**‘They Call Me Babu’: The Politics of Visibility and Gendered Memories of Dutch Colonialism in Indonesia**

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**Abstract**:

The 2019 documentary film *They Call Me Babu* utilises historical film footage including the home movies of one Dutch family with a voiceover in Bahasa Indonesia to narrate the fictionalised experiences of a former female domestic worker in the colony of the Netherlands East Indies in the closing decades of Dutch colonial rule from 1939 to 1949. By centring the experiences of ‘babu’, women who worked as nannies and nursemaids for families holding European status, and giving the main character of the film agency, the Dutch-Indonesian director Sarah Beerends endeavours to make these women visible and to narrate their viewpoints. In this paper we argue, however, that the director’s aspiration to centre the women’s stories is haunted by the spectres of the colonial matrix of power. This leads to the unintended replication of nostalgic images of, and tropes about, the colony that has characterised earlier Dutch memory work. The film does not offer a critical engagement with colonial violence and the colonial structures of power are instead positioned as contributing to the nanny’s gendered emancipation. Furthermore, we reflect on why, in the context of recent vociferous debates about colonial violence, a film which serves to soften images of Dutch colonialism, was generally well received.

**Keywords**: decolonial, memory activism, politics of visibility, affect and memory, gendered memories, Indonesia

**Introduction**

‘They Call Me Babu’ (*Ze Noemen me Baboe*, 2019), a documentary film by Indisch (Indo-Dutch) filmmaker Sandra Beerends, was produced within the framework of newly-emerging efforts to decolonise the history of the Dutch East Indies in the Netherlands by prioritising Indonesian voices.[[2]](#endnote-2) Over the last decade, such efforts have been primarily led by people of Indisch descent and those who have other historical connections to the former colony. They have engaged in a range of efforts to address the legacies of colonialism and its traumatic afterlives. *Babu* were Indonesian women who worked as nannies and nursemaids for families holding European status in the Netherlands East Indies. Sandra Beerends’ aim to make visible *babu* by centring this historical figure and trying to represent their experiences is a welcome turn. Yet, by narrating the fictionalised story of a former nanny using footage from the late colonial period of one particular nanny, Bereends oversimplifies both the historical experiences of *babu* and the complexity of the colonial society in which they lived. Both the narrative and visuals work to erase inequalities of gender, race and class. This is particularly pertinent for the Netherlands East Indies, a colony within which there was sustained regulation of race and interracial intimacies.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Dutch colonialism in the Indonesian archipelago was premised on the economic exploitation of local people and resources and the assumed right to rule over Indonesians which derived from beliefs in racial superiority. This project spanned several centuries beginning with the formation of the East India Company (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, VOC), in the early seventeenth century. The colony came under the administration of the Dutch government in the 1800s as the Netherlands East Indies (*Nederlands-Indië*), until the Japanese occupation of 1942-1945. At the conclusion of the Asia Pacific War Indonesians declared independence yet the Dutch tried to take back the colony leading to a five-year war of independence (1945-1949). Dutch economic dominance continued into the 1950s beyond the formal and belated Dutch recognition of independence in 1949.[[4]](#endnote-4) A distinctive feature of Dutch colonialism was its encouragement of interracial sexual relationships and concubinage during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dutch men and other European men in service of the Dutch colonial enterprise commonly took local women as domestic help and sexual partners, and/or legal wives, which led to the formation of an interracial society.[[5]](#endnote-5) The *Reegerings Reglement* (the Indies ‘Constitution’) of 1854 juridically divided colonial subjects into three groups: the indigenous people (*inlanders*), Europeans (which included Indo-Europeans) and ‘Foreign Orientals’ which had consequences for the laws, rights and citizenship status applied to each category. This produced colonial anxieties about racial proximity.[[6]](#endnote-6) During the Japanese occupation race also partially determined people’s historical experiences because of assumptions about racial loyalty which meant many Indisch and almost all Dutch people were interned in prison camps.[[7]](#endnote-7) In the ‘bersiap’ (get ready) period between the end of the Japanese occupation and the war of Independence during which Indonesians were readying themselves against Dutch attempts to retake the colony, those who were perceived as descendants of Indonesian women who had had children with white men, and many Indisch people, along with Dutch people, suffered terrifying brutalities.[[8]](#endnote-8) Following Dutch recognition of Indonesian independence in 1949, Indisch people holding Dutch citizenship were forced to leave the country. Many migrated to the Netherlands, the United States or Australia.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Race, class and gender were axes of power around which the Dutch colonial society was organised, wherein the position of Indonesian women and women of Indonesian descent was particularly ambiguous. Both women and men of lower-class status worked as servants in colonial households. In the late colonial period of the 1920s to 1930s, with the rise of Indonesian nationalism and Dutch efforts to further legitimise their control, the Dutch demarcated more rigid boundaries between the local population and those holding European status. In this period, from which the footage that composes the majority of *They Call Me Babu* has been drawn, the position of a *babu* was particularly ambiguous. On the one hand, *babu* were celebrated for their alleged loyalty and capacity for care, but on the other hand their proximity to European children was perceived as potentially dangerous due to the potential ‘contamination’ of white children through their exposure to indigenous ways of life and of being in the world.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Despite the formal end of Dutch control of the colony in 1942 and the declaration of independence in 1945 the legacies of colonialism endured for many years in independent Indonesia and in the Netherlands. In both countries the postcolonial condition ‘remains a feature of everyday life whether at the level of institutions, law, economy, education, language, or cultural production.’[[11]](#endnote-11) An awareness of the postcolonial condition has prompted many efforts especially in the cultural sphere to engage in decolonial work which attempts to decentre the ongoing perpetuation of Eurocentric systems of value.[[12]](#endnote-12) Over the last decade, there has been an upsurge in Dutch memory activism focused on making Indonesian and Indisch women more visible in accounts of the colonial past across various genres – from literature,[[13]](#endnote-13) popular music,[[14]](#endnote-14) and popular historiography,[[15]](#endnote-15) to fiction films[[16]](#endnote-16) and numerous documentaries.[[17]](#endnote-17) Situated within this trend is Beerends’ documentary, which relies visually on black and white footage from the colonial era, but also utilises a narrative voice-over that is scripted based on interviews with former *babu* and the Dutch families for whom they once worked. By focusing on the subaltern subject of *babu* Beerends embraces one aim of decolonial artistic practice which is an attempt to recover ‘embodied experiences and memories that have been under erasure.’[[18]](#endnote-18) Yet by centring her narrative around the historical figure of the *babu*, who was both idealised and feared for her proximity to Dutch families in colonial society, she faces several challenges in terms of how to practice decoloniality. What are the possibilities of decoloniality when the end of colonial rule did not bring an end to the cultural and epistemological structures upon which colonialism functioned? Further, how might recent Dutch efforts to decolonise the memory of the Netherlands East Indies be informed by the preceding decades of Indisch collective and personal memory work, which is permeated with colonial nostalgia?[[19]](#endnote-19)

Our reading of this documentary suggests that the politics of visibility – by which we mean actively making Indonesian women visible –is haunted by spectres of the colonial matrix of power which inform what can and cannot be said. Here, we consider that spectrality operates as an affective force that derails decolonial aspirations to ‘give voice’ to subaltern women. In terms of the colonial matrix of power, we follow the work of Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano, who argues that colonialism operates through the interrelated domains of control of the economy, authority, gender, sexuality and subjectivity. Rather than being structures of the past, Quijano highlights how the coloniality of power continues after the end of administrative colonisation.[[20]](#endnote-20) In our analysis we pay attention to how spectres of colonial power relations, especially those that relate to gender, sexuality, and the contemporary production of subjectivities, inform the film. We argue that the decolonial tendencies of ‘They Call Me Babu’ operate as what we term *decolonial aspirations* – a desire to engage in decolonial work in order to unsettle colonial epistemologies, while being complicit at the same time with the distinctly heteropatriarchal value systems that produced and sustained colonialism.

