indies, through family connections: a genealogy of civil servants and Indies matrons (ethnically Dutch but born and bred in the tropics) stretching back to the eighteenth century. His parents were both distinguished figures in colonial society, his father a landowner and judicial officer, and his mother, daughter of a former Governor-General and Vice-President of the Raad van Nederlandsch-Indië (Council of the Netherlands Indies). Couperus’s sisters all wed men who wore the gold braid of the civil service. Elizabeth Baud, the woman who would eventually become his wife, also hailed from a prominent Indies family who were among the first to govern the tobacco regions of Deli in Sumatra (Beekman 1992:1-3, 10).
His wife’s respectable connections did not prevent Couperus from delving into the dark underside of Dutch colonial culture. The hidden force initially met with a scandalized reception in the Netherlands, where his books were often judged improper, even pornographic. (Indeed, Couperus himself barely escaped being labelled indecent. Though he may be celebrated in the Netherlands today as something of a Dutch equivalent to Oscar Wilde, at the turn of the century his homosexual inclinations shocked polite Dutch society). After 1900, Couperus’s books sold so poorly that he decided it might be time for a career change, and he turned to journalism for a living. His infamy at home notwithstanding, by 1927 fifteen of his books had been translated into English and he visited Britain to promote his work on two separate occasions, in 1898 and 1921. Ultimately, The hidden force became one of his most famous novels. It was made into a television series for Dutch audiences during the 1970s, a development which, according to Pamela Pattynama (1998:88), has made the novel a byword in Dutch culture for ‘the emotional resonance and cognitive impact of any exotic thing or person’.

The works of Madelon Lulofs (1899-1958) have perhaps not enjoyed the same popularity, but her novels continue to attract the attention of historians of Indonesia (particularly Sumatra) for their insights into everyday life on the expanding frontiers of the Dutch empire in the late colonial period. Lulofs was born in Surabaya, Java, and spent most of her first thirty years in the Indies, often in remote locations where her father carried out his duties as a government official. Lulofs went to Deli (the thriving east coast plantation region of Sumatra) in 1918 and was ensconced in her first marriage, to a planter, by the age of nineteen. For the twelve-year duration of this union she lived on a rubber estate in Asahan, 125 km south of Medan on the East Coast of Sumatra. While still married, Lulofs fell in love with another planter, a Hungarian named László Székely, who was, like her, a writer. They married in 1930 and were forced to return to Europe when the scandal erupted (Reid 1979:ix).

Lulofs was the first person to write about Deli in Dutch (Clerkx and Wertheim 1991:2). This region of Sumatra was brought into the colonial sphere of production in the 1870s and was still undergoing colonial development during the 1920s, the period in which Lulofs’s books were set. Both she and Székely were critical of plantation life, particularly the excesses and degeneracy of Europeans who were far removed from the censure of their fellows. Lulofs also condemned the exploitation of the labourers who were imported from Java to be employed as contract workers on the estates. (Lulofs


5 Between 1916 and 1919 Lulofs’s father was an adviser on government policy concerning the Outer Islands (Reid 1979:v, viii).
includes Chinese workers in her novels, who were of course the first to be used as coolies in Sumatra; however, she is notably unsympathetic in portraying the Chinese.) Lulofs’s novels also provide frank insights into delicate subjects like concubinage and interracial relationships, which were common on Sumatran plantations before 1919, when the Deli Company first allowed its male employees to bring their wives to Sumatra (Nieuwenhuys 1982:167). The unpalatable realities of brutality, monotony, violence and melancholy that characterized frontier life are described with candour in Lulofs’s novels. Some of her views are in broad agreement with the prevailing standard among European planters and colonial officials: the need to cajole diligence from ‘lazy natives’ by means of strict contracts and penal clauses, for example, is never fundamentally questioned in her novels.6 It is her condemnation of the treatment of coolies and the uncouth behaviour of Europeans in Sumatra, however, that lent her work its incendiary character, and that set Lulofs on the outskirts of the society that she wrote about.

The fact that many colonial writers harboured views and lifestyles that were not representative of mainstream Dutch or colonial society must prevent us from attributing their ideas too widely to their contemporaries. However, the controversies that some colonial novels generated often indicate public sensitivities on subjects such as race and identity that resided just below the surface of colonial culture. Dutch colonial novels may have reached a relatively small readership in the Indies – 360,000 readers of Dutch by 19307 – but the material for these books was often based on experience of ‘real’ life and moral dilemmas in the colonies. Further, some novels arguably became part of the fabric of colonial intellectual culture. Those that have retained their renown to the present day have even, according to one observer, penetrated the ‘collective unconscious’ of Dutch audiences today (Pattynama 1998:88).

In both *The hidden force* and *Rubber*, women are portrayed as mediating the impact of the tropics on ‘pure’ Dutch identities. It is the ‘full-blood’ Dutch female character with strong emotional ties to Europe who prevails over the enervating effects of the tropics. Male Dutch characters and Eurasian or Creole female protagonists, on the other hand, are portrayed as being far more vulnerable to the vicissitudes of the environment. This authorial judgment was perhaps grounded partly in an appreciation of history. Even in the twentieth century, after a sustained influx of European women, a large proportion of Dutch men continued to take Asian wives rather than Dutch ones:

6 Indeed, in the foreword to the English translation of *Coolie*, another plantation novel, Lulofs (1982:x) wrote that her work was ‘an attempt to explain the soul of a strange race that still remains mysterious to us of the West. I had no political aims in my view. I merely observed the disturbance caused in the mind of the Oriental confronted with the Western régime – victim of a more or less necessary system.’ A similar observation of Lulofs’s tendency to reinforce stereotypes about contrasts between Europe and Asia has also been noted by Meijer (1995:129-30).

7 See Taylor 1998:88. The figure 360,000 includes Dutch and Indonesians.
in 1925, nearly thirty per cent of Europeans in the Indies chose indigenous or Eurasian marriage partners, and in 1940 the figure still stood at twenty per cent (Gouda 1995:165). Dutch men in particular, then, often divided their cultural (and personal) allegiances between Europe and the Indies.

