The Dutch female author Aya Zikken (1919) spent a large part of her childhood in the Dutch Indies (colonial Indonesia). As were many Dutch colonial settlers, Zikken was forced to return to the homeland (the Netherlands) in the early 1940s during the struggle for Indonesian independence. The Netherlands, however, was almost completely unknown to Zikken. She tried to rework her East Indies childhood memories into numerous literary works. Suffering from feelings of rootlessness and homesickness for the Indies, Zikken also started travelling widely and has written a large body of such writing. Zikken’s background as a Dutch child in colonial Indonesia and her forced migration to the Netherlands was predominantly the reason for her to write, to travel, and to write about travel.

In the interests of exploring the notion of migratory aesthetics, I will offer a critical reading of Zikken’s narrative of “return travel” to Indonesia, entitled _Terug naar de atlasvlinder_ (Back to the Atlas Butterfly) written in 1981. The title of Aya Zikken’s return travel narrative refers directly to Zikken’s earlier written novel, entitled _De atlas vlinder_ (The Atlas Butterfly) written in 1958. The Atlas Butterfly is Zikken’s most acclaimed work. It is a nostalgic recollection of a colonial childhood in a Dutch settlers’ village in the highlands of South Sumatra. In _Back to the Atlas Butterfly_, the female travelling persona, named Aya Zikken, describes her return to this highland village where she was raised, here specified as Lahat, at South Sumatra. The intertextual relationship between the two aesthetic representations of Lahat in _The Atlas Butterfly_ and _Back to the Atlas Butterfly_ will be of crucial importance in the formulation of a migratory aesthetics.

I will argue that _Back to the Atlas Butterfly_ is very fruitful for a discussion about the notion of migratory aesthetics for the following reasons. Firstly, Aya Zikken’s return travel invites us to think about the notion of migratory aesthetics in a manner which is not
restricted to stable identity categories, such as “the migrant.” Secondly, the traveller’s return takes shape by means of a specific form of intertextuality, which may well be considered as migratory aesthetics. In *Back to the Atlas Butterfly*, the narration of the physical return to Lahat is interspersed with imaginary evocations of Lahat, with intertextual references to *The Atlas Butterfly*. Realising that a physical return to the Lahat of her childhood is not possible in the late 1970s, the traveller negotiates between observations and acts of imaginary recall of Lahat in order to recapture her past. I will argue that Lahat, as the site of the traveller’s childhood, exists in the negotiation of the slippage between the referential (but belated) and the memorial (but imaginary). The manner in which the traveller’s return is constituted through migrating between two aesthetically crafted representations of Lahat – referential and imagined – will be discussed as migratory aesthetics. Hence, my reading of a traveller’s return to Indonesia in *Back to the Atlas Butterfly* will yield insights into migratory aesthetics as a notion which does not only challenge conventional identity categories, such as “the Western traveller” and “the post-colonial migrant.” In my formulation, migratory aesthetics also centralises the mobile dimension of intertextual relationships existing between different aesthetic representations of a singular space in the attempt to return to the colonial past.

**The Trajectory of a Western Traveller Homesick for the Indies**

In Aya Zikken’s return travel narrative *Back to the Atlas Butterfly*, the travelling persona is constituted neither as a “Western traveller” nor as a “postcolonial migrant,” but as possessing qualities of both. I consider return travel writing as a non-fictional first-person account about a journey back to the traveller’s childhood site. This understanding of “return travel writing” implies that, prior to the return, a departure from the childhood site to “elsewhere” has taken place. In return travel writing, the traveller departs from “elsewhere” and travels to what used to be her childhood “home.” This is in contrast with conventional Euro-imperial definitions of travel writing. Home is a crucial category within European travel, indicating a stable space where one departs from and returns to, and which is clearly demarcated from the space of “the foreign” and “the Other.”

In *Back to the Atlas Butterfly*, the place where Zikken departs from is the Netherlands. However, this place is not considered as home, in the sense of a stable place. The I-person undertakes the return journey to Indonesia because she feels rootless and homesick in the Netherlands. Conditions of displacement from one’s origins and feelings of homesickness have traditionally been connected to postcolonial or third world subjects who migrated to the West in a pathological way. In *Being/s in Transit*, Liselotte Glage argues, however, that “… by implying that the West produced (self-) centred travellers and the former colonies, by contrast, produced fragmented, dislocated migrants … in recent years, the figure of the migrant has acquired the status of a mythical beast, one that effectively blocks the view of our own history”(9). Given the travelling persona’s homesickness and decentredness, *Back to the Atlas Butterfly* invites us to question