Our aim here is to draw attention to the specific spectres of colonial inequalities that curtail the decolonial aim to achieve visibility and speakability. We chart how the representation of *babu* in *They Call Me Babu* is affectively haunted by multilayered inequalities that are inherent in the colonialism, racism and heteronormative structures intrinsic to both the colonial and postcolonial conditions.[[21]](#endnote-21) The concept of ‘hauntings’[[22]](#endnote-22) is a productive analytical lens through which to engage with what remains on the margins of speakability and representability. The concept captures the affects most closely associated with colonialism’s traumatic afterlives. It is because of these hauntings that the decolonial intention which underpins this film ultimately results in the reproduction of a nostalgic yearning for the colony and the erasure of colonial violence. Here, we draw on Dragojlovic’s argument that Indisch practices of ‘tracing silence’ ‘manifest as an act of haunted speakability, shaped by intergenerational aspirations to visibilise personal and collective injuries.’[[23]](#endnote-23) As Dragojlovic argues ‘individual aspirations to give voice to and visibilise past injustices often reproduce the very structures they wish to dismantle.’ [[24]](#endnote-24) Thus, following Dragojlovic we use the concept of speakability to problematise a binary understanding of speech versus silence. Therefore, we use the concept of representability to denote the inherent ambiguities around any claims of absolute truth in relation to historical silencing. Here, following Trouillot, we suggest that efforts to represent silenced histories are frequently accompanied by other forms of silencing.[[25]](#endnote-25)

In what follows, we situate memory work and memory activism in relation to the Netherlands East Indies as a backdrop against which this documentary was made. We then proceed to chart how the representation of *babu* in the film is affectively haunted by spectres of structural inequalities that are inherent in the heteronormative structures intrinsic to both the colonial and postcolonial conditions. We argue that, despite the film makers awareness of colonial inequalities, the desire to give voice to a multiplicity of Indonesian domestic workers is ultimately derailed, resulting in the reproduction of the colonial stereotype of subservient Indonesian women who hold an enduring love and forgiveness for the former colonisers. The forgiveness of the Dutch colonial enterprise that is implicit in the film is communicated through a linear emancipatory narrative in which the colonial condition is portrayed as essential in ‘saving’ the *babu* from the presumed oppressive patriarchy of local society and enabling her to become an emancipated Indonesian woman. In this process, the Netherlands is separated out from the colony as a space of awakening. Furthermore, the nanny’s fictionalised historical experiences of the 1945–49 revolution reflect a distinctly Dutch/Indisch perspective, glossing over Dutch violence against Indonesians in an attempt to assuage colonial guilt.

**Postcolonial and Decolonial Memory Work**

Dutch collective memory of the colonial Netherlands East Indies has been characterised by a nostalgic longing for *Ons Indië* (Our Indies), accompanied by the common saying, *daar is wat groots verricht*’ (those were our glory days!).[[26]](#endnote-26) These widely-known ongoing sentiments are referred to as *tempo doeloe*, meaning ‘the good old days’ in Malay. According to these nostalgic longings the Netherlands East Indies is imagined in an idyllic light, as not only devoid of violence, but also as an unchanging society unspoiled by technology, wherein Indonesian people worked harmoniously in the fields or in the homes of the colonial elite in an unchallenged social order. An intrinsic part of *tempo doeloe* iconography relates to the long legacy of *mooi Indië* (beautiful Indies) paintings, focused on the representation of a lush tropical environment, depicting rice fields with Indonesian people working in them and volcanoes in the background.[[27]](#endnote-27) While *tempo doeloe*’s longstanding durée was also sparked by the proliferation of the ‘imperial nostalgia’[[28]](#endnote-28) that emerged with the expansion of mass tourism since the 1970s, Indisch cultural theorist Pamela Pattynama has argued that *tempo doeloe* has been crucial in constituting a ‘memorial community’ of Indisch people in the Netherlands.[[29]](#endnote-29) The romance of the past of the Netherlands East Indies exists, however, alongside an erasure of the memory of stigmatisation of Indisch and Indonesian people by the white colonial elite in the late colonial period and alongside a denial of gendered and racialised hierarchies.[[30]](#endnote-30) It is important to stress here that the various forms of structural violence that permeated the colonial period of the Netherlands East Indies do not solely implicate the white Dutch colonial elite, but also the Indisch people who actively participated in the production and perpetuation of racialised, economic, social and gendered hierarchies.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Alongside discourses of *tempo doeloe*, there were periodic reminders of the ‘forgotten’ Dutch colonial atrocities throughout the second part of the twentieth century and the first two decades of the twenty first century. One notable example is the 1969 public announcement by military veteran J. E. Hueting that the Dutch military perpetrated war crimes in the Dutch East Indies during the 1945–1949 independence war.[[32]](#endnote-32) These repeated ‘discoveries’ of the forgotten colonial past[[33]](#endnote-33) are often associated with visual representations, especially photographs of colonial atrocities of massacres occurring in both the Aceh War (1873­1904) and the 1945–49 period, form what Paul Bijl has termed ‘emerging memories’.[[34]](#endnote-34) Due to a lack of consensus around colonial history and related violence such images consistently reappear in public memory as something that has truly been ‘forgotten’. In this way, memories of manifold forms of colonial violence continuously haunt the Dutch present, reminding citizens of unresolved and repressed social violence.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Debates and political activism around colonial history in the Netherlands and Indonesia intensified in the first decade of the twenty first century. A crucial trigger for this was the successful court cases spearheaded from 2008 by Dutch activist of Indonesian descent living in the Netherlands, Jeffry Pondaag, on behalf of Indonesian survivors of Dutch colonial violence. These court cases resulted in state apologies in 2011 and 2012, and in compensation payments to widows of the Indonesian men massacred by Dutch troops during the Indonesian independence war.[[36]](#endnote-36) More recently, memory activists have boycotted the celebration of colonial figures and commemorative days that work to erase histories of Dutch violence against Indonesians.[[37]](#endnote-37) It was in this climate of ongoing *tempo doeloe* sentiments and intensified political activism around colonial violence that *They Call Me Babu* was produced.