At the same time, it was from the late nineteenth century onward that sharper racial distinctions between Europeans and Asians were drawn in intellectual and official circles, and that moral degradation came to be associated with racial mixing. Before the nineteenth century – more particularly, before the period of British rule of the Indies (1811-1816) – a hybrid colonial society had been accepted as the norm by Dutch elites in the colonies (Taylor 1983:16-7, 131, 157). In fact, it had sometimes been suggested that Eurasian offspring had an advantage over ‘pure’ Dutch children, as the latter were thought too weak to survive the tropics (Gouda 1995:114). By the early twentieth century such views began to succumb to an emerging orthodoxy that conferred prestige upon those with an undiluted Dutch heritage. Native lineage came to be associated with moral shadiness: Eurasians occupied a precarious social (not to mention economic and political) position in the Indies, and were increasingly associated in the colonial imagination with poverty and delinquency (Gouda 1995:112-3).

In their capacity as social and biological reproducers, women who were beyond the margins of easy racial classification were most vulnerable to coming under scrutiny as to the degree of their outward affiliation with Dutch culture. The colonial state legislated deterrents for European women who might entertain the notion of deviating from their role as cultural (and racial) gatekeepers. In 1898 Dutch women who chose indigenous husbands were assigned the legal status of their partners – along with the decline in social rank that ‘Native’ status implied – even if the couple settled in the Netherlands.

In this context of growing racial regulation in the Indies, it is perhaps no surprise that in Couperus’s *The hidden force* it is a Dutch woman who remains true to her preference for Europe’s landscapes, and who is thereby represented as retaining her cultural and moral integrity. Those around her – a European man and a Creole woman – allow themselves to become immersed in tropical landscapes and interracial relationships, and consequently forfeit their ‘Dutchness’.

*The hidden force* concerns itself with the demise of Resident Otto van Oudijck, a high-ranking Dutch official, after a series of mysterious hauntings in the fictional Javanese town of Labuwangi. Van Oudijck is not on good terms with his Javanese counterpart in government, Regent (*bupati*) Sunario, whom he thinks of as ‘merely a fanatical Javanese who always shrouded himself in mystery [...]. He found him impractical: a degenerate Javanese, an unhinged

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8 The convention was that a woman assumed her husband’s legal status. Therefore, Indonesian women who married European men gained European status (Stoler 1997:543; Gouda 1995:168).
Javanese fop! Van Oudijck’s opinion of Sunario’s brother, the Regent of Ngadjirwa, is even less charitable. When the latter disgraces himself in a show of public drunkenness, Van Oudijck makes the grave decision to have the Regent of Ngadjirwa dismissed from office, thereby curtailing the already limited privileges of the local aristocracy and bringing shame to Sunario and his family. After the regent’s dismissal, his family’s discontent sparks rumours of a rebellion and breeds insecurity among the Europeans in Labuwangi.

Meanwhile, trouble is brewing in Van Oudijck’s own household. His lascivious wife Léonie, a Dutch woman raised in the Indies, occupies herself with seducing her step-child Theo, Van Oudijck’s son by a previous marriage to a Eurasian woman. Léonie adds insult to this quasi-incestuous relationship by pursuing her step-daughter’s love interest, a young Eurasian man by the name of Addy de Luce. The immorality of Van Oudijck’s family, together with his disrespect for the traditional authority of the local rulers, unleashes a succession of terrifying ‘hidden forces’ against him and his household. The hauntings in Couperus’s novel culminate in a chilling episode in the bathroom, where Léonie’s naked body is symbolically defiled by spatterings of sirih (betel-nut) spittle from an invisible source. Soon after, the Resident’s family and household retainers flee in the wake of further mischief. It is not until Van Oudijck pays a menacing visit to Sunario’s mother that the ‘hidden forces’ cease their agitations and peace is restored.

At this juncture Van Oudijck the official has triumphed, but Van Oudijck the man begins to unravel, as though all his energy has been spent on restoring public order, and nothing remains with which to resurrect his confidence in himself or his decadent family. In coming to this realization, Van Oudijck parts with his stalwart Dutchness. He ceases to pursue advancement in the civil service, leaves his family to their own devices, and retreats to the hinterland with a young Sundanese girl and her kin, there to begin a new life. The symbolic victory of Java’s ‘hidden forces’ is thereby complete.

The hidden force continues to attract a great deal of scholarly attention, with interpretations of the novel differing widely. Rob Nieuwenhuys (1982:128-30), for example, argues that the occult ‘hidden forces’ inspiring the title amount to no more than literary props, present only as vestiges of the kind of fatalism that appealed to Couperus’s romantic sensibilities. Pamela Pattynama (1998:99, 104), on the other hand, has argued more recently that Léonie van Oudijck’s affairs, particularly with the Eurasian Addy de Luce, struck an uneasy chord with late nineteenth-century Dutch audiences because they represented sig-

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10 These events were allegedly based on materials that Couperus collected during a stay with his sister and her husband, the Resident of Pasuruan, from March 1899 to February 1900. A report was given to Couperus by Governor-General C.H.A. van der Wijck which detailed strange occurrences in the house of an assistant-resident in Sumedang in 1831, events that were also witnessed by a general in the colonial army, A.V. Michiels (Beekman 1992:21-2).
significant sexual and racial transgressions against colonial norms at a time when the rise of eugenics and discussions of racial degeneracy were becoming pressing intellectual concerns among European and colonial elites.

Alongside interpretations that focus on social relationships and racial transgressions, there is need for further development of a notion mentioned by most scholars only in passing (Beekman 1996:283; Pattynama 1998:99; Aldrich 2003:120): that Couperus’s ‘hidden forces’ are symbolic of a Dutch belief in the physical and metaphysical mutual exclusivity of East and West (or North and Equator, in this case), such that tropical nature itself convulsed at the trespass of Europeans.

