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# Don't call me *ibu*: challenges of belonging for childless transnational Indonesian women

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**Abstract** *New forms of transnational families are being created by the feminization of migration, particularly of mobile Southeast Asian female workers who take on the financial responsibility of supporting their nieces and nephews who remain in the home country. This understudied kin relationship provides important insights into the complexities of transnational belonging among childless women. Fieldwork conducted in 2015 with Indonesian professional migrant women in Melbourne, Australia, reveals a translocalized Javanese cultural practice of fostering nieces and nephews. Using a framework that extends the anthropology of belonging into a gendered transnational context, in this article I argue that children who are absent, whether living in another country or never born, are yet present in women's narratives and are key to a larger migrant project of recreating oneself as an ambiguously valued subject.*

**Keywords** AUSTRALIA, BELONGING, CHILDLESS MIGRANT WOMEN, CONSOLATION KIN, INDONESIAN, MOTHERHOOD, TRANSNATIONAL FAMILIES

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Significant scholarly work has focused on the absent children who are left behind in Indonesia and the Philippines by migrant mothers, particularly on the impact these absences have on their families (Graham et al. 2012; Pratt 2003). Mother absence has been identified as one of the hidden injuries of globalization (Madianou 2012: 277). These injuries include the emotional, physical and psychological suffering caused to left-behind children by their mothers' absence. Less attention has been given to women without children, for example, women who desire children never born.

Unlike mothers of left-behind children, who tend to focus on their own children's needs, childless migrant women often take on the responsibility of financially supporting their nieces and nephews remaining in the home country (Parreñas 2001; Pratt 2003). And, in addition to supporting their own left-behind children, Filipina migrant workers who are *Ate*, or aunt, may also, if they earn enough or have additional money,

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support their siblings' children, paying their school fees and building homes for them and the extended family (Madianou 2012).

This article provides a comparative account of new forms of transnational families, beyond the absent mother and remitting aunt, created by the feminization of migration. It deals particularly with childless, mobile, professional Indonesian women who not only support their siblings' children, but informally adopt them and mother them transnationally. Furthermore, it extends the idea of transnational mothering beyond a biologically determined category of giving birth to a child to include being an informal adoptive mother who is still biologically related as an aunt.

This account provides a nuanced perspective of the hidden injuries of globalization caused by the absence of family members. A meaningful physical absence occurs in the day-to-day lives of most female migrants. It is not only mothers' absence that causes injury. Complex transnational family relationships formed by globalization can create other forms of absence that cause harm. Mothering the children of people living in another country, with only annual visits, is an illustration of how translocal cultural practices interact within an extended family network shaped by international migration realities. No longer is the 'glocal' – the global in local practices (Appadurai 1990) – analysed in terms of local interpretations of global trends; rather, the local has become a transnational practice. This group of women illustrates the potential for understanding a widespread practice of transnational extended family informal adoption that is occurring because of the increased feminization of migration. The anthropological ethnographic story of childless skilled migrant women with absent children thus contextualizes gendered experiences of transnational families by focusing on the ambiguity inherent in their struggles for a valued female subjectivity, particularly the gendered subjectivity negotiated as part of multiscale belonging, both translocally and transnationally.

In this article, I recount the stories of Tina, Betsi and Indah (all pseudonyms), three divorced female Indonesian migrants of a Javanese cultural background working as Indonesian language teachers in Australia, who were part of my anthropological fieldwork. The study included ten women who married Caucasian<sup>1</sup> Australian men and received spousal visas before obtaining permanent residence in Australia. Each of the three women described in this article had planned to have what Indonesians and Australians often refer to as a Eurasian child. These desired children were never born because the women ended up divorced and past the age of childbearing. In some cases, the husband's infertility, or the woman's failure to conceive through in vitro fertilization (IVF), caused the divorce. Although these three women, all between 45 and 54, are childless and divorced, they have informally adopted nieces and nephews whom they support financially and, in the case of Tina and Indah, with whom they live during the women's annual Australian school holiday return to Indonesia.

In comparison with scholarly work on childless migrant Filipina women (Parreñas 2001; Pratt 2003), where the trend of the remitting single aunt dominates, the three Indonesian women enact a Javanese-specific practice of informally adopting siblings' children and becoming an adoptive mother of sorts. The informal adoptions provide the women with a belonging to a culturally sanctioned gender status akin to motherhood,

which Beatty (2002), Geertz (1961), Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill (2007), and Schröder-Butterfill and Kreager (2005) claim is a Javanese tradition. The women thus negotiate a translocalized belonging that McKay (2006) describes as a place-based subjectivity that can be carried to another local area. Geertz (1961: 83) describes childlessness in Java as a potential source of family problems. 'A woman with many children is envied; a barren woman is pitied.' Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill (2007: 10) argue that adoption is common in Java, where the acceptable response to childlessness is to adopt a child or children, usually the offspring of relatives.