The film, which attracted significant funding, was also very well received in Dutch society. Funding came from the Shared Cultural Heritage scheme of the Dutch Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Education, Culture and Science which awards between 5,000-35,000 euros for projects between Dutch and partner collaborators in countries with historical links to the Netherlands.[[38]](#endnote-38) The film was released at IDFA (the International Documentary Film Festival, Amsterdam) in November 2019, where it became the fourth favourite documentary film out of 166 films.[[39]](#endnote-39) Since its release, it has been screened across 23 cinemas in the Netherlands, and it was awarded the Crystal film prize by the Dutch Film fund (*Nederlands Filmfonds*) for selling 10,000 cinema tickets.[[40]](#endnote-40) The film was curiously praised for its presumed ‘neutrality’ by numerous Dutch reviewers. Even the usually critical weekly magazine *Groene Amsterdammer* published a review by Joost de Vries who praised the apolitical stance of the film, stating, ‘Beerends did not want to file a complaint. She just wanted to tell a story that is already difficult enough in itself.’[[41]](#endnote-41) The reference here to a difficult story conveys the sense of intense contestation about this history. In a rare critical review of the film, San Fu Maltha, a Dutch filmmaker of Indo-Chinese descent, astutely argued that the storyline, which offers idealised representations of *babu* that are closely resonant with the colonial representations of the ‘noble savage’, as well as the strong prevalence of *tempo doelo* iconography led to generous funding and at the same time attracted large audiences.[[42]](#endnote-42) This political economy of memory work clearly indicates that the colonial matrix of power is not a structure of the past, but rather something that affectively haunts contemporary efforts to re-remember colonialism differently.

There are very few published reviews of the film in Indonesia so far most likely because the screening of the film there was delayed due to outbreak of Covid 19 in early 2020 and the desire of the filmmaker to attend live screenings with Indonesian audiences. The only two published reviews we could locate are written by Indonesian correspondents in the Netherlands suggesting that the film has not yet had an impact in Indonesia. The first of these reviews by correspondent Aboeprijadi Santoso, who is typically critical of the Indonesian government on human rights issues, simply summarises the plot and interestingly writes that ‘Bereends, should be applauded for her work and achievement.’[[43]](#endnote-43) The second review by Linda Sudarto, is also relatively uncritical of the film stating that the director ‘uses the narration of Alima to remind us of the wounds of imperialism and a war that created a dichotomy of East and West’. This review, however, quotes the more critical view of Indonesian writer Felix Nesi who questions how the relatively naïve character of Alima suddenly develops a more critical view of colonialism in contrast to the strong emotional bond she has with her employer’s family.[[44]](#endnote-44) Neither of these reviews however deeply probe how coloniality is dealt with in the film. This may reflect the fact that the film has not yet been viewed by a wide audience in Indonesia.

**Decolonial Aspirations and the Politics of Visibility**

Alluding to the extreme marginality of the *babu* and the difficulties of finding traces of them in historical records such as archives, Locher Scholten writes that: ‘of all dominated groups in the former colonies, dominated servants were the most ‘ subaltern.’[[45]](#endnote-45) In her choice of film title Beerends similarly stresses the subjugated position of *babu*. She alerts the viewers to the fact that most servants in the colony of the Netherlands East Indies were not known by their own names, but instead by the title of their occupation. Once the main protagonist in this film, the fictional Alima, gains employment, she explains to the viewers: ‘I was called *babu*. I did not know that word. It was a Dutch word, as if they wanted to say two words at once – *ba* from *mbak* (miss), and *bu* from the word *ibu* (mother). Ba-bu. I was not yet used to that word’. This practice of calling house workers only by the title of their occupation is echoed in the observations of scholars.[[46]](#endnote-46) In making this naming practice overt, Beerends seeks to critique a key aspect of the colonial practice of erasing the personal identities of Indonesian people through their general classification, using the racist term ‘natives’.

The precise connotations of the term *babu*, however, deserve more reflection. Several Indonesian writers have offered important mediations on its etymology. Ahmad Khadafi argues that the word *babu* is the feminine equivalent of the derogatory masculine word, ‘coolie’, in English, which implies engagement in hard physical labour.[[47]](#endnote-47) Similarly, Hairus Salim argues that the word is both a colonial and feudal hangover that was once used to describe the devalued labour of a female house worker ‘who tidied the rooms, fed the children milk and did the washing.’ [[48]](#endnote-48) In present-day Indonesia, the term *babu* has many negative connotations and is no longer used.[[49]](#endnote-49) In Dutch society, the term *babu* continues to hold negative connotations. In the Netherlands, more recent marriage migrants from Indonesia use the term *babu* to remind their ethnic Dutch spouses as well as their employers of their status. One such migrant, for example, stated ‘I am not their Javanese *babu*! Dutch people sometimes forget this. The colony is over! No more! Finished!’.[[50]](#endnote-50) The prevailing essentialist image of subservient, nurturing Indonesian femininity is a powerful reminder of the persistence of colonial categorisation of people and places in the contemporary Netherlands. This highlights how easily available and applicable the expectations of colonial gendered labour are to contemporary circumstances.

In contrast to this ‘They Call Me Babu’ was promoted by Beerends as a representation of ‘forgotten women’.[[51]](#endnote-51) The fact that information about female colonial servants does not appear in the conventional history books is of course not surprising.[[52]](#endnote-52) But there is in fact an abundance of narratives about the *babu* in the postcolonial Dutch literature as well as in Indisch and Dutch memoirs.[[53]](#endnote-53) For example, Rudy Kousbroek’s book *Terug naar Negri Pan Erkoms* (Return to the Land of Ori Gin) and documentary *Het meer der herinnering* (The Sea of Memory), produced in the mid-1990s, extensively featured the figure of *babu* including home movie footage of these women.[[54]](#endnote-54) While it can hardly be said that the figure of *babu* has been forgotten in the Netherlands, what sets Beerends’ documentary apart from similar efforts to revive what is perceived as ‘forgotten’ is the scale of funding that allowed Beerends to produce a one-hour-and-eight minutes long documentary based entirely on old black and white footage.

Based on clips from 179 films, Beerends tells the fictional story of *babu* Alima. The sole reliance on historical footage serves as a claim to authenticity and an associated ‘truthful’ representation of *babu*. The film clips Beerends uses are from home films made by elite colonial families as well as from official Dutch and Japanese archive films held by the *Instituut voor* *Beeld en Geluid* (Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision) and Eye Film Museum in the Netherlands and the NHK broadcaster in Japan.[[55]](#endnote-55) Most of the footage comes from the home movies of one Dutch family, which allows Beerends to narrate the story of a child named Jantje who appears repeatedly in the film. The dependence on this footage means that Beerends is immediately bound in narrating this story by these images and what they depict. Susie Protschky notes that in the colony photographs were taken for the purposes of family viewing and to project the values of ‘worldliness, domesticity and a peculiar mode of civility’ associated with the Indies elite.[[56]](#endnote-56) These visual artefacts were used not only for the purposes of remembrance for the immediate family, but also ‘sent home as proof of the good life overseas’, emphasising a nostalgic, *tempo doeloe* framing.[[57]](#endnote-57) The same could be said about the purposes and meanings associated with home films. Dutch families in the Netherlands East Indies frequently made home films featuring their houses, children and touristic outings, to send home to family members in the Netherlands.[[58]](#endnote-58) They also documented big events such as voyages of departure and arrival in ports. It is precisely this kind of family footage of daily life both inside and outside the house, as well as long journeys from port to port and on board large passenger liners from the colony to the metropole, that is presented in *They Call Me Babu*. Given conventions of the day according to which fathers made home films as a way of participating in family life, and the fact the father rarely appears in the footage, it is likely he was behind the camera lens.[[59]](#endnote-59)

