HAUNTED SPACES: GHOSTS AND POSTMEMORIES IN ADRIAAN VAN DIS' *LAND OF LIES*

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Abstract: *This article examines the childhood home as a space for engaging with postmemories of postcolonialism and imprisonment during the Second World War. In the autobiographical short story* Land of Lies, *Dutch author Adriaan van Dis interrogates the notion of identity and the relations between children and parents which are strongly connected by the differences between European spatiality and the colonized spatiality. Permanently debating the many ramifications of racial differences, Van Dis shows how the parents' memories are transmitted to the next generation not only through storytelling, but also through constant projection and investment. The aim of this paper is to show how postcolonial identities are built at the crossroad between familial history and the uncertainty of memory in order to provide a larger framework for interrogating the postcolonial* sense of belonging.

Keywords: *postcolonialism, Dutch-language literature, space, postmemory, identity*

"No unreliable friend than memory"[1] (Van Dis 358), begins Adriaan van Dis his short story *Land of Lies* (*Leugenland*) and this quote may serve as a humble introduction for his books dealing with the postcolonial period and, subsequently, with life in the Netherlands as a place of returning for the parents and a place of a difficult arriving for the protagonist. The question of how an identity is built has been a major concern in recent writings engaging with postcolonial identities, particularly regarding the second-generation (Bosma, 2012). The intersection between postcolonialism and postmemory (Hirsch, 2012) has paved the way for a deeper understanding of what memory means for those who *come after* (Frosch, 2019; Rothberg, 2019) a traumatic event and how this affects the construction of an identity.

In this article, my main focus is on how the postcolonial identity is built on the instability of memory, which becomes a spatial metaphor on belonging. The intersection between familial histories and the uncertainty that arise around memories becomes the departure point where a second-generation postcolonial identity is built. Furthermore, I claim that the ghosts of colonialism never really disappear, but rather they haunt the second-generation individuals, distorting their sense of identity. Drawing on Avery F. Gordon's writings on *haunting* (2008) and Marianne Hirsch's pivotal *The*

[1] All the quotations from Adriaan van Dis are translated by me from Dutch.

Generation of Postmemory (2008), I will show how the narrator's home becomes an unfamiliar space which moves away for the purpose of dwelling and closer to that of re-living and re-enacting a past permanently blurred by instability. The narrator describes his own memory as deceitful and he finds it impossible to move away from it, as it attracts him like a magnet, opening the space he needs for an interrogation of the present. For the postcolonial subject, this interrogation can only happen through an interrogation of the past. Strongly autobiographical, *Land of Lies* engages with the problematic rhetoric of familial relations and, moreover, with what is means to belong to a place or a culture.

Notions of *outside* and *inside* bear the ever-returning problematic aspect of postcolonialism: the hegemonic discourses on separation between European/non-European, colonized/colonizer, black/white. This aspect is also visible in the short story, an idea to which I will return later in this article. For now, I will refer to the ways in which the narrator and his family seem to be living a realm of uncertainties that shape their interactions both inside and outside the family. Hence, *inside* and *outside* become familial problematics of spatiality. These doubts experienced by the narrator are strongly connected to the ghosts that haunted the space inhabited by the family. This place becomes the home of constant questioning and interrogation of the past, as well as of the many ways in which it affects the present. The question that arises here is whether the space becomes a ghosts in itself.

Avery F. Gordon uses the term of *haunting*

> to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters of ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. (Gordon xvi)

Hence, haunting transforms a home into a space for the uncanny, for the unspeakable that is yet felt on the sensorial level. Although at first in constant hiding, it appears into light at a certain point, changing the known parameters of being. It is not difficult for the individual to lose their sense of being and becoming in such an environment. It is precisely in the *blind spot* where the mental counterreaction occurs, providing a framework for understanding or, at least, for attempting to understand the shift from the familiar to the unfamiliar, even to the unknown. Furthermore, Gordon makes here a statement I consider pivotal for my investigation. By arguing that the *ghosts*

appear when what is contained is brought to light, she delineates the limits between reality and non-reality. For how can one make a separation between a phenomenon and imagination? When one seeks to make this separation, they are faced with the fact that a ghost "has a real presence and demands its due" (Gordon xvi), requiring the individual to have an immediate reaction, as it opens up the space for re-analysing. But what is brought to light in *Land of Lies*? I assert that the colonial trauma and its many ramifications becomes *unblocked* from view and it becomes the leitmotif of the short story. The protagonist attempts not only to understand it, but also to look beyond it in order to see what has been hidden.