Beatty (2002) suggests that in villages in Banyuwagi, East Java, children grow and wander freely among neighbouring houses, but eat and sleep wherever they feel at home. Moreover, if a dispossessed mother tries too quickly to retrieve her child, the child's adopted caregiver is likely to complain that the child does not feel 'at home' with the mother and does not want to go. Beatty concludes that the exclusiveness of the maternal tie is neither encouraged nor defended; rather, everything seems to conspire against the idea of maternity as a fact of nature. Others can stake a claim, quite literally, and the child is henceforth known as their *anak akon-akon*: a 'claimed child' (Beatty 2002: 476). Therefore, the status of mother in the Javanese context is not exclusively determined by the act of giving birth, but is more fluid and is socially and culturally influenced. Similarly, the stories about Javanese women in Australia in this article show how these women have embraced the Javanese understanding of mothering that Beatty outlined above, and how they use it to minimize their loss of status over not being a biological mother (*ibu*) but still being biologically related to their adopted children as an aunt.

The three, now divorced, Javanese Indonesian women in Australia described two competing narratives of motherhood in their effort to minimize their loss of status, their unfulfilled parenting desires around unborn children, and their relationships with their informally adopted nieces and nephews. Their stories of 'consolation mothering' reveal their idealized subjectivity as a mother, their parenting values, and their corresponding practices. These narratives highlight an alternative identity as a transnational professional woman and mother that nevertheless remains profoundly ambiguous (Coles and Fechter 2007; Yeoh and Chen 2015), due to two opposing pulls towards work and home that are socially entrenched, resulting in cultural contradictions about motherhood, especially absent migrant mothers (Madianou 2012: 284). Ambiguity is also a productive space in which to analyse the performance of a specific gendered identity – the valued role of a migrant mother. However, because the three women are relatively affluent compared with their siblings in Indonesia, and transnationally mobile, with social and cultural capital as Indonesian language teachers in Australia, they can negotiate the demands of professional work and family life, thereby subverting the structuring gender discourse of the respected *ibu*, or wife and mother. By informally adopting their nieces and nephews in Indonesia and mothering them during school holidays and/or transnationally, the women compensate for the loss of this valued gendered identity by taking on an ambiguous form of adoptive mother or *ibu*.

The focus of the article on the anthropology of belonging is inspired by Gammeltoft's (2014) work on women's belonging in relation to their absent children.

Gammeltoft argues for an anthropology of belonging that is based on 'a state discourse, a social practice and a loss'; as well as belonging as a valued social being through subjectivation or the process of becoming a subject (Gammeltoft 2014: 225). Gammeltoft's work is an ethnography of the choices women in Vietnam make to abort, or not, because of abnormalities detected in their ultrasound scan. However, the stories of these absent children are also stories of the mother's loss of belonging to the family, having to live in the husband's patrilineal household, where the wife's main role is to nurture the next generation. Similarly, the three Javanese women in this article left their families in Indonesia to live in Australia as marriage migrants, intending to have Australian children. Gammeltoft's ethnography is also concerned with the women's loss of belonging to the Vietnamese state when they did not fulfil the ideal female role, which is to produce the next generation of citizens and ensure the continuation of the family structure. As Indonesian migrant women who desired and planned for Eurasian children with Caucasian Australian spouses, the ambiguity of the women's belonging is experienced in relation to two interrelated transnational gender discourses – that of the Asian bride in Australia with expectations of becoming a mother to Australia's next generation of citizens, and that of an Indonesian female citizen overseas, stigmatized as a divorcee/widow, or *janda*, who is outside the valued framework of wife and mother, or *ibu*.

An anthropology of belonging framework helps to elucidate the ambiguous subjectivity of these Javanese women in Australia by focusing on their stories of negotiating structuring gender discourse of the state through enacting translocal social practices in the face of loss. Mothering their informally adopted nieces and nephews across distance is a strategy the women employ of belonging in both Australia, where they mainly reside and work, and Indonesia, where they maintain relationships with their extended family. Belonging, however, does not exist solely at the subjective level; rather, it extends to include the experience of belonging on multiple scales of transnational, national and local identification (Yuval-Davis 2007, 2011). The three women's belonging in relation to their absent desired Eurasian children and their adopted nieces and nephews in Indonesia is a form of negotiating these multiple scales of belonging as a migrant subject. Absent children are central in the women's narratives of who they are as skilled migrants, and are key to the women's belonging to a transnational Indonesian Australian society. Children, whether they are present in the daily lives of skilled migrant women or not, are a central part of the glocal dynamic that exists within extended family networks.

The contribution of this article to anthropological research is that, through ethnographic accounts of migration, it focuses on children whose importance is predicated on their absence. Absent children call into question taken-for-granted assumptions about the needs and social realities of migrant women and their family relationships (Butt 2018). I discuss the three women's narratives in terms of how both the absent children the women desired but did not conceive with their ex-husbands and the absent adopted nieces and nephews living in Indonesia advance different personal and family agendas in a complicated global arena of mobility and containment.