Thinking more specifically about how and why the *babu* appeared in these home films requires further reflection on family space. Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler argue that photographs of *babu* were exceptional because they were not part of idealised images of the colony.[[60]](#endnote-60) The purpose of home films was to serve as ‘a technology of memory based on storing memories.’[[61]](#endnote-61) The intended subject of the footage featured in the film, which was captured by the particular family, was of course not the *babu*, but instead the child of the colonising family. The *babu* presumably only features because of her constant care of and proximity to the child. Stoler and Strassler remind us that photographs taken by Dutch families were ‘cherished by the colonizer and not the colonized’.[[62]](#endnote-62)

In attempting to visibilise *babu* in the colonial footage, Beerends uses first person narration to tell the story of a fictional *babu* Alima throughout the film. To lend the film authenticity and a sense that this is the life story of one woman, the film is narrated in a formal form of Bahasa Indonesia (with English and Dutch subtitles available) by Denise Azman, an actress of Indonesian descent who grew up in the Netherlands.[[63]](#endnote-63) Alima’s narrative, composed as a life story recounted to her recently deceased mother, is based on multiple oral histories conducted by Beerends with both Dutch families who had once had *babu* as well as oral histories collected by an Indonesian researcher from Surabaya with former *babu*.[[64]](#endnote-64) In her quest to narrate the story of one imaginary *babu*, Beerends faces several challenges which further divert her from the production of a decolonial film. The fictional licence taken by Beerends to make the film more dramatic leads her to privilege some stories over others. Throughout this process, the individual voices of Indonesian women are lost and, more problematically, erased. At the end of the film, the brief credits quickly flash the names of numerous Indonesian women who were interviewed for the project. This, combined with erasing the individual voices of women, results in the film doing precisely the opposite to what it is seeking to achieve. Rather than presenting the multiplicity of voices and subject positions of the former *babu* whose stories form the basis of the film’s narrative, the fictional Alima tells an idealised story that perpetuates the *tempo doeloe* trope of an Indonesian indigenous woman who unconditionally loves the Dutch children she cares for.

Most of the narrative script privileges nostalgic Dutch views of nursemaids and of colonial harmony. The theme of harmony is conjured through the use of a lilting, lullaby-like feminine Indonesian voiceover. This narrative strategy, associated with a loving, caring nanny, produces a soothing and comforting affect as if to say that even if she is critical at times, her love and affection is unbounded, and she passes no real, major judgment on colonial history. Similarly, the *tempo doeloe* trope of happy family life is reinforced by the representation of the Dutch family around which the film is built. In this representation, the family occupies an apolitical space where the bonds of intimacy transcend race, despite what Beerends acknowledges were ‘colonial inequalities.’[[65]](#endnote-65)

Scholarship on nursemaids and children in the colonial period tells us that the family was not a neutral space and that colonial officials instructed European mothers to beware of the ‘affective attachments’ between European children and *babu* in European households. In the late 19th to early 20th centuries, for the colonial elite, the figure of *babu* was associated with extreme anxiety because of the view that the family was a key site where children’s morality, sense of racial identity and indeed loyalty to the Dutch could be moulded.[[66]](#endnote-66) Locher-Scholten argues that Dutch women in the colony viewed their servants through two broad discourses – orientalism, and the colonial family – with the latter discourse functioning as ‘a rhetoric of concealment, hiding differences of race, class and gender.’[[67]](#endnote-67) In the Dutch colonial society, the rhetoric of the family implied both ‘familial solidarity and harmony’, but also ‘hierarchy and subtle power’.[[68]](#endnote-68) Themes of colonial harmony were thus promoted through references to the colonial family. At the same time, *babu* were often praised for their devotion and loyalty. In a 1919 publication about Dutch people in the Dutch East Indies, for example, a Dutch author wrote: ‘I think the devotion of the *babu* is infinitely greater than that of a Dutch nursemaid. She attaches herself whole-heartedly to your child and keeps this attachment her whole life.’[[69]](#endnote-69) This text, written a century ago, mirrors a key trope of the film, which is the attachment between the *babu*, Alima, and the child, Jantje.

**Haunted Representability**

One of the key purported purposes of producing this film was to ‘uncover’ the little-known history of the close bonds of affection between Indonesian *babu* and Dutch children, and the ongoing effects of these relationships. Based on her personal family experiences and discussions with other Dutch families with experiences in the colony, Beerends stated:

I think that babu’s have had much more impact than generally perceived in the first instance. For example, I used to hum my children to sleep because my mum always did that to me. My mum had learned that from her nanny in the Indies. There was something unconditional about that love between child and *babu*, despite all the inequality in colonial society. She was family. [Beerends pauses.] And yet again also not.[[70]](#endnote-70)

This statement might in many ways be surprising, given that over the past several decades, Indisch memory work – particularly by second and third generation descendants of those who lived in the Netherlands East Indies – has been preoccupied with recovering silenced histories and memories, which has often resulted in the production of documentaries featuring old photographs and footage from home movies in order to locate figures, places and events that have presumably been silenced and forgotten.[[71]](#endnote-71) Yet, this exuberant cultural production does not diminish Beerends’s sense of urgency to ‘uncover’ what is believed to have been ‘forgotten’ and silenced. As previously argued by Dragojlovic, the affective forces that drive this dynamic cultural production emanate from intergenerational hauntings of those connected to this history.[[72]](#endnote-72)

Our analysis builds on Avery Gordon’s astute argument that haunting is neither pre-modern superstition nor individual psychosis, but an important sociological phenomenon that emanates from diverse circumstances of historical injustice.[[73]](#endnote-73) Making this explicit link between historical violence and contemporary hauntings, Gordon makes an important distinction between trauma, as a dissociative state of numbness, and hauntings, which produce an urgency for ‘something-to-be-done’.[[74]](#endnote-74) The efforts to visibilise *babu* in this documentary are affectively derailed by the spectres of colonial power relations, especially in relation to gender, sexuality, and racialisation, which haunt the present and police the margins of speakability and representability. Most importantly, there is a glaring absence of interraciality in this documentary. Across various interviews, Beerends, who identifies as Indisch, stresses that her motivation to make this film was personal – a way to highlight a special bond that her mother had with her *babu* in the Netherlands East Indies. However, what is striking about this documentary is its depiction of a colonial society in which the protagonists are only Indonesian people or Dutch colonialists, while interracial Indisch people, who comprised a significant part of the very colonial society Beerends is representing, are largely absent and entirely silenced. An audience unfamiliar with the complexity of the colonial society would not pick up a hint of the complexities and importance of interraciality in the colonial society. This produces an erasure of the experiences of Indonesian women who had children with Dutch and/or other European men in the service of the Dutch colonial empire, and subsequently an erasure of their interracial descendants.[[75]](#endnote-75) While Indisch people held the legal status of Europeans, they also occupied an ambivalent space between the local and European worlds.[[76]](#endnote-76) The erasure of Indisch people from the film, rather than allowing for a multiplicity of voices, perpetuates the anxiety and ambiguity that existed in the colony about interraciality and continues to the present day.

