Book Review

Rosemarijn Hoefte and Peter Meel (eds.) (2018) *Departing from Java: Javanese Labour, Migration and Diaspora.* Copenhagen: NIAS Press. ISBN 9788776942458 (hardcover); 9788776942465 (softcover). 288 pp. US$80 (hardcover); US$29 (softcover).

Reviewed by
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Departing from Java is a wonderful collection of essays that I will immediately include as reading material for teaching on migration and development in Southeast Asia. Edited volumes are often a mixed bag, but in this case each individual chapter was fascinating, relevant and offered something new. Migrancy has become such a defining part of everyday life for millions of Indonesians (and for people everywhere), and the quality of these studies is testament to the amount of academic work that has gone into researching the experience of migrant workers.

The first surprise is the historical depth and scale of migration from Java. The book covers colonial and postcolonial migration within Indonesia and the Dutch empire, as well as the contemporary movements of migrant workers to Malaysia, East Asia and the Middle East. Some of the first migrants were the exiled political opponents of the Dutch; they ended up in places like South Africa and Sri Lanka. Many others were settlers in the colonial and postcolonial Transmigration Programme. But the vast majority were workers – first indentured workers shipped by the colonial power to plantation and mining colonies on Sumatra, New Caledonia (a French overseas territory located east of Australia) and Suriname in South America. These transnational diasporas are dwarfed by contemporary migration. Examples discussed in this volume are palm oil and factory workers in Malaysia, factory workers, domestic workers and fishermen in Taiwan, and female domestic workers in Hong Kong, Singapore, Dubai and Saudi Arabia.

The book starts with migration by Javanese within Indonesia. Rebecca Elmhirst discusses the experience of Javanese peasants who joined the *Transmigrasi* programme which relocated millions of people from Java to the Outer Islands of Indonesia during Dutch colonial rule and later during the Suharto dictatorship. Elmhirst shows how the construction of a particular kind of Javanese identity based on creating "little Javas" was based as much on the cultural heritage of state authorities and bureaucrats and what they thought "traditional" culture should look like, as on the aspirations of the transmigrants themselves. The new colonists "othered" the "native" Lampungese, portraying themselves as more advanced and civilised, and reflecting the perceived superiority of Javanese culture vis-à-vis other ethnicities of Indonesia. However, female settlers also challenged cultural norms and traditional notions of gender by working the fields and divorcing their husbands, becoming in their own eyes "strong women". Agus Suwignyo and Widaratih Kamiso uncover fascinating details about the *transmigrasi* programmes in Sulawesi between 1900 and 2013. This includes the settlement of political prisoners who survived the 1965

massacre and whose settlement had to be surrounded by those of ex-military and religious personnel.

The larger part, particularly of overseas and more recent migrations, however, was by workers or by peasants who became workers through the process of migration. The process started early on, at the beginning of the twentieth century, with migration to New Caledonia, as discussed by Pamela Allen. Javanese were recruited alongside Vietnamese to work the tin mines and plantations in the context of a vicious penal labour system of French colonialism. Thousands of Javanese were brought to Suriname by the Dutch in the nineteenth century – again to work as indentured labourers in plantations and mines, and people of Javanese descent now make up 14 per cent of the population. Peter Meel's chapter gives a detailed historical overview of the development of political parties based on Javanese ethnicity, showing a shift towards multi-ethnic nationalism. Migration to Malaysia also began with indentured labour for the colonial British mines and plantations, beginning a pattern that has continued until today. In the vast plantation landscapes analysed by Amarjit Kaur, there are few signs of little Javas – the Indonesian workers are of mixed ethnicity and are expected to return home after a few years of work.

The chapters by Rachel Silvey and Nurchayati offer detail and insights into the lives of Indonesian women working as "maids" in Saudi Arabia and Dubai. Nurchayati examines the experience of women from one Javanese village, Praggang, where poorer women have been migrating as domestic workers to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, South Korea and Saudi Arabia for decades. One interesting aspect is how working as a woman in Saudi Arabia opens up the eyes of the migrants to gender construction – they have to negotiate around different concepts of how a "Javanese woman" or a "Saudi Arabian woman" should behave, pray and clothe themselves. Another is how workers help each other to develop successful defence strategies against sexual harassment by their employers. Silvey, looking at the biographies of a Sundanese woman and a Javanese woman, explores the tension between the portrayal of domestic workers as victims of abuse – a common campaigning image of human rights NGOs – and the narratives of women workers. The latter stress the liberating experience of dormitory life and social networks among women workers, and the pleasure of working in different countries, escaping the stifling confines of patriarchal rural life in Java.