Couperus’s main characters in The hidden force are effective mouthpieces for Dutch and Javanese attitudes (in some cases, archetypal) toward nature and landscape in the Netherlands Indies. These attitudes are not only in keeping with general aspects of Couperus’s characters’ personalities, but also with their sense of cultural identity. For Sunario, the Regent of Labuwangi, nature is animated by spirits and powers that can be unleashed upon those who infringe upon traditional, indigenous rules of cosmic order. Indeed, in Couperus’s view, Sunario’s intimacy with nature stems from two sources: from his being ‘native’, and therefore having an innate relationship with his surroundings, and from his status as the local spiritual leader which, as a nobleman, is his divine vocation. This gives Sunario the ability to harness aspects of nature that are unknown to and even denied by Europeans. A character such as this ‘is conscious of the quiet force; he feels the mystery borne upon the seething winds of the mountains, in the stillness of the secretive nights, and he foresees distant events’ (Couperus 1982:96-7). There is of course a racialist implication to this viewpoint: it implies that while the Javanese may commune with the obscure forces of nature, they cannot necessarily know themselves. In such a view ‘natives’ lack insight and intellectual sophistication relative to the Dutch, the latter having supposedly lost many of their baser instincts and gained the higher faculty of reason on the path to civilization.

Van Helderen, a lower official who has never been to Europe, thinks of Java as his homeland and is comfortable in his surroundings. While Dutch descent has secured him a privileged position in colonial society, he is critical of colonial rule for economic gain alone and advocates an ethical approach to government in the Indies. Van Helderen is well aware of the reasons why the local population may at times resent Dutch rule. He tells the wife of Van Oudijck’s overworked secretary, Eva Eldersma:

11 See Frances Gouda (1995:119), who notes that many Dutch believed that Indonesians had a mystical connection with nature that westerners had lost due to their sophistication. Indonesians were also assumed to have a wildness within them that the Dutch had managed to overcome.

12 As observed by Meijer (1995:127), a similar coexistence of instinctual communion with nature together with an absence of rational thought and self-knowledge are ascribed to the Javanese characters in Lulofs’s Rubber.
The reality is not a great ruler in the Indies, but a small, mean-spirited extortionist; the land is sucked dry, and the real population – not the Dutch, who spend their Indies money in The Hague; but the people, the Indies people, bound to the Indies soil – are oppressed by the disregard of their overlords, who once gave of their own blood for the benefit of the people. But now the people threaten to rise up against oppression and disdain [...]. You, artistically, feel the danger approaching vaguely, like a cloud in the sky, in the Indies night; I see the danger as something entirely real arising [...] from out of the very soil of the Indies. (Couperus 1982:63.)

Here Van Helderen has hit upon a fundamental distinction between what he deems a ‘natural’ response from the Javanese toward Dutch misgovernance and what Eva expects from a people who, in her view, are self-evidently inferior to the Dutch. For Eva, the insubordination not only of the Javanese but of their very soil against Dutch authority is ‘unnatural’ (perhaps even supernatural). For Van Helderen, on the other hand, it is organic and as understandable as if the Dutch were to revolt against unjust rule in the Netherlands. For imperialist ‘old hands’ like Van Oudijck such sympathies were out of the question, as were any reservations about colonialism. Van Oudijck assumes an arrogance that stems from his belief in himself as an invincible Dutchman, and ‘he found it ridiculous, the notion that there were peoples who had more control over these [hidden] forces than the Westerners’ (Couperus 1982:110).

Eva Eldersma is more receptive to these ‘hidden forces’ than her male compatriots, and the anxiety that she feels amidst Java’s landscapes is one of the factors that leads to her ultimate return to the Netherlands. It is through Eva’s eyes that we witness the occasional paranoia of those colonists who felt themselves unwelcome strangers in Java. Being surrounded by nature makes Eva, a city girl, profoundly uncomfortable, and consequently the place in which she feels most at ease in Java is at its metropolitan centre, Batavia. By European standards the colonial capital was little more than a provincial town, but for Eva its neat separation of nature from culture represented a welcome respite from the claustrophobia induced by her surroundings in the provinces. Eva never really adapts to the changed lifestyle that residence in Java requires. In Labuwangi ‘she felt that her house, her spacious house, was small and open and defenceless against the immense Indies night, which could enter from all around’.13 This appears to have been a widespread aspect of Western musings upon nature in Southeast Asia: Vicente Rafael (2000:67) notes similar feelings recorded by American women in the Philippines during the early twentieth century.

Late colonial architecture suggests that Eva’s view of tropical living was shared by others. In the early twentieth century Europeans living in Batavia began to abandon the spacious, airy houses that they had constructed for them-
selves in previous centuries in favour of smaller buildings and heavier furnishings more suited to the European cities that they were attempting to emulate (Abeyasekere 1987:115). Rudolph Mrázek (2002:64, 74) has noted that in the late nineteenth century the Dutch were reverting to increasingly cloistered, stuffy architectural styles, more in line with the buildings of seventeenth-century Holland than with the requirements of the tropics. Mrázek (2002:64, 74) refers to this trend as ‘a technology for how to get across the ocean, on the foreign shore, and not to notice’. Colonial houses, Mrázek (2002:84, 135) argues, often had a temporary appearance, much like a hotel, because by the early twentieth century nobody expected to stay in the Indies for very long.

Significantly, Eva’s terror at Javanese nature is often bound to her sense of alienation from the local population. She confides to Van Helderen that: “I am sometimes afraid. Here I always feel [...] on the point of being overwhelmed, by what I don’t know: by something out of the ground, by a force of nature, by a secret in the soul of these black people, whom I don’t know.” (Couperus 1982:129-30.) Her perception of differences in climate and landscape between Holland and Java causes such a homesickness in Eva – and such a loathing for the Indies – that she falls into a deep depression. During the monsoon season she perceives senseless destruction all around her, caused by the brutal rains and humidity. It leaves her dispirited, erodes her sense of security and, perhaps most importantly, undermines her sense of herself as an indomitable European:

Day by day, inexorably, something perished, something rotted away, something grew mouldy or rusted. And the whole aesthetic philosophy which she had first used to learn about the Indies – to value the good in the Indies [...] was no longer able to withstand the streaming water, the cracking apart of her furniture, the staining of her gowns and gloves, all the damp, mould, and rust that ruined the exquisite environment she had designed and created around herself, to console her for living in the Indies. (Couperus 1982:125.)