The aim for visibilisation in the film is haunted by various contentious subjects and relationships that come in and out of speakability and representability. For example, in the above quote, Beerends partially disrupts the focus on the close bond between an Indonesian maid and her employers by acknowledging the inequalities in colonial society and the fact that *babu* were at once part of and *not* part of the family. In general, however, disruptions to the central theme of harmonious relations between the Dutch and Indonesians outside of the confines of the family occur only in passing, never interrupting the central theme of the enduring affection thatthe *babu* feels for the first Dutch child she cared for. When the fictional Alima bids farewell to Jantje as his family leaves the colony, for example, she tells the audience, ‘I smelled his smell deeply so he, my eldest child (*anak sulung*), would always be in my heart.’ In this scene by referring to Jantje as her own child she conveys a deep familial bond. This emphasis on Alima’s motherly bond to the Dutch child reinforces views of normative womanhood, according to which women’s roles as mothers and in performing caring work are emphasised.

The accentuation of the *babu*’s enduring affection for the children she cared for is an ongoing *tempo doelo* trope. Scholars have observed that there is a considerable gap between Dutch memories of *babu* and the memories of the women who worked in this occupation. Based on interviews with Indonesian former domestic workers conducted in 1996 and 1997, Stoler and Strassler argue that local memories of the colony challenge ‘the popular romance of the beloved and nurturing servant that dominates Dutch memories’.[[77]](#endnote-77) In making this point, they challenge Dutch remembrance of domestic workers by emphasising that Indonesians by contrast emphasised not memories of a home, but instead of repetitive domestic work and of being treated as part of the family only in the sense of an unequal relationship of patronage.[[78]](#endnote-78) Former domestic workers stressed memories of work and routines, and certain Dutch words imprinted in their minds such as eat, sleep, cook and wash (*eten*, *slepen*, *koken*, *wassen*),[[79]](#endnote-79) rather than of affection for their former employers. While in the film the routines of daily work performed by *babu* are similarly emphasised in Alima’s narration of doing the washing and bathing, feeding and playing with Jantje, the primary focus is Alima’s attachment to Jantje. Thus, the only subject position offered to *babu* in this documentary is entrenched in the colonial matrix of power that curtails decolonial aspirations for speakability, visibility and plurality.

**Space, Place and the ‘Emancipation’ of Babu**

Through the narration of Alima’s life story, Beerends touches upon some key events in the last decade of the Netherlands East Indies through to the arrival of Japanese in 1942 and the ensuing war for independence. In doing so, she attempts to give the fictionalised babu Alima agency by drawing on a broader nationalist trope of using the emancipated woman as a metonym for the emerging emancipated nation. The ways in which Alima’s awakening is represented are, however, particularly problematic because of the idealisation of the Netherlands as a colonial metropole in the process. Soon after Alima gains employment with a Dutch family, she accompanies them on a trip to the Netherlands. Alima narrates her journey by ocean liner with a sense of wonder. The Netherlands is represented as a more progressive space than the colony and a place where Alima begins to develop increasing political awareness. This theme is communicated in several ways. The first is through the affinity Alima develops with the family’s Dutch maid, Betsie, who is represented as Alima’s teacher. Alima turns to Betsie, for example, to ask what sovereignty means. Betsie replies that it means independence. Alima also observes that in the Netherlands she is given a holiday by her *nyonya* (the lady of the house). When, back in the colony, however, when she asks her *nyonya* for a holiday she angrily replies, ‘here there are different rules’, thus alerting viewers to the fact that in this case domestic labour exploitation was worse in the colony. Furthermore, Alima is for the first time treated as an equal in the Netherlands. As viewers are shown home movie footage of the nanny entering and ordering food in a Dutch grocery store, she reports on a conversation with the shop keeper:

Today for the first time in my life I was addressed as *Mevrouw* (Ms). Can I help you *Mevrouw*? I did not imagine I was being addressed. I looked behind me. No, I mean you, can I help you? Now I am a *nyonya*, an Indonesian *nyonya*.

This narration, which is communicated with the emotion of newfound pride, suggests that Alima is used to being invisible in colonial society, but now suddenly in the Netherlands she is visible. Through these representations, the Netherlands is characterised as an egalitarian space of possibility and a site of Alima’s awakening. This representation is consistent with an enduring Dutch self-image of a ‘commitment to tolerance, fostered by a long humanist heritage.’[[80]](#endnote-80) The separation of the Netherlands and the colony, however, mirrors the notion of ‘colonial aphasia’ according to which the history of Dutch colonialism is detached from the history of the Netherlands,[[81]](#endnote-81) further accentuating the sense of an unresolved colonial history.

In contrast to the presentation of the Netherlands as a place of emancipatory possibilities, the exclusive reliance on footage captured through a colonial gaze results in the portrayal of Indonesia through the conventional *tempo doeloe* iconography. For example, the film opens with scenes of mountain ranges, lush rice fields and volcanoes. These shots serve to bring the viewer into the world of nostalgic yearning for the lost colony. As Susie Protschky has argued, European images of the tropics were used to evoke ‘an alluring contrast to the flat polderlands and cold waterways of the Netherlands’, and a tangible vision of the Dutch colonial possession of the Netherlands East Indies.[[82]](#endnote-82) This heavy reliance on *mooi Indië* (beautiful Indies) or *tempo doeloe* iconography,[[83]](#endnote-83) throughout the film promotes nostalgic longing for the former colony, overshadowing and marginalising any engagements with structures of colonial inequalities.

The linear, emancipatory progression of Alima’s character – from her escape from a forced marriage and her service in a Dutch household to her wondrous lifestyle of traveling with the Dutch family – necessitates a critique of her employers. For example, Alima begins to notice that, when the family makes a stopover in Egypt on their boat trip to the Netherlands and journeys to the pyramids by camel, their behaviour does not change. She observes that it is ‘as if the whole world was owned by them’. Here she exposes the colonial entitlement of this Dutch family. Similarly, when audiences are shown footage of German troops arriving in the Netherlands and commencing their occupation Alima communicates the shocked reaction of the Dutch *tuan* (master)to the fact the Netherlands was now occupied. Alima then shares the Indonesian gardener’s response to the tuan’s shock, which is to state the common nationalist refrain that: ‘Indonesia has been occupied for 300 years.’ Alima also reacts critically after she tries to reassure her Dutch *nyonya*, who has just been freed from a Japanese prison camp, that all will be alright, and the *nyonya* responds that ‘it won’t be alright because *our* country has been stolen.’ Here, the reported words of the *nyonya* convey a sense of loss that many Dutch people who lived in the colony felt when they were forced to flee.[[84]](#endnote-84) Yet Alima responds by saying: ‘we did not steal it, we are merely taking it back’. In this way, the film charts the gradual awakening in Alima of feelings of nationalism and more intense questioning of the place of the Dutch in the colony, firmly signalling Beerends’ decolonial aspirations. Yet, even though she offers occasional didactic criticism – as any good nanny is expected to do –Alima’s Dutch employers are portrayed as those who saved her from the presumed oppressive local patriarchy and also facilitated her emancipation. In this way, the colonial enterprise is portrayed as holding a liberatory capacity, especially for local women.