Showing how these three childless women negotiate their sense of belonging is key

to understanding the structuring gender discourses that affect Indonesian migrant women in Australia. The article will therefore explore how, as Asian women who are marriage migrants and the spouses of white men, either Australian citizens or residents, the women are affected by the racialized discourse of Asian brides as housewives and mothers. However, to understand the multiple levels of structuring gender discourse, it is important to explicate the women's various transnational and translocal subjectivities as widow/divorcee, or *janda*, and as adoptive mother/aunt. As divorced women, they transgress the valued Indonesian, and therefore transnational, category of *ibu* and are stigmatized as a *janda*, or widow/divorcée of ill repute in Australia. The women negotiate these interrelated Indonesian and Australian structuring gender discourses by informally adopting their Indonesian nieces and nephews, using a translocal Javanese custom that allows them to become transnational mothers and ameliorate their loss of belonging to valued gender identities.

Before delving into the three Javanese Indonesian language teachers' stories, I shall discuss three structuring gender discourses that affect Indonesian migrant women in Australia. The women's stories of school holidays, IVF, marriage migration, and their longing for Eurasian children illustrate affective forms of the structuring gender discourses that influenced their sense of loss over the absent children in their lives. By explicating how these three structuring gender discourses affect the women's negotiations of their ambiguously valued subjectivity, this ethnography shows the various ways in which female migrants try to recreate themselves to regain their sense of belonging. Therefore, by contextualizing gender subjectivity within an anthropology of belonging as both 'social practice and state discourse', I provide a nuanced understanding of transnational families' experiences (Gammeltoft 2014: 225).

### **Structuring gender discourses affecting Indonesian migrant women in Australia**

Immediately after Australia gained independence within the British Commonwealth, the Australian Parliament passed the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act, known as the White Australia policy, aimed at ensuring Australia's British character. This policy's preference for white European migrants restricted Asian migrants, even though many settled in Australia, particularly in Victoria, where the research for this article was conducted, during the gold rush of the mid-1800s. Asian migrant men who came during the gold rush and then remained in Australia as settlers were not allowed to bring their spouses, and Asian female migration was severely restricted. The only Asian women allowed to migrate to Australia were Japanese war brides after the Second World War. Only after the Migration Act of 1966 was passed to allow Vietnamese refugees to settle was the White Australia policy abolished, and Australia's multicultural policy began in 1972. The 1980s and 1990s saw many Filipina migrant women arriving as marriage migrants, particularly as the spouses of white Australian men. The women were stereotyped as mail-order brides, often described as 'gold diggers', with a negative connotation of coming from a poor Third World country and marrying not for love, but for money. The mail-order bride stereotype continues to affect Southeast Asian women from developing countries who arrive as marriage migrants.

The first gendered and racialized structuring discourse affecting the Indonesian women in this article comes from the Australian state. As a reaction to the high number of female marriage migrants who came to Australia, mainly from the Philippines, as spouses of mainly white Australian men, the government produced an immigration poster of a smiling Asian woman, with the caption 'You can be part of the family too' (Ang 1996). The poster portrays Asian migrant women as assimilated and 'safe'. The expectation is that women who migrate as spouses or fiancées quickly become mothers, workers and citizens in a new context (Piper and Roces 2003). Moreover, the Australian husbands viewed the East as a source of traditional family values, equating marrying an Asian bride with achieving a stable family life (Robinson 1996). Roces (2003) argues that Asian marriage migrant women are pigeonholed as brides on spousal visas with the expectation that they will become housewives, not workers or breadwinners, even after years of settlement in Australia and despite their high level of education and skills prior to migration (Roces 2003). These conflicting identity dimensions are rarely surveyed (Piper and Roces 2003). However, in the context of a history of racialized immigration politics in Australia, the discourses on Asian marriage migrant women matter for these Indonesian women, who are narrating their identity beyond being the spouses of Anglo Australian men, yet with expectations of forming a family with them.