The postcolonial trauma (Ward, 2015; Craps, 2013) lingers around in *Land of Lies* from the first paragraphs until the end of the story, without ever coming to the surface, and comes into direct connection with the notion of *haunting*, although "haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" (Gordon xvi), hence the individual is invested with a drive to engage with the ghosts in the present, as a way of foregrounding the future, instead of working through the trauma (Hirsch, 2012). As Gordon notes, through

> haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts [...] we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed towards us. (Gordon xvi)

Thus, haunting demands looking directly into what has been hidden from sight, what has been left at the periphery of thinking and also of memory. It may almost seem as if there is something lurking, waiting to be seen and engaged with. That *what's been hidden* builds up the momentum upon which it will come into light and it is "a frightening experience" (Gordon xvi), as it has a direct connection with a harmful or traumatic event through which the individual needs to work. In *Land of Lies*, Van Dis engages with an almost phenomenological observation on space and on what it means to inhabit a space, both physically and mentally. Upon contemplating on the mechanisms that create a home, he comes to move between postmemories of war, colonization and imprisonment camps that become the central pillars on which his own identity is built.

For Van Dis, "the Dutch East Indies represents the transitory sense of self shared by the second-generation" (Bosma, 2012), but his books represent an exception among Dutch-language literature engaging with the postcolonial period. The protagonist in his books is the only one in his migrant family born in the Netherlands, hence he does not share the convoluted past with the other members of the family (the colonization in Indonesia, the imprisonment

after Japan occupied the country and the blurred period after the war, before Indonesia gained its independence). He is also an illegitimate child, as his mother never married his father, a problematic aftereffect of the migration to the Netherlands. Thus the protagonist is constantly followed by racial differences and the aftermath of a war he never lived.

Similar to an inner migration, Van Dis revisits his arrival and childhood in the Netherlands by making a list of everything that was *Indisch*[2] in his childhood home, concluding that memory bears a form of elasticity. In the beginning of *Land of Lies*, after naming memory a false friend, he describes the trip he and his family made in order to arrive in the Netherlands:

> Take the Indies we left behind. My Indies… It would not be much trouble for me to recall our crossing with the Klipfontein from Palembang to Amsterdam. The damp hut, the smell of vomit in the hollow-sounding corridors and the terror in my father's eyes when he bowed to the military police who jumped on board at the IJmuiden locks. Accidentally. Or maybe out of habit, because in the three-and-a-half years of camp that had passed him, the bowing had gotten into his back. A survival attitude. He was laughed at for it too. [...] Also I remember waking up at the board, how, every morning, we tasted the air from the porthole. A bit colder every morning. And there we dressed accordingly: from blouse to sweater, from sweater to jacket and the first scarf, the second scarf. Knotted to the new country. (358-359)

The fact that he uses the first person, singular and plural, offers authenticity to the text and the reader finds themselves in no position to question what Van Dis writes. At the same time, the vivid way in which he describes the trip would position him in the place of a child who witnesses his parents' being laughed at for maintaining the behavioural customs they have learnt during the war, while living in a Japanese imprisonment camp. After apparently setting the scene with this introduction, Van Dis positions the reader in a conflicting state, writing "True story? Not according to the facts. I was not carrying a jacket in Kilpfontein. My mother was carrying me. Inside her." (359). Hence, he was not born yet upon arriving in the Netherlands, despite the seemingly lucid recollection. Perhaps it is precisely this inconsistent introduction to the story that permits the reader to gain an insight on the state of *in-between-ness* (Anzaldúa, 2015) in which he dwells, as well

[2] The term *Indisch* refers to the first generation of postcolonial migrants.

as on the acts of remembering and on what it means to belong to a place. This *in-between-ness* will follow him across the whole story.