Couperus seems to suggest that even if there was no occult ‘hidden force’ in Java, the intensity of nature was of a magnitude that militated against any ‘real’ European ever being at ease in the country. Indeed, Eva always felt that ‘there was in her house an Eastern resistance against her Western ideas. It was always a struggle not to surrender to lassitude, to let the grounds go wild’ (Couperus 1982:125). In the depths of her despair, Eva makes the controversial suggestion that perhaps Europeans should surrender to such temptations and ‘go native’, thereby committing the ultimate betrayal against the tenets of European respectability (Couperus 1982:129).

To everyone’s surprise, it is the novel’s robust Dutchman who ultimately follows Eva’s advice. Van Oudijck begins to concede the existence of insidious powers when finally confronted with his wife’s increasingly blatant indiscre-
tions. It is only then that he becomes ‘insurmountably superstitious, believing in a hidden force that lurked he knew not where, in the Indies, in the soil of the Indies, in a profound mystery, somewhere – a force that wished him ill because he was a European, an overlord, a foreigner on this mysterious, sacred ground’ (Couperus 1982:172).

Significantly, Van Oudijck remains incapable of holding his wife responsible for her own actions, preferring instead to blame tropical nature, as though Léonie’s moral laxity were the direct result of the languorous climate. By the same attribution – the wretched influences of tropical nature on colonial order – Van Oudijck avoids blaming Sunario and his followers for causing the political mischief that unsettles the European population of Labuwangi. The triumph of Javanese nature over his constitution becomes Van Oudijck’s scapegoat for all his troubles. ‘What had become of his ambition?’ he asks himself. ‘He thought it was all due to the influence of the climate. It would certainly be a good thing to refresh his blood and his spirit in Europe, to spend a couple of winters there.’ (Couperus 1982:176.) Van Oudijck does not, however, return to the Netherlands. Instead, he surrenders to the same impulse for submersion that he had once condemned others for, retreating to the hinterland with a young Sundanese woman.

In Van Oudijck’s misattribution of his personal misery to the vagaries of an inert climate, Couperus explores a deeper inability among Dutch colonists to grasp the true nature of their alienation in the Indies. In their dealings with Asians, the Dutch refused to blame themselves for any failings of governance due to their own ineptness or insensitivity, and rejected responsibility for the strength of indigenous resistance to colonial rule, both of which (if conceded) might fatally undermine the Dutch imperial project in the Indies. Instead, liability for defeat was attributed to extraneous factors – in this case, nature and landscape – that were beyond human control. Thus were the shortcomings of the colonial civilizing mission explained, along with failed Dutch attempts to govern their own unrestrained behaviour beyond the strictures of European society. In the eyes of his natal community, Van Oudijck has been enervated, sapped of the energy to fulfil his European brief of governing while remaining separate from his subjects. Removed from his European enclave he has, in both body and spirit, ‘gone native’, submitted to the power of the tropical environment. So utterly transformed by nature is Van Oudijck that he can no longer entertain the possibility of returning to the Netherlands. “In Holland I would not be able to withstand the climate anymore, or the people”, he tells Eva. “Here I find the climate congenial, and I have withdrawn from society.” (Couperus 1982:200.)

As a fallen man, Van Oudijck can no longer return to his country of origin. However, this option is still open to Eva, who has retained her European integrity by resisting the temptations of Javanese nature. Her return to the
Netherlands at the end of the novel represents an action that is right and natural for a consummate European who, unlike her verindischt (‘Indies-ized’) compatriots, is unable to adapt to the rigours of a profoundly foreign environment.

Thirty years after The hidden force was published in the Netherlands, a character similar to Couperus’s Eva Eldersma, one with an almost identical response to Indies nature and landscapes, appeared in Madelon Lulofs’s novel Rubber. Despite (or perhaps because of) the controversy it aroused, the novel was a great success. It was reprinted several times, translated into German, English and Swedish, and eventually made into a stage play and a film.14 The novel focuses on the fortunes of the white staff – a motley assortment of people from all over Europe and America – on Tumbuk Tinggih, a fictional rubber estate on the east coast of Sumatra. We receive much of our introduction to plantation life through the eyes of its two newest arrivals, Frank and Marion Versteegh. In time, both become familiar with (though never entirely accepting of) the rhythms of plantation life. Throughout the novel the Versteeghs remain principled and industrious, traits that ultimately go unrewarded: at the onset of the Great Depression Frank is made redundant and, without having saved as much as they intended to, the Versteeghs are forced to return to the Netherlands.

The daily trials and tribulations of the European inhabitants of Tumbuk Tinggih are punctuated by two recurring events: extravagant nights out at the social club, and the perceived threat of injury or death at the hands of discontented coolies. The social club is where the white ‘assistants’ of the plantation venture once a fortnight in order to flirt with one another’s wives and drown in their cups. It is where intrigues are hatched enabling one man to gain professional advancement over another, and where vast sums of money are squandered on imported luxuries such that even the colossal bonuses that planters stood to earn in times of glut could barely suffice to procure enough celebratory drinks for the next round. Such nights of abandon were pursued with an urgency whose object was to seek oblivion from the daily grind of duties associated with being a planter or, indeed, a planter’s wife. Perhaps there was also a desire to mask the fear that any given night at the club might be one’s last. Violence features prominently in Rubber from the outset. First an assistant on a neighbouring plantation is killed. Later, a young Dutchman at Tumbuk Tinggih itself falls victim to the malice of a recalcitrant coolie run amok. In the novel, the assistant’s stabbing is portrayed as unprovoked and is later evaluated as inexplicable. Not surprisingly, the bereavement of the assistant’s young widow is portrayed with a great deal of sympathy. However, Lulofs gives little consideration to the oppressive system that defined a coolie’s conditions of labour in 1920s Sumatra, and she disregards

the historical fact of brutal punishments that were sanctioned by a special criminal code (Stoler 1995a; Breman 1990; Thee Kian Wie 1977).