The second discourse to affect Indonesian migrant women in Australia is that of a valued transnational Indonesian Australian gender identity as an *ibu guru*, or classroom mother, which shapes these three Indonesian language teachers' day-to-day reality as they teach in their Australian classrooms. The structuring discourse of *ibu guru*/mother/wife/teacher expects a performance of ideal Indonesian femininity centering on women being married mothers, ideally with two children, in which the mothering role is to educate the children morally and manage the household (Robinson and Bessell 2002). A state discourse of Indonesian women's role as mother and wife primarily finds its expression in a state-sanctioned women's association called *Dharma Wanita* (Suryakusuma 1996), which promotes an *ibu* subjectivity in Indonesian embassies and consulates, as in Melbourne. Although the valued wife/mother role of *ibu* is altered to an extent by Indonesian women in diasporic communities in Australia who do not always identify with the honorific of *ibu*, women interact with this discourse through being part of *Dharma Wanita*. The structure of the organization mirrors that of the consulate staff: *Dharma Wanita* valorizes the *ibu* role in the association's cultural activities, which focus on women's domestic role through activities such as cooking. The women's belonging, as manifested in a stable connection with the Indonesian migrant community, is particularly expressed through the expectation and identification of them as *ibu guru*. Within the larger Australian community, belonging is also, at times, narrated ambiguously vis-à-vis the women's status as migrants possessing high skills and working in a professional field as tertiary-educated language teachers.

The third structuring gender discourse to affect the women is *janda*, an Indonesian term to describe both widows and divorcees at a time when their valued status as an *ibu* is becoming ambiguous. According to the stereotype, *janda*, particularly young *janda*, are sexually experienced but deprived women on the lookout for a new man (Mahy et al. 2016). Unlike *ibu*, the term *janda* has not played an overt role in Indonesian state

ideology. It is a much more colloquial concept (Parker and Creese 2016), but one that is widespread and that seriously undermines women's reputations. *Janda* are seen to be no longer protected (or controlled) by male influence and hence at liberty to pursue their own gratification (Mahy et al. 2016). A *janda* who remarries may subsequently be considered an *ibu*, although she cannot entirely erase her earlier reputation.

As the following individual narratives show, these three divorced women have to negotiate their subjectivity within these three interrelated structuring gender discourses of Asian female migrant, ambiguous respected Indonesian *ibu*, and disrespected *janda*.

### **Tina: mothering as *ibu guru* during school holiday visits**

'Don't call me *ibu*, call me *mbak* [Javanese honorific for older female relative]', said Tina, reminding me how she preferred to be addressed outside the classroom *ibu guru* context. I interviewed her on a sunny yet cold winter's day, and we met in front of the Victoria State Library, where Tina spent Sundays browsing journal articles on teaching, language and linguistics. Although it was her day off, Tina was serious about excelling in her profession, and she reasoned that the journals would improve her ability as both Indonesian language teacher and 'linguist', another way she defines herself. When you do not have a family here in Melbourne, Tina explained, you have more time to concentrate on professional activities. The word *family* made Tina unsure at first that she was someone I could interview about professional female migrants and their families. 'I am a "single fighter". I don't have a family here. I am divorced. I don't have children. My family is in Indonesia', she said. After I explained that I was interested in how she maintains her relationship with her family in Indonesia, she revealed that she is also 'a mother to my nieces in Indonesia'. She described how she spends most of the Australian school holidays taking care of them and supporting her extended family, being the oldest of her siblings, or *mbak yu*, as they call her.

Tina's insistence on being called *mbak* was memorable because most female Indonesian language teachers would introduce themselves as *ibu*, which goes with *ibu guru*, the standard term for teachers in Indonesia. Tina would also sometimes call herself *Ibu* Tina, using her first name, as is the norm in Indonesia, instead of her husband's surname, which is more customary in an Australian or English classroom. For Tina, leaving out the surname of her ex-husband is a way of overcoming the stigma of divorce and of owning her personal achievement as an Indonesian language teacher.

In our interview, Tina's insistence on being called a *mbak* instead of *ibu* carried through outside the classroom as she narrated her multiple roles, her life story of coming to Australia, and her self-definition at that moment. Although she had wanted to be a mother, that goal was initially secondary to her other goals of becoming a professional worker, migrating, and living overseas.

Tina is a 54-year-old divorcee who came to live permanently in Australia 20 years ago, on a spousal visa, to marry an Anglo-Australian man she had met in her hometown in Java, Indonesia. This town was well known for the universities that offered an immersion course in Indonesian language, which her former husband was taking when they met. Tina had already been to Australia for a short course as an international

student taking a diploma in teaching English, and she shared a career and interest in linguistic studies with her ex-spouse. In understanding Tina's narrative in relation to how she defines herself and is defined by others, or her subjectivation, it is necessary to note that there was always a tension between her expectation of being a skilled tertiary-educated worker who successfully migrated to a Western country and that of being a mother. Tina's relationship story with an Anglo-Australian man who came to Indonesia because of his career interest in the language, as mentioned earlier, is part of her professional trajectory as an Indonesian language teacher, and was reflected in their plans to have a family and raise bilingual children. Tina's gender expectation for herself as a wife of an Australian included being the mother of a bilingual child. In an interview (14 June 2015) Tina explained how:

Because my husband could speak Indonesian ... if we had a child, indeed that was the plan, at home we will speak Indonesian, at school, English. So, they have that bilingual [ability]. ... I studied linguistics, you know ... but because we didn't have children ... we couldn't implement it. ... But they [would] have to go to a school that teaches Indonesian. ... That's the number one thing ... the language.