A sense of belonging seems to be given to the narrator by specific, material things that create Indië for him, which he lists, as if each item in the house holds a memory of its own: "And yet is Indië a memory for me" (359), he writes, despite only having visited the country after he turned fifty years old. Space becomes a memory in its own right and the narrator is haunted by it, regardless of how many forms it takes. Van Dis' interest regarding what makes a person *Indisch* or Dutch resonates in the entire short story, as he asks the question not only in relation with himself, but also with his mother, who, although born in the Netherlands, has long lived in the Dutch Indies: "But does that makes her Indisch? And me? The pink piglet of the family, son of a father of a colour he denied" (359–360). The question regarding his mother's own *in-between-ness* echoes in the text and it shows how the impossibility of speaking about 'fixed identities', although not inheritable, bears itself the opportunity for transmission. This uncertainty is transmitted to the son, who asks himself questions that seem to resonate with his mother. However, things are more complicated for him, as he finds himself in the position of the white son, while his three stepsisters had darker skin. For him, racial differences bear a double meaning: both inside and outside the family. His sense of identity and belonging are distorted from the beginning of this story, as he is seen as an outsider by everybody around him: not dark enough for his family and not white enough for the new country.

The narrator starts his list by saying "I was raised in an Indisch environment. The taste of the house was Indisch. [...] the name of the fruit brought memory" (359–360). Indonesia was not only a story about a faraway place where his family once lived, but rather a continuum of remembering and re-living, as his parents seemed to have continuously attempted to recreate the space they left behind. Their attempt to re-enact life in the former colony has strong echoes in the son's understanding of identity. Further he states that

> Our house was Indisch. [...] The children with whom I played were Indisch. [...]Clutter was Indish. [...] Cleanliness on your body was Indisch. [...] Nicely dressed was Indisch. [...] The language at the table was Indisch. [...] Punches were Indisch. [...] Indisch was subtle. (360–362)

At the same time, he describes Dutch people as "kassar" (362), a Malay word describing something rough, gross. It would seem that everything that surrounded him was of Indonesian origin or had, at least, Indonesian characteristics. Rather untypical for postcolonial literature, Van Dis goes

beyond the hegemonic discourses on colonized / colonizer, black / white (see Fanon, 1952) and leaves this binary mode of thinking behind. Instead, he places situated experience and the many ramifications of race and racial interrogations at the core of his writings. The complicated family history and the fact that the narrator is the only one in the family who had no connection with the colonization period turn him into an outside. Hence he encounters a double exclusion, which has racism at its origin, as he recollects: "Everything and everyone was Indisch during the first ten years of my life. Except me." (362)

For him, the questions on identity, home and belonging are strongly interwoven with the familiar connections that develop under the painful sign of colonialism and Japanese imprisonment. The stories he hears about this period become the connection he has with his family's past and they take the form of postmemories: they are not "mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 197) and they bear the risk of "having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated by those of a previous generation" (197). The fact that the parents seldom spoke about what living in the colonies really meant allow the protagonist to create his own stories and projection regarding Indonesia. His imaginative investment paves the way for a lack of understanding regarding past experiences. These become dislocated and blurred, it becomes impossible to states what is real and what is not.

Postmemory

> describes the relationship that the generation after bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before–to experiences they remember only by means of the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as they seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch 5)

Hence, it is the transmission of these memories that provides the framework for looking at and understanding the dynamics of the connections between fictional and lived experiences, dynamics which reveal not only the diversity of literature, but also nurture and preserve a certain transfer between communities and the various ways in which identity is perceived. When engaging with second-generation literature, one can easily see how the narrative often mixes fictional and autobiographical aspects, moving from the first-generation to the second, from Indisch to Dutch. The aftereffects of such a painful past – life in the colonies – continue up to the present. *Land of Lies* brings to the surface not only the colonial past, but also other traumatic events, such as the Second World War and / or life in prisoners' camps

during the Japanese occupation of Indonesia. However, similar to a photograph, the written text is also mediated. It often seems to give the reader only a partial perspective, without allowing full exposure to the events. Confusion is almost permanently visible: from fragments which are difficult to follow in a chronological order, to changing of the narrative *I*, the texts present the reader with a sense of disorientation and "knowledge remains partial, fragmentary, with its enlightening components both partially revealed and blocked from exposure" (Hirsch 66).