Lulofs is characteristically more sensitive to the private lives of the European women on the plantation than she is to systemic abuses on the estates. This is particularly true of her portrayal of Renée, a young and fashionable Dutchwoman who enters into a marriage with a planter named John Vanlaer. Recent studies of Rubber have overlooked this relationship and the causes of its ultimate dissolution. An otherwise insightful study of the novel by Maaike Meijer (1995), for example, fails to consider Renée and John Vanlaer at all, even though Lulofs clearly sets the couple in contrast against the ‘successful’ model of the ideal, bourgeois European partnership between Marion and Frank Versteegh. John Vanlaer, like many old Deli planters, has been in Sumatra for some time and cohabited with a Japanese concubine before his marriage to Renée, who quickly tires of plantation life after she arrives and takes to seeking diversions. An emotional void is filled when she meets Ravinsky, a charming Russian planter whose reputation as a ladies’ man does not prevent the two from forming a genuine attachment to one another. Their affair culminates in a tryst in the mountain resort of Berastagi, where their relationship is consummated. Shortly afterwards Renée confesses all to her husband. The two separate, and Renée returns to Europe with Ravinsky. Echoes of Lulofs’s own elopement with Székely? – very probably. More importantly, Renée evokes parallels with Couperus’s Eva Eldersma for her inability to feel at home in a tropical Asian landscape.

It is no accident that it is in the highlands that Renée begins to unravel, for it is here that she is reminded most profoundly of her alienation. At first glance this may be surprising. Mountain retreats were lauded for their similarity to Europe, especially the invigorating qualities of their cooler climes, and were widely sought as remedies for exhausted interlopers in the tropics. Hill stations replete with luxurious hotels became common in Sumatra’s highlands during the late nineteenth century, much as they already were in Java and in other parts of the colonial world, such as British India. The landscapes of these hill stations were transformed to suit European aesthetic and culinary tastes. Gardens displayed European flower varieties and boasted continental fruits and vegetables. In Lulofs’s novel, this mountain landscape is described as a place of great beauty, where the Dutch appetite for ‘views’ is abundantly satisfied. Indeed, nowhere else in the novel does Lulofs indulge in more lyrical descriptions.

Renée feels instantly invigorated at the mountain resort, and muses that only in temperate climes such as these can humans truly hope to thrive. In time, however, Renée’s enthusiasm subsides: after all, the mountains are only a poor substitute for the ‘real’ thing back in Europe (although not in the flat topography of the Netherlands, so we must assume that Renée has
had the privilege of travelling to mountainous countries on the Continent).

While Renée’s tendency to keep comparing Sumatra and Holland is probably understandable to any expatriate, she expresses a fundamental unwillingness to appreciate the very real beauty of Sumatra’s highlands:

Maybe she was homesick for Holland, for Europe. For however glorious the climate in the hills might be, it was still the Indies. All that to-do in the hotel, it was all luxurious, fashionable. It remained imitation [...]. It was, it remained, the tropics! It failed to approach the authentic reality [of Europe]. (Lulofs 1932:209.)

Part of Renée’s disappointment with Sumatra’s mountains seems to stem from a deep-seated unease, perhaps even anxiety, about the scale of this landscape and the consequentially diminutive status that it bestows on human life and culture, which are of such importance to her. As narrator, Lulofs suggests that such vast landscapes are not for everyone, particularly not for sophisticated Europeans who have long been separated from such ‘primitive’ sites of grandeur:

Renée gazed around herself and shuddered. She felt too small, too diminutive and civilized to cope with the stately majesty of this primitive landscape. A wild scream awoke in her: the cry of a refined person who screamed for the protection of her civilization, who had become too distant from primitiveness even to defend herself, and who could only exist within a community. A desolate fear of being alone welled up within her, and as she raised her arms in despair something in her cried: Away from here! Europe! City! People! Traffic!

Away from here, where the whole sky oppressed her with its weight, and where the earth would not receive her. (Lulofs 1932:210.)

In the last line of this passage Renée seems not so much to be rejecting the landscape as being rejected by it, a notion not unlike the profound sense of alienation experienced by Couperus’s Eva Eldersma on Java, despite its high population density and shrinking wildernesses. Eva’s return to Europe might not have been marred by infidelity, as Renée’s is in Lulofs’s novel, but both characters ultimately return to their land of origin partly because they simply cannot come to terms with an Asian landscape that is strange and threatening to them. The implication is that both women harbour a steadfastly pure, incorruptibly Dutch identity that is incompatible with and cannot be conquered by the overwhelming elements of Indonesian nature, and it is for this inflexibility that they are ultimately expelled – or choose to expel themselves – from the country’s very surface.

It is the men whom these women leave behind who exhibit the true racial ‘degradation’ that must, following late colonial logic, result from a Dutch person absorbing Indies landscapes into their identity. For Couperus, Otto
van Oudijck’s decision to stay in Java while his friend Eva flees in the wake of ‘hidden forces’ represents the outcome of a too thorough acclimatization through a loss of European self. Similarly, for Lulofs, the husband Renée leaves behind shucks off the new standards of post-marriage-ban plantation society by returning to his Japanese concubine. While Lulofs describes this reunion without censorship or malice, many of her contemporaries in Europe were far harsher in their judgment of such living arrangements for Dutch men, particularly when these unions resulted in children. Along with accepting the frighteningly dense jungle bordering the plantation, the searing heat, and the merciless sunlight that characterized life on the east coast of Sumatra, John Vanlaer accepted the conditions of a life that would have been regarded as improper and immoral by his Dutch acquaintances at home. Landscape and identity: the one went with the other, and the implication in these two novels is that those who surrendered to a foreign environment must also relinquish their very selves.

Inside/outside: shifting identities in an Indonesian landscape

It is fitting, perhaps, to use inside/outside – a common spatial distinction in Indonesian cosmologies – to characterize a dominant concern in Maria Dermoût’s The ten thousand things (1955), for it is a novel that traces the negotiation of public/private, European/Asian identities with reference to nature and landscape in an old colonial family of blijvers (‘stayers’, or long-term residents of the Indies). The ten thousand things is discussed here even though it was published in the 1950s because it is about Ambon (in Maluku, eastern Indonesia) as Dermoût experienced it under colonial rule in the early twentieth century.