Tina never conceived her planned, desired, bilingual Eurasian child, not because she was 'the barren one' who should be pitied (Geertz 1961), but because her ex-husband was infertile. Six years ago, following her divorce, Tina informally adopted a child each from two of her younger siblings in Indonesia. Tina sees herself as the girls' permanent foster mother. She physically cares for them in her deceased parents' house in Indonesia for four months a year during the Australian school holidays and treats them as her own children in accordance with Javanese cultural practice.

As the eldest of four, Tina sees herself as responsible for the well-being of her left-behind extended family of younger siblings. However, in accordance with translocal Javanese cultural practice, she combined her *mbak* and *ibu guru* identities to become a working transnational mother to her informally adopted nieces, thus demonstrating belonging through multiple scales of translocal and transnational subjectivity.

Because I don't have [children], I do the same with my nieces that are in Jakarta. If I go there, like ... last year, that was when I had ... four months off ... they live with me at my mother's house. ... They are not my children, but they live in my mother's house with me, so I become their mother. Their mothers also ask me to teach them.

Tina's nieces relocated from their natal home, which is close to their grandparents' house where their foster mother/aunt Tina resides for four months every year. Because the interview took place on my third meeting with Tina, she was sufficiently familiar with me to discuss in detail her 'mothering' activities during the Australian school holidays. During her time living with them, she taught her nieces how to become independent like her in tasks such as washing their own clothes and shopping, as well

as the etiquette of eating dinner together and being disciplined with their schoolwork and household chores. Coming from an educated military family, Tina wanted to pass down the values that were part of her upbringing, which she credits with helping her succeed as a professional woman in Australia.

So, I have to go back home. I have a responsibility. ... I monitor them, so when I talk with them, they have to line up. ... What is your top mark? What are your grades? You see, I have to know that. ... So, if I call them, they know and have an answer. Why can't you do this? It seems like you have to take lessons. It's OK, but everything you have to report to me. Because I pay for their education, I pay for everything. ... I don't have children. That's including books. Excursion to Bali ... whatever ... is under education. ... The money is always there.

It is assumed that Tina, whose adopted nieces are left behind with their birth parents, would have a different experience of the mother/child relationship from that of domestic migrant women who try to live up to the good mother ideal. However, Tina's narrative suggests that she emphasizes ideas of 'good mothering' in her activities, using phrases such as 'I teach them' and 'I have a responsibility'. Tina describes her main responsibility to her adopted children as financial support for their education. Thus, for Tina, choosing to be an adoptive mother during school holiday visits to Indonesia becomes an extension of her *ibu guru* or classroom mothering role in Australia. For some Indonesian women, however, the responsibility of being a good mother to the informally adopted children of their siblings may be imposed on them by extended family members because they are childless, as Betsi's narrative in the next section shows.

### **Betsi: the limits of IVF, and adopting nieces as a family expectation**

For her interview, Betsi chose to meet me during her lunch break at a popular café frequented by university students and young professionals near the inner-city tertiary institution where she works. Betsi teaches on a casual contract basis per semester, and although her employment status is less secure than Tina's, she has a master's degree, which allows her to teach Indonesian language to university students. Like Tina, Betsi also takes her career as a linguist seriously, and had a similar migration trajectory: she met her Anglo Australian husband at an Indonesian language immersion programme in Indonesia and then came to Australia on a spousal visa. However, both Tina and Betsi emphasized their affiliation to Australia as permanent residents who chose to migrate there to gain further Australian qualifications as part of their career advancement.

Speaking loudly to drown the background noise in the café, Betsi described how she resented the negative connotations and ambiguous sense of belonging ascribed in Australia to female marriage migrants from poorer Asian country. She started the interview with a story of how one of her female university students commented that Betsi must feel so lucky to have married an Anglo-Australian man working in the same profession as her, and thus having been able to migrate to Australia. Betsi responded

by asking her student in a loud voice, 'why should I be lucky? Why should he not be the lucky one to have married me, an Indonesian native speaker working in the same profession?' Betsi's account highlights the racialized and gendered discourse with which she has to contend as a working Indonesian spouse, marriage migrant and recipient of the negative stereotype of an Asian female migrant in Australia.

Unlike Tina, Betsi did not emphasize or narrate at length either her identity as an informal adoptive mother to her two nieces or her 'good mothering' activities. She described herself as an aunt who informally adopts, takes care of and supports her nieces. Her status as an informal adoptive mother is conferred on her. Because she is childless and her brother and his family are less fortunate, her extended family expects her, as the aunt, to take on the supporting role of benefactor, along with the formalities associated with being an adoptive mother. As she explained (interview, 3 June 2015):

I helped by paying the university fees and sometimes, you know, buying her [niece] a computer, and also when she got married I also paid quite a lot ... of the expenses. ... They [Tina's family] understand that I already paid for the education for the two adopted children, [now] university girls. I think we have a lot more responsibilities to watch [over] our extended families in Indonesia than Australians. [I am] expected to help sometimes financially and sometimes in the form of emotional support or contribution to find a solution to problems that the extended family faced. In Indonesia, if you are better off, you are expected to help the less well-off within your family. And then also, the fact that I don't have children [of my own], then I felt somehow that I had to help others, you know, less fortunate.