Hirsch's concept has been discussed by theoreticians in relation to various narratives which explore different traumatic experiences and certain questions have been risen. In his essay "Second-Generation Testimony, Transmission of Trauma and Postmemory", Ernst van Alphen claims that parents-children relationships are shaped by discontinuities and by a "lack of intelligibility" (488) and claims that when children have less information about the past, they become more connected to it on a personal level. For him it is precisely the lack of information or the precarity of it that allows the subject to recreate himself the past. Hence, the main aspect of connection to the past lies in the fragmentation of it in the narratives of the second-generation. A full understanding of the past is almost impossible and yet, certain tropes are visible which provide a means of recognizing present accounts of suffering which have their roots in the past of another person. One of the key points in this fragmentation is the existence of displacement and replacement, hence a moving away from the original place of violence and trauma and into a new space, which separates the individual from the past. In a different reading of postmemory, Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir claims that through postmemory one can make sense of narratives while also accepting the fact that there are permanent silences and re-creations of stories. Hence, the acceptance of fragmentation is one of the ways in which an individual can understand the past.

The relationship established between the collective, personal and cultural trauma of a convoluted past rotates around transmitted experiences and the writers' self-projections (fictional and autobiographical), because actual events, memories and fiction meet in a sometimes diffuse medium. The reader has trouble when trying to see what can be counted as real and what not. Here again I return to Hirsch, who, when discussing a picture of her parents in Romanian Cernăuți, refers to the photo's indexicality as being "more performative – based on the viewer's needs and desires – than factual" (Hirsch 61). Therefore, meaning to the text must be attached through shifting between interpretation and more or less exact accounts of facts. Investigating accounts of suffering and transmission in the ever-changing light of displacement and replacement must answer the question of where these narratives are situated in terms of identity. Being faced with duality,

narratives present shifts between socio-cultural contexts and I argue that these shifts are the foundation of a split identity. It is also the case of the protagonist in *Land of Lies*: his identity is built on shift and fragmentation – the fragmentation of the stories he hears, which are always incomplete and distorted.

According to Hirsch, the individual is shaped "however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension" (5). Hence, the narratives bear this fragmentation of the postmemories, which is to be seen in various forms of alienation. This traumatic fragments are always returning, as a "consequence of the traumatic recall" (6) that moves from one generation to another. More than a recall, postmemories also bear an "embodied experience" (6), which is also intergenerational. For the second-generation, it is not only the self that is fragmented, but also the actual body, even more so when the body becomes political. For example, the inhabitants of former Dutch colonies have found their way to the Netherlands, where they found themselves in an unfamiliar situation, still unable to reconnect with neither of the cultures. And in some cases, the intergenerational connections are so thin that the child is not able to understand what affects them. The subject has the experience of feeling affected, of noticing that they are alienated and, in some cases, they are not capable of realizing why this is happening.

Lisa Baraitser compares this experience with the processes of reflection in psychoanalysis, arguing that the

> attempt to make sense of something that one knows has occurred, and yet in some profound way one seems to have missed, is at the core of a psychoanalytic sensibility in which events come to be significant after an originary event that has bypassed memory and language (102).

Thus, traumatic experiences are often too much to bear, too much to understand as they happen and they are lived with without being actually processed, without becoming significant. It is only later that one can go back to the experience and, having distance as an ally, they can reflect upon the past. However, for Baraitser, although this experience is missed, it persists in the form of an event on which one must work in order to make sense of. The lack of ability to process a traumatic event can be intergenerational: "each generation is brought into time by attempting to bind the 'bindings without binding' of the adults that preceded them, a dialectical and mutually metamorphosing process" (104), claims Baraitser following the French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche. This binding represents a way to explain the idea that memory is continuous, as well as identity. One cannot refer to

memory as to a past, to something that happened and is bygone. It is rather in a continuous tense, being relived and recaptured every day, bearing the fact that it can be transmitted further.