Maria Dermoût (1888-1961) was born in the Indies and spent a large part of her life there. She too married young (although, unlike Lulofs, she seems to have remained pleased with her first choice). Dermoût had deep familial roots in the Indies. Her great-grandfather, the first to settle in the archipelago, was a sea captain in the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, Dutch East India Company), and each family member thereafter was to spend at least part of their life in the Indies, including her own children and grandchildren, all but one of whom were born in the archipelago (Nieuwenhuys 1982:255-6). The ten thousand things was also highly successful in the Netherlands and has been translated into eleven languages (Beekman 1996:483, 485). It is based on four years that Dermoût spent on Ambon starting in 1910. While she was not enam-

15 The distinction between inside/outside in Southeast Asian and, specifically, Indonesian cosmologies is discussed with respect to textile design and function by Maxwell (1990:93, 95). Textiles often reflect ‘the division of the world into two orders’, one order being female, lower, left, moon, death, and inside, and the other order being male, upper, sun, life, and outside. The same categories are discussed more generally by Soemantri (1999:24-5) and Taylor and Aragon (1991:34).
oured with the climate here – heavy rains interspersed with long dry spells – the landscapes of the coast left a deep impression upon her (Van der Woude 1973:60-1). Nieuwenhuys (1982:257) goes so far as to suggest that, by virtue of her preference for Indonesian subjects, Dermoût could not properly be considered ‘a real Dutch author’. ‘[U]ntil the very last’, Nieuwenhuys (1982:256) proclaims, ‘she lived in Indonesia with and through her books’ – a poignant observation given that Dermoût left the Indies shortly before the Second World War, which signalled the beginning of the end of the Dutch empire in Asia.

The setting of Dermoût’s *The ten thousand things* is late colonial Ambon, once part of the famed ‘spice islands’ from which the VOC had derived so much of its wealth and fame during the seventeenth century. By the early twentieth century the islands of Maluku were an all but forgotten corner of the Netherlands Indies, overshadowed by more pressing concerns at the expanding geographical, political and economic frontiers of the colonial state. Small and tranquil, Ambon had become a domesticated comfort zone in Dutch views of the Indies, visited by painters and writers making pilgrimages of historical reflection upon the Dutch colonial past.

In Dermoût’s novel we encounter a landscape that is presented far more sympathetically than Java or Sumatra are described by Couperus and Lulofs. Interestingly, given Couperus’s penchant for aestheticism, allusions to beautiful Javanese landscapes are surprisingly rare in *The hidden force*. More frequently, Couperus uses evocations of nature as a tool to illuminate the darker aspects of colonial life and its effects on the European population. Opportunities to discover beauty in the Indies seem always to be thwarted by apprehensions that human life there is dwarfed by the relentless contest between extremes of nature. For Lulofs, similar observations might be made. Descriptions of majestic landscapes are usually countered by anxieties over the vastness and ‘emptiness’ of these vistas, and their resistance to European occupation. Dermoût’s descriptions, on the other hand, are written from the perspective of an insider. These are places that were considered home, that were valued as a part of everyday lives and personal selves, and were remembered with mixed feelings because they had been lost when the colonial period ended.

In *The ten thousand things* the Van Kleintje family have been spice growers for centuries and have no inkling that the Dutch possession of the Indies will soon be forcibly relinquished. The novel’s narrative structure derives from a series of murders on Ambon, which appear as separate chapters or short stories in the book. These vignettes come together at the novel’s end when the protagonist reflects on the premature death of her son – a death that she chooses to construe as murder, even though it occurs during his service as an officer in the Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger (KNIL, Royal Netherlands Indies Army).
The narrative is often relayed through the eyes of Felicia, who begins life under the protection of parents grown rich from the proceeds of a Javanese sugar plantation, but who is abandoned with a small child by her husband when the family’s fortunes collapse. Felicia then decides to raise her boy Himpies (a variant of ‘Willem’) on Ambon, where she had spent part of her own childhood. Himpies is brought up among the same comforts that Felicia enjoyed as a girl – a sprawling garden, the bays, the hinterland, and most importantly, a Dutch grandmother whose Indisch stories and beliefs have a lasting impact on the young boy. These influences trouble Felicia as her son grows older, for she fears that his identification with the indigenous world will prevent his successful integration into the European community for which his Dutch ancestry has destined him.

Although the hybrid society of Ambon is far removed from the censorious gaze of larger European enclaves such as those in Batavia or Medan, the Van Kleintjes are blijvers, but also Dutch, and must maintain this identity in the presence of both Asian and European outsiders. European selves are displayed in public, when the steamship brings Dutch visitors, and when school friends come to play with Himpies. In private, in the sanctity of domestic spaces and kindred company, European selves are relaxed and affinities for local beliefs, peoples and landscapes are indulged. The regulation of this elastic repertoire of identities becomes something that Felicia and her son often disagree about as Himpies grows older and forms his own ideas about which persona suits him best.

The stereotype of a strong Dutch constitution ravaged by an enervating tropical climate is present in subtle doses throughout The ten thousand things. For example, Felicia’s and her grandmother’s preferred costume, the sarung (wrap skirt) and kebaya (blouse), is an outward sign that the two women have ‘gone native’, and is one of the few ways in which they allow themselves to publicly identify with indigenous (or at least Indisch) culture. Jean Gelman Taylor (1997:111) has noted that, by the early twentieth century, native dress was considered by Europeans in most parts of the Indies to fall in the category of sleepwear (see also Mrázek 2002:137). In this instance, then, identity was closely related to place and affinity. Felicia’s decision to adopt native dress seems to follow from her sense that she belongs to the hinterland rather than the town. ‘[I]n time the Garden won’, Dermoût tells us. ‘Her clothes lent a helping hand.’ (Dermoût 1959:61.) Further, when her mother dies, Felicia begins to undertake extensive expeditions over the island. The more Felicia immerses herself in the landscapes of Ambon, the more her European origins and interests seem to drop away from her.