The expectations that Betsi described about supporting her siblings' children reflect Javanese cultural expectations. Kreager and Schröder-Butterfill (2007) describe tensions in Javanese extended families over expectations of how much support adoptive parents need to give to children and siblings and what they will receive in return during their old age. Similarly, but in a transnational context, although the extended family's expectations of Betsi as a benefactor, remitting aunt and mother to her informally adopted nieces caused tension at times, these expectations occurred because Betsi was childless, despite having tried hard to conceive her own children through IVF.

That's the decision that came after my second attempt to get pregnant via IVF and it failed. So, I wanted very much to have children, but my [ex] husband had a vasectomy, so we can't conceive naturally, so we had to do it via IVF and it cost a lot of money and also cost a lot of stress [sic]. And the two attempts that I had made me realize that it's probably not going to be easy to get children, unless it involves somebody else, like getting a [sperm] donation ... and that was not the option that I considered favourable. So, then I decided, OK that's it, I'm not going to try anymore. ... Even though I did regret it several times, but that's in the past.

Tina's and Betsi's narratives also focused on the fact that their childlessness was not because they were barren but because of their husbands' infertility. Betsi attributed the loss of her marriage to her husband's infertility, even though she had known from the outset that there was only a slim chance of conception.

I think that was something natural. It's part of the natural progression that [you] become an adult and you find someone and then you start your family. ... But before we got married I also already knew that there might be some problems because my husband already [had a] vasectomy long before we met ... but I still hoped that ... there's a chance to do it naturally.

Betsi's repeated use of the word *natural* shows that having children was part of her worldview of creating a normative family through her marriage migration. Betsi's account reflects themes identified in Miller and Madianou's (2012) research on Filipina migrant mothers, where they discuss how the birth of a child objectifies the relationships that are made evident with and through the child's existence. Having a child is what makes people related (Strathern 1986, cited in Miller and Madianou 2012: 9–10). In other words, making relationships (such as marital relationships) visible is far more than merely a representation of those relationships. For Betsi and her husband, pinning their hopes on a child was a tangible goal of the relationship to negotiate their transnational belonging. Tying in to this article's broad argument, if one cannot have one's own child, then adoption, even informal adoption of one's sibling's children, which was expected of Betsi by her brother's family, may become a tangible objective of the marital relationship. Reproductive and contraceptive technologies offer migrant women and men novel opportunities to negotiate the absence and presence of children and to imagine or realize family and future through the act of having or adopting children. Yet Betsi's narrative shows the limits of these reproductive technologies in relation to her ideal of producing her own child. More acutely, her story exemplifies her sense of loss of belonging to a valued Indonesian gendered subjectivity as an *ibu* who can give birth to a Eurasian child in Australia.

I knew that the technology, even then, was already advanced. You still can't create something out of nothing if the sperm is no longer fertile. You can't make it fertile just because of the technology. The technology certainly made it possible to do a lot of things, but I just didn't consider like getting a sperm donor. ... I just couldn't see myself facing the complications of identity crisis or things like that for the children ... who didn't know ... one of their parents ... they have this psychological problem. They have all sorts of problems and I didn't feel at the time that I was prepared to be involved in that kind of thing. If I had children I want my children to be sure, I mean not to have to worry about that, where I came from, who the father is.

Reproductive technologies such as IVF play a complex role in processes of citizenship (Kahn 2000) and belonging more broadly, and are involved in the process

of augmenting the social body implicitly in the process of acquiring other forms of legitimating one's relationship to the absent child (Butt 2018). These processes of externalizing and distributing elements of the self into objects and relationships outside the physical body are key to understanding how children can be made to come into being (Butt 2018). As Betsi's narrative shows, the failure of technologies like IVF to bring forth a desired child may make the child's absence more acutely felt and unravel various forms of belonging and problems of not belonging for an Indonesian migrant woman in Australia with a 'natural' gendered expectation of forming a heteronormative family. However, as the younger teacher Indah's narrative shows in the next section, IVF can still provide the hoped-for technological means to conceive the desired 'biological' Eurasian child when a new Caucasian Australian partner and a second chance arise.