Thus, the present becomes also blurred and the effects of past events are permanently seen and experienced. In *Land of Lies*, the past is situated under the sign of mysticism and spirituality, as the mother changed her beliefs, turning towards the indigenous ones. The mother protagonist's mother was European and her attempts to integrate in the new culture were unsuccessful until she started adhering to the local beliefs. Her integration happens on the pillar of a complete disavowal of Christian ways in favour of indigenous ones. While the father is rather absent in the short story, the mother seems to be the one holding all the answers that may explain why the narrator's own identity is split between many unreliable memories. His mother was born in the Netherlands, "the daughter of a chubby white peasant" (362) and the narrator sees his mother's departure to Indonesia as a way of separating "from the preachers from her youth" (362), hinting at the fact that his mother found a new faith in the colony, one completely different from the one in the Netherlands. Hence, Western religion is replaced by different forms of mysticism and this will affect the mother in various ways.

The mother left for the Dutch Indies when she was nineteen, shortly after she had gotten married with her first husband. She learnt the language, but she was still "too white [...] and her husband too suspicious: the son of a family that had opted for a strange flag, for Dutch authority and guns and gag laws" (363). The difficulty of integration in the new society is worsened by the fact that the protestant religion is completely different from the local ones. Soon she starts participating in different activities (mainly ceremonies for death, birth and marriage), but there is a specific event recollected in the story when she begins to gain a sense of belonging to this new place. Living among the local people, the mother hears stories about

> birds that could talk, animals that turned into other animals [...]. She hung her daughter in a rag around her hips, and when she was bitten by a strange insect and European home remedies failed, she washed her on the bank of a river where legend has it that a child impaled by warriors had risen from the dead. It doesn't hurt to try, she thought. Her daughter healed. With that act, she gained the trust of the local population (364).

Thus, the way in which she managed to gain the local people's trust was through a complete belief in their ways. This ultimate act of trust – believing that a local legend will heal the daughter's life hints at the transformation undergone by the mother: the denouncing of European beliefs and the turn to

local, indigenous ones, which engage with science in a strange, mystical way. It is at this point that the mother starts integrating in the new community and, more importantly, she is accepted by the locals. Hence, the mother's integration process requires a double form of acceptance: only after she accepts local beliefs and stories, is she seen as *one of them*. This process is a rather spiritual one, rather than a material or bureaucratic one.

After the episode with the daughter, the mother is faced with legends dealing with ghosts and predictions of the future based on one's dreams: "The tiger that came to visit her in her sleep at night? 'Beware, girl, that is death lurking around you" (364). Yet, while the mother adhered to these spiritual ideas, her husband became afraid that she would "slip" (365), so he asked for a transfer in the army to a another city, so that these new spiritual beliefs will be left behind. Due to the fact the Second World War started, they were unable to leave and the mother and the daughters were sent to a Japanese imprisonment camp. Here, her interest in spirituality grew even more and she "convinced herself that suffering was the only way to reach spiritual maturity" (365). Although this is an idea which often also appears in Christian beliefs, the mother's interest in religion seems to be a mixed between all the faiths she had learnt about. This blend of religions and cultures will follow the family to the Netherlands, although they will be slightly altered.