This liberatory potential for female emancipation as apparently facilitated by Dutch colonialism is highlighted throughout the film. In the opening scenes, we are told that Alima’s mother had big dreams for her. Speaking to her deceased mother, Alima recollects, ‘Mother, you taught me that girls must stand on their own feet, but I don’t have your courage, mother.’ Promising to follow her mother’s dream for her ‘to strive for a beautiful life’ she leaves her village, goes to the city of Bandung and then takes up the job with the Dutch family that entails a journey to the Netherlands. While Alima is represented as wanting to fulfill her mother’s wishes, these aspirations are all portrayed as being made possible by the Dutch power structures. She is first saved from the presumably oppressive local patriarchy by employment in a Dutch household, and then enlightened by ideas of liberation and emancipation in the Netherlands thanks to a white Dutch woman. Here again, colonial power structures are represented as facilitating Indonesian female emancipation.

Throughout the film, clear references are made to the elite Javanese icon of Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879­1904), who was in part influenced by Dutch liberal ideas, but also by her experiences of being forced to marry a man who already had one wife. Kartini, who was the daughter of a Javanese aristocrat and colonial official, became famous largely because of the letters she wrote to progressive Dutch women which were later translated into Indonesian. She is celebrated in Indonesia as the country’s first feminist and as an anti-colonial thinker.[[85]](#endnote-85) Kartini challenged Dutch colonial rule and supposed Dutch superiority over local people as well as feudal local customs, such as polygamy.[[86]](#endnote-86) Alima makes several critiques of the patriarchal aspects of Indonesian culture, including her father’s preference for sons, her uncle’s attempt to marry her off to a Chinese man (who is characterised as oppressive), and finally an attempt by her lover’s family after the death of her lover to force her to marry his brother, presumably to legitimise her child. Alima constantly thwarts these efforts. She later sets up a school for girls. Here, the closeness between her story and that of Kartini, who critiqued the patriarchal culture and set up and ran schools for girls, is very clear. We are told that her lover, Ribut, referred to her as ‘Kartini’. Kartini has been celebrated in both Dutch and Indonesian society from the early twentieth century onwards. Most recently, she has been made an icon of Dutch multiculturalism, praised primarily for challenging ‘traditional’ gender norms, rather than oppressive aspects of Dutch colonialism and racism.[[87]](#endnote-87) By representing the figure of *babu,* who most likely had little to no education, as a Kartini equivalent Beerends avoids a substantial critique of colonial inequalities and instead produces a highly idealised and unrealistic *babu*, who becomes a heroine of female emancipation from local, but not Dutch, power structures.

**Obscuring Dutch Colonial Violence and the Persistence of *Tempo Doeloe* Framings**

Beyond the sporadic mentioning of colonial inequalities narrated by Alima, the film skirts around Dutch violence of any kind. This is particularly striking given the trends in contemporary memory politics noted above. In Indonesia, it is well understood that there was a frequent blurring of the two categories of *babu*, being housemaids and nannies, and *nyai*, being live-in housekeepers with whom Dutch men residing in the colony frequently had sexual relationships which were underpinned by inequalities, coercion and sexual violence. In the film, however, the figure of *nyai* and interracial women more broadly are completely absent as is any substantial engagement with sexual coercion. A brief allusion to sexual violence occurs on the sea passage home from the Netherlands when Alima narrates that a young girl had been ‘disturbed’ (*diganggu*) in her cabin by her master (*tuan*). Given this is a fictional account, it is noteworthy that this attack does not occur in the home, represented as a space of harmony, but instead on a boat. Alima’s response is to go to her cabin and lock the door.

The director’s choice not to address sexual violence more overtly may have reflected the reluctance of women interviewed for the film to speak about this. Stoler and Strassler observed in their interviews, for example, one former domestic worker referred to a Dutch man as a good man, yet when pressed she also revealed that he had tried to rape an employee when the wife and child had gone on vacation.[[88]](#endnote-88)

In contrast to the reluctance to portray Dutch sexual violence against Indonesian women in the film, the representation of Japanese sexual violence and overall Japanese violence against both Indonesian and Dutch people is very explicit. In the scenes dealing with the Japanese occupation, viewers are shown Japanese men looking over Javanese women picking rice. Alima directly references sexual violence carried out by Japanese men when she states ‘Dewi Sri was insulted by the Japanese. They planted Japanese rice seeds in her stomach like she was a prostitute in one of their houses of prostitution.’ Here she refers to the Japanese-run so-called ‘comfort stations’ or ‘houses of prostitution’ set up in this period.[[89]](#endnote-89) The attention to Japanese sexual violence could reflect the fact that, due to a global movement for redress, this violence is more widely recognised than Dutch sexual violence.[[90]](#endnote-90) The emphasis in the film on the Japanese period as one of great suffering corresponds with tropes in both Indonesian and Dutch memory. In Indonesian memory, this refers to *romusha* or ‘forced labourers’, whereas in the Dutch memory, it refers to the experiences of imprisonment in internment camps and more importantly to the loss of a cherished colony.[[91]](#endnote-91)

The emphasis on Dutch loss and suffering is highlighted in the prelude to the family’s internment, during scenes of a night fair where the family enjoys rides on the merry-go-round and in dodgem cars. This ideal evening is followed by Alima’s expressions of anxiety that the family will be placed in a camp, while viewers are shown images of camps surrounded by barbed wire and Japanese soldiers. Alima voices her concerns by saying, ‘I could not protect them. All of my *nyonya’s* family were taken, they were swept up with force. Jantje was pulled away.’ Here, Alima is most concerned not for herself, but for what will happen to the family she works for. The accentuation of the suffering of those holding Dutch status during the Japanese occupation privileges Dutch perspectives.

The suffering of the colonial residents is further stressed by images of burnt-out cars and posters calling for independence as the film alludes to the period of *bersiap*, thereby equating Indonesian independence fighters with violence. During this period, in which the loyalties of each individual came under suspicion, members of Indonesian *laskars* (armed militias) and the Republican military killed thousands of Dutch and Indisch people.[[92]](#endnote-92) In the film, these communities are represented as facing a threat, and it is them that Alima wishes to protect. As these scenes are being shown, Alima narrates, ‘I remembered my family. I remembered Jantje. As I approached the place where Jantje was held I grew worried that something might have happened to them, especially because there were rumours some of our *pejuang* had carried out violence against Dutch people.’ Again, Alima is most concerned about the family for whom she once worked, emphasising the theme of her loyalty to them.

What is not mentioned in the film, however, is that Indonesian militia members also reserved a special contempt for those who were willing to serve the Dutch, condemning such people in posters as ‘dogs of NICA’, for abandoning their own people.[[93]](#endnote-93) These servants were policed for any signs of carrying or buying food for Dutch people, making it more dangerous not only to continue to work for the Dutch, but to provide basic help. Long after the period of colonisation some people remained fearful of revealing they had worked for the Dutch because of ongoing fears about how they would be judged in terms of their loyalty to the Republic.[[94]](#endnote-94) Yet in the film the dangers of domestic workers’ loyalty to the Dutch remain hidden because they disrupt the neat story of Alima’s enduring affection for the family.