A lot of the book discusses the construction, imagining and reimagining of Javanese identities and, indeed, the discussion of "the Javanese" in this way prioritises ethnic identity and cultural difference. The overall framing in the introduction is mainly one of identity – identity formation, sameness, othering. From this ethnic perspective, Javanese workers "competed" with workers from other ethnic backgrounds, "holding their own" against "rival labourers" and thereby strengthening their "Javanese identity" (p. 10). Labour struggles do get a mention, but the focus is more on differentiated fragmentation and "subtle resistance" à la Scott so beloved by postcolonial scholars. Overall, the main question is the reproduction of "Javanese identity" and "forms of Javaneseness" (p. 18), in the sense that migration from Java led to the creation of little Javas all around the world.

This focus on Javanese identity, while providing a rough framework for the book's chapters, does not really hold up. Empirically, the line between Javanese and Indonesian is increasingly blurred, with some chapters using both terms interchangeably. The argument that Javanese is historically more accurate than Indonesian (because it is pre-nation-state) neglects the impact of anti-colonial nationalism on the identity of Javanese, while the term Javanese subsumes other major ethnicities such as the Madurese, the Sundanese and the Chinese. Were all these groups excluded from migration? Did they form their own sub-diasporas "in rivalry" with the Javanese? Or did they rather bond with each other because they shared one common language (Indonesian)

and a nostalgia for a very similar home, as well as a common experience of migration, exploitation and repression?

Questions of identity and othering are not only ethnically based but are also related to class. Several authors differentiate along these lines. Wayne Palmer's comparison of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong and Singapore, for example, explores the racist stereotyping by employers, who classify Javanese as passive and compliant, compared to other Indonesians who are seen as less docile and other nationalities such as Filipinas, who speak better English but are more "uppity". The networks of migrant workers are less explicitly ethnicised. Workers will connect with people they know, such as relatives and neighbours, and seek solidarity and nostalgia in a common language (including Bahasa Indonesia) or cooking. (They also connect with migrant workers from other countries.) A homeward orientation is also a class issue – because this is a place they can go back to – offering permanence in a life otherwise characterised by enforced temporality. Indonesian migrant workers are not entitled to settle or to gain citizenship in any of the countries that host them today.

The empirical material in many of the chapters shows the emergence of other hybrid and also class-based identities in the melting pot of the new societies. Again and again, stories crop up of how Javanese workers joined workers of other ethnicities in struggle. This perspective is most pronounced in Robert Tierney's discussion of the struggle against racism by migrant workers in Taiwan. Indonesians make up the largest part of Taiwan's migrant workforce, alongside Filipinas, Vietnamese and Thais. Most work in factories, but Indonesian men make up the biggest part of the workforce in the deep-sea trawling industry, and Indonesian women dominate the age-care and domestic-worker sector. Tierney explains the system of systematic racist discrimination in Taiwan, from the temporary status and lack of rights of migrant workers and the allocation of particular jobs according to nationality to the abuse of power, particularly in domestic work settings, and the lack of respect afforded migrant workers by employers and co-workers. Although most Indonesian workers do come from Java, their strategy of resisting exploitation and racism has been based more on a general identity as Indonesians and migrant workers. Javanese roots become relevant in political cultural performances, but these are enacted within a cross-ethnic mobilisation of migrant workers framed as a general class issue. This can be seen by the victory of mass protests for the right to celebrate Eid-al-Fitr in a public space, in this case Taipei Main Station. Although the issue was mainly relevant to Muslim Indonesians, protests were supported by other migrant groups and by Taiwanese labour organisations. Another cross-ethnic organisation is the Yilan Migrant Fisher Union (YMFU), founded in 2011, which organises migrant workers regardless of their national background.

Reflecting on the book, I feel that the immense historical depth and the attention to detail that can be found throughout might have benefited from a different framing – one that does not ignore the cultural aspects but which embeds ethnic identities within a more rigorous class analysis and a more explicitly *labour* history. It is no fluke that the recreation of little Javas was most pronounced in the chapters on settler colonists – that is, a peasant class (and bureaucratic fantasies of that class). But the vast majority of Javanese migrants were and are indentured and temporary workers, with a shared experience of exploitation and repression *as workers*. There is still a story to be told about how Javanese workers joined with Chinese workers in the plantations of Sumatra and Malaysia, with Vietnamese workers in the tin mines of New Caledonia, with Creole workers in the bauxite mines of Suriname, with Filipino workers on the Taiwanese deep-sea trawlers, and with fellow domestic workers in the struggle for working rights and a decent living wage in Hong Kong and Singapore. Did these workers resent or enjoy the cultural differences between them? Did common struggles create different, transnational,

transgenerational and transcultural identities informed by a collective identity as a globalised working class? Further exploration is needed of this contribution of little Javas to a big working class with hybrid, changing and collective identities – perhaps with an explicit Labour Geography focus. But this book, and the research by the authors that it is based on, is a great foundation and a fascinating collection of insights into the history of the Javanese diaspora.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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