### **Indah: a new partner and a new opportunity for a desired Eurasian child**

Waiting for Indah, who agreed to be interviewed on a Saturday afternoon in front of the language intensive school, I observed that the students coming out of the lessons were mainly teenagers from an Asian migrant background who were trying to improve their university entrance exam scores outside normal school hours. As we walked to the nearby shopping mall to conduct the interview over lunch, Indah agreed with my observation, joking that she would have been a stereotypical 'Asian tiger mum' (Soutphommasane 2011) herself, putting her children in intensive courses to get into their university of choice. Indah then revealed that even though she is divorced and did not have a child with her ex-husband, she now had a new (Caucasian male) partner, and hoped through IVF to be able to have a child and build a family with him. However, she has already informally adopted her two nephews in Indonesia, with whom she spends time during her Australian school holidays. As she explained (interview, 30 May 2015):

I want to have children, yeah. But ... it's just always other things before. ... I always want to have children. I will, why not? I still have that hope. ... He [new partner] is ... yeah. He wants to have children. ... I'm planning to now ... IVF ... Not before. ... Because I'm 45 now, so it's one of the ways ... or it's the only ways [sic].

Indah's focus on having a second chance at conceiving a child, however, was overshadowed by her difficult relationship with her extended family in Indonesia and their expectations of her being a mother.

So, nobody really nags me, 'oh when are you going to have children?' They talk to me like that if we are close, but I refuse to be close to them ... uncles or aunties, grandma, yeah. ... No. They don't force me. No, but like, yeah, fortunately I'm not close. ... I'm not interested in having relationship with them. So, when I go home, I just go home for my siblings and nephews.

Although Indah is committed to her nephews, she narrates in contradictory terms her subjectivity as an adoptive mother and her desire for the Eurasian child she has not conceived but who remains vitally present in her stories of past and future aspirations around family. Living in Australia, Indah negotiates the expectations of her extended family in Indonesia that she will be a mother by distancing herself from most of them. Indah, Betsi and Tina have also all mentioned how their extended family at times regard them as *janda*. The social stigma of being a *janda* is acutely felt during the women's trips back to Indonesia and, at times, when they are with the Indonesian diasporic community in Australia. Constable (2014) described a similar situation in her research on female Indonesian domestic migrants who returned home but had to migrate again to escape this stigma, which can cause *malu*, or shame (Lindquist 2004). Indah avoids most of her extended family because of the *janda* stigma and the sense of shame she feels in association with it.

Indah's mobility, maintaining homes in both countries and providing financial support for her 'adopted' nephews is a way of atoning for her broken marriage, *janda* status and failure (so far) to produce Eurasian children, though she remains hopeful of a second chance with her new partner through IVF. Reproductive technologies like IVF may or may not bring a child into a family, but their mere existence keeps the spectre of the hoped-for children alive for Indah in her day-to-day life as a chance to change her subjectivity to that of a birth mother and to belong to the ideal heteronormative family, as expected of her as an Indonesian female migrant in Australia. Nevertheless, Indah did not go into any more detail about how she thinks or feels about her plan for IVF, but moved on to describe her desire for a Eurasian child.

Indah specified the desired physical features of her planned Eurasian child as a Caucasian *anak bule ... kan memperbaiki keturunan* or 'a white [of no colour] child, to create better descendants'. For Indah, having Caucasian-looking children is desirable. This desire for whiteness can also be seen in Indonesian Eurasian models who are hired to promote popular skin-whitening products synonymous with being part of a Western, global, consumerist lifestyle identified with the upper-class urban elite (Handajani 2008).

Cultural studies scholars have analysed Eurasians as a multicultural, global and upwardly mobile group that white, coloured and mixed-race societies can consume (Goon and Craven 2003; Matthews 2002). However, this valorization of Eurasians glosses over the racist and sexist undercurrents that exist in a white-majority Australian society still influenced by the White Australia policy that existed until 1972. The policy affected 'Indos', who usually had Indonesian mothers and Dutch fathers, and historically separated siblings based on their skin colour. During Australia's white Australia immigration policy, Indos who were 'white' enough to pass could migrate to Australia, but those deemed too dark were barred from settling (Coté 2010). Nevertheless, as Indah's narrative shows, a Eurasian Indo or *bule* child with mixed cultural heritage has become a desired racial category for women who marry white men.

I thought ... I would have a mix child, a Caucasian *bule* kid ... a German [partner]. And in Germany there is ... a tradition for when a child goes to school

for the first time, they bring this ... big cone-shaped thing. ... The name is *Schultüte*. So, the first time they go to school, they bring that. So, I was dreaming I would make the *Schultüte* for my child ... or with the child together, we decorate it. ... Oh, I wanted, I really wanted to have children. Or just a child, you know ... until the age, yes, until about 40 years old. I was really like hoping.

Not only did Indah narrate at length her plans for important life moments such as the first day of school, but the longing she expressed for the valued Eurasian child also reflected her wish to belong to a specific cultural group transnationally, both in Australia, where she and her partner permanently reside, and in Indonesia, where she still has a home.