After finding out that her husband was beheaded – "The tiger dream had come true" (365) – she starts a relationship with a "whiter one, but no less Indisch" (365), who will become the narrator's father. The mother's strong belief that "No one had a monopoly on truth" (365) led her to raise the children at the crossroad between three religions: Muslim, Judaism and Christianity in the Netherlands. At the same time, she believed in many things, as the narrator explains, recollecting moments from after their relocation in the Netherlands:

> in yoga, theosophy, anthroposophy, astrology, palmistry, divination, kabbalistic, card reading [...] She also believed in ghosts. Her garden was full of them, she said, but she also knew where to find them in the dunes, in woods, in houses". (366)

Thus, the mother's mixed religious and mystical views position the entire family between the Western culture and the Oriental one. I argue that the mother's interest, close to an obsession, in all these differently religious views position her in a place of uncertainty, as she is unsure which way is the right one. However, the *ghosts* in the garden are not a sign of an obsessive behaviour, but rather a connection she shares with her former home country. The mother names *ghosts* are the symptom of her inability to cope with

another change in spatiality. I assert that these phantoms are not projections of her brain, but rather mental investments and projections of memory. By speaking about them she prevents the narrator to gain full access to the past. Since the colonial past takes the form of specters and no member of the family speaks about it, how can the son understand it? He is unable to understand why his parents, particularly his mother, recreate the space they inhabited in Indonesia, while at the same denouncing the beliefs of the past. This leads to a complete blurring of the present, as I will show below.

Towards the end of the story, the protagonist asks himself "And those stories about her being absorbed in the native culture? True? False?" (367) mainly because, once returned to the Netherlands, the mother seems to be excluding everything she had once worshiped in the colony, including the past: "She also commanded her daughters to forget the past. It was over" (368). One may question why this sudden change occurred, what were the dynamics at stake that made her renegade everything that was at the core of the children's upbringing and, moreover, at the core of her own existence. The narrator does not offer an answer in this story, but the reader may speculate around the reasons that led to such a shift in belief. I argue that she created two different versions of the past: the past of war and imprisonment, which she strongly denounced; and the past of spirituality and mystical beliefs, which she chose to maintain, although under different parameters. She created a separation between the locals' Dutch Indies, which provided her with a way of coping with change and with the feeling of not-belonging and the invaders' Dutch Indies. Perhaps it is the belongings that reminded her of the convoluted past that she did not want to keep, only the feeling of belonging to a place.

Similar to the mother after moving to the Netherlands, the narrator wished for that sense of belonging also through a separation between the Dutch Indies he had come to learn, despite never really having lived there: "I wanted nothing more than to belong to the Indies. Not the Indies of sorrow, but the Indies of adventures. I set myself up as a treasurer and reconstructed a past where I could find peace with my father and my mother could be happy again" (368). Hence, comparable to his mother's experience in the Netherlands he also wishes for a romanticized version of the Dutch Indies, the one he knows from stories and legends, where the war never occurred. It is on this dualistic image of the Dutch Indies that Van Dis writes about his process of building an identity. Yet, instead of focussing on binary modes of thinking, Van Dis shows his narrator in the middle of fragmentation and inability to deal with his own mental projections and investments. He is unable to find an explanation for his mother's chaotic household in the Netherlands and neither can he adapt to the space the family inhabits, a space witch he is unable both to understand and to relate to.

The final sentences of the short story may provide an answer to the question of how are postcolonial identities built. The narrator states that "Perhaps that is the essence of the Indies for me: telling stories" (369) and I argue that this provides an answer to the question regarding the construction of an identity. His inability to fully grasp the past is taken over by postmemories and mental projections and investments. He writes stories about a haunted past to which he had only fragmentary access, which deeply influences his present. For the narrator, memory has a specific, personal definition, which he integrates in his stories: "The elasticity of memory. Memories of a past I had no access to. An Indies I invented myself" (369). I argue that he has invented a new, intimate space on the multitude of *Indisch* objects in the house, as well as on the *ghosts* that his mother hid in her garden and it this invention that allows him to build his own identity. Despite being mainly situated in the realm of silence, the childhood home becomes the vessel through which postmemories are transmitted and storytelling becomes *something-to-be-done* that Gordon sees as a direct consequence of the *haunting*. The narrator's identity is built on stories, brick by brick, and, as he constructs this identity, he also finds a sense of belonging which is also spatial: it is located at the crossroad between reality and imagination. By doing this, he also recreates his mother's sense of belonging in the Dutch Indies: the sons turns to storytelling in the same way the mother turned to indigenous stories about beliefs in a greater force.

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