Significantly, Felicia’s Dutch sense of self re-emerges in her role as mother. As protector of her child’s future she must ensure that he is capable of assimilating in European society. When Himpies reaches school age, Felicia begins
to censor the household superstitions that are kept alive by her grandmother. She laments the ‘distance’ (from the Netherlands) and lack of opportunity to ‘escape’ (from Maluku) that life on Ambon entails for her son: ‘[T]he child, Himpies, she should not have brought him here, to the Garden so far away, abandoned by God and all people, and hemmed in on all sides: rivers, inner bay, mountains, and on an island – also hemmed in, ocean around it – nowhere a little path to escape along’ (Dermond 1959:65). Having resigned herself to the loss of her own Dutchness, Felicia is desperate to preserve her son’s Europeanness, and when Himpies resists the idea of going to the Netherlands to finish his education, his mother admonishes him for desiring the very life that she has chosen for herself:

‘Are you too indolent to study? Oh, I know, you’d rather stay and hang around the Small Garden. Be a little Indo man in pyjamas, sell eggs and milk, and spices that no-one wants to buy anymore! Look out for a woman with some money, certainly ... otherwise a plate of sago porridge and a fish from the bay, is that what you want?’ (Dermond 1959:85)

In Felicia’s estimation her son has taken on too much of what is ‘native’ – a lack of ambition and vitality, and the absence of a desire to improve one’s moral and economic circumstances. This desultory character has presumably been formed in the landscapes of Ambon. As children, Himpies and his friend Domingoes firmly occupy the landscape of the family garden:

He loved it in his own manner – without many ups and downs, just as it was – ordinary, as the garden had been these seven years for the two children, Domingoes and Himpies together. They had never stood and looked at the garden, they hadn’t seen that the garden was ‘beautiful’ and so frightfully far away and quiet! They had not seen anything to fear in the garden. (Dermond 1959:81.)

The fleeting mention of fear here is developed as Himpies grows older.

He learned to be alone in the garden – he could just stand still somewhere, his eyes wide open, and look, and see that the garden was beautiful. He also saw things detached from one another, one by one: one tree, one rock, one flower, one shell on the beach, one crab, one bird. At times he was afraid alone, not very, and he did not know why. (Dermond 1959:84.)

In this later stage of childhood, Himpies has begun to lose his sense of being embraced by his surroundings. He stands alone, seeing his surroundings as a ‘view’ that he is able to appreciate from a stable vantage point and enjoy for aesthetic reasons, much the way that European painters of Indies landscapes ‘looked’ around themselves.

16 As explained in Syed Hussein Alatas’s controversial The myth of the lazy native (1977), where Alatas discusses the discourse of indolence that was adopted by Europeans in describing some Asians in the tropics.
Himpies’s changing attitudes to the landscapes of Ambon as he matures seem to parallel colonial notions of the proper development of a boy into an adult male. Accepting native cosmologies was permissible only in childhood. Indeed, colonial elites believed that European children and adult Indonesians had much in common. Maturity was marked by adopting Dutch modes of seeing and ‘rational’ European belief systems. Colonial concern for the plight of children who did not learn their proper place in colonial society was manifested in the late colonial trend (enabled by vast improvements in international transport) for parents to send their children to Holland for their education. Felicia forces Himpies to do the same so that he, like other Dutch children in the Indies, might be rescued in his formative years from the effects of the tropical climate and the pernicious influence of native servants, particularly with respect to sexual development (Stoler 1997:537). The importance of early intervention and ceaseless vigilance could not be underestimated since, as Couperus’s portrait of the Van Oudijck family demonstrates, morally weak Dutch adults could not be relied upon to withstand the insidious tropical environment.

Himpies’s acquisition of a vague fear of his local landscapes represents a crucial moment in his development of an adult Dutch identity. Is he frightened of the spirits that inhabit Indies landscapes because of a growing consciousness that such forces would represent an aberration of nature in European (Christian) belief systems? Is he perhaps repulsed by and afraid of himself for subscribing to notions that would be laughed at by his European school friends? In short, are the indigenous beliefs in an animated nature that Himpies absorbed as a young child beginning to coexist uneasily with the ‘enlightened’ cosmologies that are part of an adult Dutch education?

This would seem to be the case, for by the time Himpies reaches school age he has learned to keep these two aspects of his persona increasingly separate, possibly to avoid ridicule from his European friends. The household garden, Himpies discovers, is a living thing that rejects his playmates: ‘By turns Dutch children from Himpies’s class came to stay; the garden was not friendly to the new children; they got too sunburned there, in the water and again in the sun; they fell out of trees, had their feet stung by coral. One stepped on a sea urchin.’ (Dermoût 1959:84.) Upon his return from several years of schooling in the Netherlands, Himpies and his mother routinely conspire to keep their relationship with the family garden private in the presence of Dutch visitors from town. Perhaps these things are concealed from visitors because they involve personal memories, and perhaps it is because these

17 See Gouda 1993:2, where she asserts that the tendency for Europeans to portray natives as children was common in the discourses of the Dutch, French, and British empires. See also Gouda 1995:130-1; Stoler 1995b:141; Mrázek 2002:157. Mrázek suggests that the Javanese in particular were treated as children in part because they looked youthful to the Dutch.
guests were outsiders, transients who thought of the Netherlands (certainly not sleepy Ambo) as home: ‘[T]hey didn’t see much in Maluku – it was too far away, one ship a month by which to leave – they longed for home, for returning to Holland’ (Dermoût 1959:93).

By adulthood, Himpies has ostensibly absorbed a Dutch education, a fact that is attested to by his becoming a respected officer in the colonial army. However, it is uncertain to what extent Himpies has learned to reconcile the conflicting Dutch and Indonesian views of nature and landscape. It certainly seems that, privately, Himpies is never able to completely identify with Dutch views of Ambon. His own mother does not realize the full truth of this until she sees how happy Himpies is to be back in Ambon after a long sojourn in the Netherlands. On his first night home she hears her son whistling an old song from childhood in his room: ‘The song began with the words “watching from a distance”. Had he had such a very bad time [in the Netherlands]?’ she wonders (Dermoût 1959:92). For Himpies even more than for his mother, then, the usual meanings of ‘home’ and ‘away’ are inverted: Ambon serves as his template for the natal landscape and the Netherlands represents the foreign environment.

The dilemmas of identity that result as Himpies moves between these two worlds seem to have become enshrined in Dutch memories of the colonial era. Himpies survives in the form of a wax effigy in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, commemorated by a plaque that nowhere notes the fact of his fictional status.18 Perhaps his compartmentalized identity is something that resonated with those Dutch people who lived for long periods of time in the Indies, particularly after it had been removed from them as a second homeland by way of, firstly, independence from Dutch rule and secondly, Soekarno’s expulsion of non-Indonesian citizens in 1957.