As with Betsi and Tina, supporting her nephews financially allows Indah to reassert her multiscalar transnational and translocal belonging as a type of mother and to show her mobility, affluence, and social and economic capital. For Indah, living with these children in Indonesia for a few months each year provides some consolation for the continued absence of her planned and desired Eurasian child:

In the meantime, I can go back four times a year. ... Spend my whole holiday there. ... I'm actually now building a house in Jakarta ... close [to] the house of my younger sister. ... Then when I go home I am close with my nephews. No, I don't feel lonely, no. I don't regret. I'm 45. Still not have children. I help the two nephews who study at university. Because the tuition fee is expensive you know. ... I told them that ... their scores should always be good.

Indah described how she wanted her two informally adopted children eventually to live in Australia as young adults:

If they want to continue their education [in Australia], why not? Because I am here. I already know, if they want to go to school, what kind of education is needed, you know. ... Maybe I will let them work first in Indonesia to gain more experience and then ... I will take them here to study a little bit and then maybe set up a business.

Indah, like Tina and Betsi, is passing on her values to her adopted nephews, encouraging them to do well at university and possibly to migrate to Australia. The women's belonging through a migrant subjectivity pinned on an absent Eurasian child who remains emotionally present in their stories is transferable to their consolation children. Yet, the women's narratives project a shadow side of belonging that includes losses and absences, where belonging is enacted in the presence of spectres of the Eurasian child who has been lost or set aside. In other words, there are two interconnected absent children – the ones unborn and the ones who live elsewhere. The unborn are spectres who are given a voice. For example, Betsi's account of her failed IVF attempt was told from the perspective of an unborn child who would have, in Betsi's words, psychological problems if conceived with donor sperm. Indah's and Tina's narratives

brought their unborn children to life through all their plans to have a bilingual or Eurasian child. Indah painted a vivid picture of the child's first day at school and the German rituals and activities she would perform with her non-existent child. The absent children who are informally adopted and, for most of the time, live at a physical distance in Indonesia are also made present in the women's success stories, both of harnessing their economic and social capital through their relative affluence and mobility, and of engaging in transnational parenting through a mother-teacher role, so sponsoring these children's education and future careers.

## Conclusion

As professional Indonesian migrant women who came to Australia on spousal visas, Tina, Indah and Betsi want to feel a sense of belonging in relation to the valued gendered subjectivity of being a biological mother to a desired, yet absent, Eurasian child. The impact of the interrelated structuring gender discourses is felt most acutely in the women's expectations of the idealized heteronormative family they have been unable to achieve, yet is subverted through a re-creation of their subjectivity in four related ways.

First, through a process of subjectivation, the women defined themselves within the interrelated structuring gender discourses as certain kinds of people, such as *ibu* and *ibu guru*, and then translated these subject positions into providing economic support for the education of their 'adopted' Indonesian nieces and nephews. Second, the women's strivings for multiscalar belonging drew on Indonesian structuring gender discourses about the ideal family, woman, mother and wife that are part of their lives as professional workers and migrants in Australia. Here, the women voiced doubts and uncertainties about their ambiguous belonging as both wives and workers who are expected to form a family in Australia. However, they also described how they could overcome such ambiguity, to an extent, by being a transnational informal adoptive mother with the economic and social means to do so as a professional, skilled Indonesian language teacher in Australia. Third, they described their experiences of failing to belong to the idealized heteronormative family, not in terms of their own biological failure, but, in Tina's and Betsi's cases, that of their infertile ex-husbands. Moreover, two of the women recounted their use of reproductive technologies, whether unsuccessfully, as in Betsi's case, or with Indah's glimmer of hope of having her desired Eurasian child through IVF treatment with a new partner. Last, there remains in the women's stories a shadow side of belonging in which losses and absences have been set aside, yet these absent children continue to be part of how the women expressed their gendered subjectivation, sometimes ambiguously or in contradiction, as valued migrant women living a transnational life in Indonesia and Australia. Nevertheless, the women's value to some extent seems to reside in being good mothers to their informally adopted children who live in another country.

This article therefore shows the impact of the interrelated structuring gender discourses on how belonging is ambiguously negotiated within the migrant project of recreating oneself as a valued transnational subject. The aim of this article is to extend

our understanding of the feminization of migration and to contribute to the literature on transnational families by focusing on how women's gendered subjectivities are negotiated within the blurred distinction of skilled female Asian marriage migrants and the heteronormative family ideals associated with such categorization. By negotiating such subjectivities, Tina, Betsi, and Indah provide an example that extends the idea of transnational mothering beyond a biologically determined category of giving birth to a child to include translocal Javanese cultural practices that value informal adoptive mothers who are biologically related as aunts.

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### **Note**

1. The interviewed women referred to their ex-husbands as *bule*, which is synonymous for 'white people'. The majority were Anglo Australians, although some came from other parts of Europe, such as Germany.

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