Another case of the concealment of Dutch violence is the final section of the film, which covers the period of the Indonesian war of independence, a period now hotly debated in the Netherlands. Dutch troops are shown as arriving in Indonesia by boat with weapons. Alima has by this stage already met her lover Ribut, whose name means ‘noisy’ or ‘storm’, and she flees the city of Bandung after the Sea of Fire episode in March 1946. At this time the Indonesian independence fighters set fire to half the city calling on Indonesians to flee to both prevent the Dutch from acquiring strategic military posts and to demonstrate popular support for independence.[[95]](#endnote-95) Once Alima and Ribut reach the republican stronghold of Yogyakarta, she works with him in a cotton factory and enjoys happy times. Yet, when the Dutch arrive in Yogyakarta, he tells her he must go to stop them, to fight for her and their child. Ribut never returns, presumably because he is killed by the Dutch, yet the details of his death are not narrated. The armed struggle between the Dutch and Indonesians is only symbolically represented in an extended montage of scenes of a Balinese dancer in a bird man costume performing in front of villagers, Javanese dancers shooting bows and arrows and an injured fighter, Indonesian men spearing crocodiles, and finally a corpse floating down a river, which is the most direct reference to the violence and victims of the war. The decision to use such footage to cover the violence of the war and not to show any Dutch soldiers in proximity with Indonesian soldiers again suggests the filmmaker’s reticence to address the topic of colonial violence. Alima’s implied unconditional love and loyalty for the Dutch is finally sealed when she is represented as heartbroken by the death of Ribut, yet expresses no anger or judgement towards the Dutch.

**Conclusion**:

While the main narrative focus in *They Call Me Babu* is on the figure of *babu*, a marginalised colonial subject, the visual representations and narrative structure of the film engage in numerous erasures of structural inequalities, specifically as they pertain to gender, race and class. The film thus misses an opportunity to productively engage in ‘epistemic disobedience’,[[96]](#endnote-96) which would have the potential to dismantle and re-write the underlying logic of Dutch colonialism. The producers’ aspiration to produce a decolonial film is thwarted by the spectrality of affective hauntings, which derail the decolonial aim to re-think colonialism. By tailoring an idealised narrative that is stifled by the romanticisation of marginality, the reproduction of normative womanhood and the imposition of a ‘feel good’ emancipatory progression narrative on the colonial female servant, the film takes away any urgency to decolonise the collective memory about the Dutch East Indies. Rather than representing the plurality and multivocality of voices and subject positions that Indonesian women who worked as nannies for the Dutch families occupied, the film reproduces the heteropatriarchal value systems that produced and sustained colonialism, thereby serving to perpetuate the very structures it sought to upend.

In the context of recent vociferous debates about Dutch colonial violence it is particularly striking that this film, which serves to soften images of Dutch colonialism, was generally well received in Dutch society as evidenced by the IDFA and Crystal film prizes, awarded on the basis of audience popularity. This suggests that alongside mounting critiques of Dutch colonial violence and calls to more fully decolonise history, more comforting images of the colonial past are at the same time, and perhaps for this very reason, embraced by others in Dutch society because they demand far less reflection on the project of decoloniality.