Before leaving this discussion of The ten thousand things, it is worth mentioning the chapter entitled ‘The professor’, one of the more poignant sections of Dermoût’s novel and one that counters the European attitudes toward nature, landscape and identity with an Indonesian case. ‘The professor’ tells the tale of Raden Mas Suprapto, the educated heir to an aristocratic dynasty in Central Java, and his apprenticeship to an eccentric Scottish academic whose enthusiasm for botany leads him to retrace the footsteps of Georg Everhard Rumphius in Maluku. Suprapto’s involvement with the professor, together with his distance from Java, leads to an identity crisis of the sort that became widespread among educated indigenous elites in the late colonial period.19

18 Noted on a research trip to the museum in April 2004.

19 See Sutherland 1979:132-3, 135-6. Sutherland argues that even in the early twentieth century, the Dutch still preferred to elevate the sons of bupati to senior positions in the civil service, rather than consider educated lower-class Javanese for these positions. The nominal maintenance of a hereditary principle in the indigenous arm of colonial government contradicted the curtailment of other traditional aristocratic privileges, notably those to do with the exercise of independent
On the one hand, Suprapto had been raised to cultivate and perfect the halus (refined) Javanese aristocratic persona. He respects this identity but also hates it for the confinement that it engenders, particularly in the guise of his cold surrogate ‘mother’ who expects him to conform to tradition when he assumes his inheritance. Suprapto’s craving for a different life is thwarted when his studies in Holland are cut short by his ‘mother’ on the pretext that there is no money for their continuance. His role as assistant to the Scottish professor is the only one left to him before he assumes the duties of his rank. By the standards of the Javanese priyayi (elite/official) class, the professor’s manner is unrefined, and yet his sharp insights into Suprapto’s circumstances, together with his brilliant intellect, leave the latter unsure as to whether the professor deserved all the criticisms that the Javanese of Suprapto’s class might heap upon him. On expedition one day, in Suprapto’s absence, the professor is killed by Butonese, and Suprapto must finally come to terms with what (and who) it is that he really values.

The landscape of Suprapto’s Java is inseparable from his heritage, identity and future. The portrait of the high-ranking aunt who has adopted him as her son reminds him daily of his duties as the heir apparent:

Suprapto looked at her, at what was behind her: The land – his land – Central Java, the Principalities […]. As he looked at the portrait he knew that one day he would go back, he knew that she – ‘Sir Princess’ So-and-So, in travelling costume, and all that was behind her: plains, mountains, sky, palace, trees, people, the beautiful, dignified woman, temples, epic poems, dances, songs – this was his background, the foundation of his life; this was who he was. (Dermoût 1959:162-4.)

Much to Suprapto’s initial chagrin, his eccentric professor is able to articulate the burden that this landscape symbolizes for the young aristocrat:

All of us always, must, when we are young, keep something for when we are old, but we let it go, and then we want to get away, and we draw a ship in the sand to take us to a new country, and we always forget the ballast – and there is no ballast other than the earth of the old country, and the earth of the new country is always just as heavy as that of the old. And for that we go away, over the seas, and sometimes drown along the way, in deep, deep water […]. (Dermoût 1959:167.)

Though far from speaking for the Indonesians over whom Dermoût’s compatriots had ruled, the difficulties that she imagined for Suprapto and Himpies suggest a dilemma about nature and landscape and their relationship to identity and sources of income. Sutherland (1979:viii) summarizes the resulting quandary for many Javanese elites in the late colonial period thus: ‘Bound by colonial constraints, unable to respond vigorously to economic and related social change, the native officials of the late nineteenth century were an uprooted elite whose refined and over-elaborate cultural life was probably more a result of impotence than of specifically Javanese traits’.
Conclusions

Being Dutch in the tropics was no easy undertaking. For many colonial novelists it was a dilemma that animated the major narrative of their work. One of the most profound paradoxes of Dutch colonial rule was the allocation of identities to landscapes situated far apart – the Netherlands and the Indies – that, in a projection of the ideal colonial society, were constructed to be mutually exclusive. Some writers approached the ambiguities of this paradox by portraying characters who failed to accommodate themselves to the Indies environment, returning to Europe where they no longer had to worry about who they were because it was evident in the landscapes around them. Alternatively, a writer could force his or her characters to give up Europe forever because they had betrayed the identity that was forged within Dutch landscapes. Couperus and Lulofs explore both these possibilities in their work. A further option for novelists was to create characters who manoeuvred between European and native identities, and to investigate the ways in which these oscillations related to Indies nature and landscapes. This is Dermoût’s speciality, one that she even attempted to portray in the guise of a Javanese character.

All three novels suggest that the formation and maintenance of Dutch identities in the Indies during the early twentieth century was carried out with reference not just to other Europeans, or to Asians (often focusing specifically on differences between the two); ‘Dutchness’ was a notion that was also defined with respect to nature and landscapes, both real and ideal. In many cases, memories of the Netherlands provided a default template against which to compare all other landscapes, and was associated in colonial minds with fidelity to a rather abstract notion of cultural purity. The landscapes of the Indies, on the other hand, were spaces that elicited ambiguous responses – affection and allegiance from those colonists who had been born and raised in the tropics; but also confusion and repulsion from those who conflated appreciation for Indies nature with disloyalty to their Dutch heritage and to colonial society. Indies landscapes, it seems, were not only shaped by the Europeans who altered them for colonial purposes; they also determined the contours of individual identities and precipitated a dialogue among some colonists about what it meant to be Dutch in the tropics.
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Maria Dermoût-Ingerman as a young woman together with her husband, presiding officer of the landraad (country bench) in Pati, circa 1907 (KITLV, 31345)
Louis Couperus and his in-laws in Batavia in 1899. From left to right, his brother-in-law, Mrs Baud and on his far right, his wife, Elisabeth Couperus-Baud. (KITLV, 4520.)
W. Wijnandts van Resand, Sr and his wife, his brother-in-law Baud, his mother-in-law,