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2. The Dutch title of the film uses the old Indonesian spelling of the term baboe, ending in an *oe*. To be consistent we use the modern spelling of this term babu throughout the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for example Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Thomas Lindblad and Peter Post, ‘Indonesian Economic Decolonization in Regional and International Perspective: An Introduction’, in *Indonesian Economic Decolonization in Regional and International Perspective,* eds. Thomas Lindblad and Peter Post (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2009), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
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11. Robert J. C. Young, ‘The Postcolonial Condition’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Post War European History*, ed. Dan Stone (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Marion Bloem, *Een Meisje van Honderd: Roman* (Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 2013) and Dido Michielsen, *Lichter dan ik* (Amsterdam: Hollands Diep, 2019). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ana Dragojlovic, ‘Caring for the Un-Speakable: Coercion, Shame, and the Structural Violence Continuum’, in *Gender, Violence and Power in Indonesia, Across Time and Space*, eds. Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic and Hannah Loney (London: Routledge, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Reggie Baay, *De njai: het concubinaat in Nederlands-Indië* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennep). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Ver van familie*. Directed by Marion Bloem.Amsterdam: Rocketta Film, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ana Dragojlovic, ‘Practising Affect for Haunted Speakability: Triggering Trauma Through an Interactive Art Project’, *History and Anthropology*, 2021, first published online https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02757206.2021.1901287?journalCode=ghan20. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
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21. See also Ana Dragojlovic, ‘Gender, Violence, Power: The Pervasiveness of Heteropatriarchal Moral Orders in Indonesia across Time and Space’, in *Gender, Violence and Power in Indonesia: Across Time and Space*, eds. Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic and Hannah Loney (London: Routledge, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Dragojlovic, ‘Practising Affect for Haunted Speakability.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Dragojlovic, ‘Practising Affect for Haunted Speakability’*: 15* [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ana Dragojlovic, ‘Practising Affect for Haunted Speakability’*: 15* [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
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30. Hans Meijer, *Indië Geworteld: De Twintigste Eeuw* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2004); Dragojlovic, ‘Caring for the Un-Speakable’; Locher-Scholten, ‘So Close and Yet So Far’. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Dragojlovic, ‘Caring for the Un-Speakable’. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See Pattynama, ‘Memories of Interracial Contacts’: 69-82. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Ana Dragojlovic, *Beyond Bali: Subaltern Citizens and Postcolonial Intimacy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016): 101-127. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Paul Bijl, *Emerging Memory: Photographs of Colonial Atrocity in Dutch Cultural Remembrance* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
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36. Stef Scagliola, ‘Cleo’s Unfinished Business’: Coming to terms with Dutch War Crimes in Indonesia’s war of Independence’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 14, no.3-4 (2012): 419-439 and Katharine McGregor, ‘From National Sacrifice to Compensation Claims: Changing Indonesian representations of the Westerling Massacres in South Sulawesi, 1946-1947’ in *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence: The Dutch Empire in Indonesia*, eds. Bart Luttikhuis and Dirk Moses (London: Routledge, 2014), 292-307. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
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45. Locher-Scholten, ‘Orientalism and the Rhetoric of the Family’: 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ann Stoler and Karen Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial: Memory work in ‘New Order’ Java’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 42, no. 1 (2000): 4-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ahmad Khadafi, ‘Terminologi Budak, Kuli dan Babu’, Tirto.id, Jan 26, 2017, <https://tirto.id/terminologi-budak-kuli-dan-babu-chF1>. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Hairus Salim, ‘Dari Babu ke Pekerja Rumah Tangga’, *Tempo*, March 17, 2013, <https://majalah.tempo.co/read/bahasa/142053/dari-babu-ke-pekerja-rumah-tangga>. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. In 2017, for example, when a public official serving as the deputy head of the parliament also responsible for monitoring Indonesian labourers used this term to describe Indonesian foreign domestic workers he was reported by an alliance of workers to the parliamentary disciplinary council (Mahkamah Kehormatan). Members of the alliance claimed he had insulted domestic workers by using an outdated and inappropriate term with connotations of slavery. Adukan Fahri Hamzah, ‘Migran Care Istilah Babu tidak Etis’, *Tempo*, 27 January 2017, https://nasional.tempo.co/read/840388/adukan-fahri-hamzah-migrant-care-istilah-babu-tidak-etis [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Dragojlovic, *Beyond Bali: Subaltern Citizens and Postcolonial Intimacy*, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Lara Nuberg, ‘Vergeten wondervrouwen’, *VPRO Gids*, Jun 27 - Jul 3, 2020, <https://www.vprogids.nl/2020/26/inhoud/artikelen/p16-Vergeten-wondervrouwen.html>. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Rudy Kousbroek, *Terug naar Negri Pan Erkoms* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1995) and *Het Meer der Herinnering*. Directed by Lies Janssen and Frans Hoeben. Hilversum: RVU Film, 1994. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xat8qWS6BjU> ). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Sofia Lovegrove, ‘“They call me babu”: giving a voice to untold stories’, DutchCulture, October 17, 2019, <https://dutchculture.nl/en/news/they-call-me-babu-documentary>. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Susie Protschky, **‘Tea Cups,** Cameras and Family Life: Picturing Domesticity in Elite European and Javanese Family Photographs from the Netherlands Indies, ca. 1900-42’, *History of Photography*, 36, no. 1 (Feb 2012): 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. **Nico de Klerk, ‘Home Away from Home: Private Films from the Dutch East Indies’, in *Mining the home movie:*** *Excavations in Histories and Memories,* eds. Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 154. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Susan Aasman, ‘Impossible Family Portraits: Users, New Media Technologies and the Writing of Amateur Media History*,’* *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 11, no. 2-3 (2013): 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Aasman, ‘Impossible Family Portraits’: 123. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 23. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Linawati Sudarto, ‘Babu, Keluarga Belanda dan Revolusi’, *Tempo,* Jan 4, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Lovegrove, ‘“They call me babu”: Giving a Voice to Untold Stories’. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. ### Lovegrove, ‘“They call me babu”: Giving a Voice to Untold Stories’.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 118, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Locher-Scholten, ‘Orientalism and the Rhetoric of the Family’: 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Locher-Scholten, ‘Orientalism and the Rhetoric of the Family’: 22. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. T. Brondgeest Sr, *Nederlanders in Indië* (Barn Hollandia, 1919), 39, as quoted in Locher-Scholten, ‘Orientalism and the Rhetoric of the Family: 28. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. ### Nuberg, ‘Vergeten Wondervrouwen’.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. Dragojlovic, ‘Practising Affect for Haunted Speakability’. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. For more details about intergenerational hauntings in the context of Indisch memory work see Dragojlovic ‘Practising Affect for Haunted Speakability and Ana Dragojlovic, ‘Politics of Negative Affect: Intergenerational Hauntings, Counter-Archival Practices and the Queer Memory Project’, *Subjectivity*, 11(2) 2018: 91–107. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. Maltha, ‘Docu over kindermeisje gemiste kans’. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. By making the later point they seek particularly to reflect on ‘how the specifically ‘colonial’ is situated in popular memory’. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 18. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 34-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Vincent J. H. Houben, ‘A Torn Soul: The Dutch Public Discussion of the Colonial Past in 1995’, *Indonesia*, 63, (1997): 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. Paul Bijl, ‘Colonial Memory and Forgetting in the Netherlands and Indonesia’, in *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence: The Dutch Empire in Indonesia*, eds. Bart Luttikhius and Dirk Moses (London: Routledge, 2014), 261–281. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. Susie Protschky, *Images of the tropics: environment and visual culture in colonial Indonesia* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2011): 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. Pattynama, ‘Tempo Doeloe Nostalgia and Brani Memory Community’. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. Marguérite Schenkhuizen, ***Memoirs of an Indo Woman****: Twentieth Century Life in the East Indies and Abroad* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1993), 200. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. The emphasis on Kartini’s anti-colonial credentials has varied over time and was most prominent in the 1950s and 1960s during which time she was celebrated by Indonesian women in the leftist women’s organisation Gerwani as an inspiration for their anti-imperial activism, see Katharine E. McGregor, ‘Indonesian Women, the Women’s International Democratic Federation and the Struggle for Women’s Rights, 1946-1965’, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 40 (117): 203-204. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. Paul Bijl and Grace V. S. Chin, ‘Introduction’, in *Appropriating Kartini*, eds. Paul Bijl and Grace V. S. Chin (Singapore: ISEAS, 2020), 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. On this point and a more specific discussion of how Kartini’s image has been deployed in the so called Kartini Prize (Kartiniprijs) which is targeted at minority ethnic communities within which it is problematically assumed there is more gender oppression, see Paul Bijl, ‘Kartini and the Politics of European Multiculturalism’, in *Appropriating Kartini*, eds. Paul Bijl and Grace V. S. Chin (Singapore: ISEAS, 2020), 161-162. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. Katharine McGregor, ‘Living in a Conflict Zone: Gendered Violence During the Japanese Occupation of the Netherlands East Indies’ in *Gendered Violence Across Time and Space in Indonesia and East Timor*, eds. Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic and Hannah Loney (London: Routledge, 2020), 39-58. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. See Katharine McGregor, ‘Transnational and Japanese Activism on Behalf of Indonesian and Dutch Victims of Enforced Military Prostitution During World War Two’, *Japan Focus: The Asia Pacific Journal* (<http://apjjf.org/>), 2016. On Dutch sexual violence see Susie Protschky, ‘Home at the Front: Violence Against Indonesian Women and Children in Dutch Military Barracks During the Indonesian National Revolution’ in *Gendered Violence Across Time and Space in Indonesia and East Timor*, eds.Katharine McGregor, Ana Dragojlovic and Hannah Loney (London: Routledge, 2020), 59-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. See Goto Ken’ichi, ‘Multilayered Postcolonial Space: Indonesia, the Netherlands, Japan and East Timor’, in Kazuko Mori, Ken’ichoro Hirano, *A New East Asia: Toward a Regional Community* (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. William H. Frederick, ‘The Killing of Dutch and Eurasians in Indonesia’s National Revolution (1945–1949): A Brief Genocide Reconsidered’, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 14, no. 3-4 (2012): 369-70. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. Robert Cribb, *Gangsters and Revolutionaries: Jakarta People’s Militia and the Indonesian revolution, 1945-1949* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 63. NICA stands for the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration which was given the task of ‘restoring order’ in the colony after the Japanese surrender. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. Stoler and Strassler, ‘Castings for the Colonial’: 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Ratnayu Sitaresmi et al, *Saya Pilih Mengungsi: Pengorbanan Rakyat Bandung untuk Kedaulatan* (Bandung: Kerjasama Penngarapan Paguyuban Pelestarian Budaya Bandung dan Penerbit Bunaya, 2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. Walter D. Mignolo, ‘Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: on (De)coloniality, Border Thinking and Epistemic Disobedience’, *Journal Postcolonial Studies*, 14, no. 3 (2011): 273-283. [↑](#endnote-ref-96)