Building on Borrowed Time: The Temporal Horizons of Infrastructural Breakdown in the Delta of Semarang

by

Lukas Ley

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Anthropology
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork and one month of archival research, this doctoral thesis describes the predicament of residents of a coastal sub-district in the city Semarang, Indonesia. They must constantly adapt to the sinking foundations of their houses as well as dysfunctional drainage infrastructure. As neighbourhoods threaten to sink below sea level, daily incidents of tidal flooding demand timely adaptation and constant repair of houses and river banks. “Building on Borrowed Time” portrays the multiple ways of enduring this situation, exploring the divergent and often contradictory temporalities that congregate around water. It argues that residents endure a situation of chronic breakdown. It is through the logic of chronic breakdown that ecological transformations as well as political shifts are analyzed in this thesis. While it describes the temporal horizons of breakdown from the perspective of riverside residents, it also offers a historical account of the emergence of coastal settlements in late colonial times. Here, state interventions force indigenous coastal dwellers into a marginal position regarding the city’s spatial and political configuration. Today, in view of the region’s advanced disconnect from the ‘modern’ spaces of the city, the post-colonial state’s concern with sanitation, crime, and ecological degradation explains the emergence of a specific governance of local time. This governance reproduces a present in which ecological disaster in the lives of coastal dwellers is
recursive and requires constant managing. Drawing on Cazdyn’s notion of the ‘chronic’ and Povinelli’s concept of ‘quasi-events,’ I show that state agencies, through neighbourhood-level organs of power and bottom-up development schemes, cultivate a ‘meantime’ that does not produce lasting relief, but further “colonizes” the future. An ethnography of the present reveals the temporal practices of this meantime, such as repair and maintenance of infrastructure. These practices effectively replace development (“pembangunan”) projected in plans with continuous but desultory stacking-up (“peninggian”) and fixing of infrastructure. While a spirit of ‘real’ development converges upon the area, driven by crisis scenarios of Dutch and Indonesian water experts, these plans are characteristic of a neoliberal remaking of lifeworlds that ultimately reinforces the chronic.
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**Cover photo**  Installation entitled “Bergumul” (wrestle) by Kokoh Nugroho, at Semarang Art Rob Exhibition, Pekalongan, Central Java. Materials used: metal bed frame, condoms, injection needles, alarm clocks, string. Photo by author.
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Introduction

Tidal Flooding and the Temporal Horizons of Infrastructural Breakdown

*The perfect grip of a hand that is no longer of any use landscapes the present.*

I left the house at 6 in the morning. It had been cloudy for many days and raining periodically, but most streets remained passable. The bike ride was smooth. The rain had a cooling effect and it stayed pleasantly breezy throughout the morning hours. What a perfect day for the community walking event. When I arrived in Kemijen, sweating only mildly, the main road by the river was already packed with residents getting in position for the starting signal. But this wasn’t a competition. The jalan santai (relaxed walking) event was supposed to get people out of their normal routine and moving – to animate their circulation. Perhaps sweat moderately. Everybody came out dressed in appropriate sportswear: sweatpants, t-shirts, and baseball caps. I had arrived after the communal warmup and was nudged to the starting line by friends. The starting signal sounded and the group was set in motion. Two men were posted behind the starting line to distribute door prize tickets as additional incentive.

The chosen route avoided crossing the Banger River into the densely-inhabited neighbourhoods of the eastern bank. Instead, it directed participants onto the west side’s main streets, which were wider and better maintained, to allow for dispersion and walking in groups. We walked northbound for about 400 meters and turned west at the sub-district’s abandoned pumping house. Cutting northwest through a neighbourhood called Penjaringan (“fishing by

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1 Excerpt from Theodoros Chiotis’ poem “Perfusion” (2015) published in “Futures: Poetry of The Greek Crisis.” Many thanks to my colleague George Mantzios for sharing the poem with me.
net”), I caught a glimpse of the remaining fishponds behind the last row of houses south of the railway. Not many residents of Kemijen continue to farm fish to this day. At the westernmost edge of Kemijen, the walking party pivoted and descended along Pertamina’s (Indonesia’s second-largest oil producer) high security wire fence for 500 meters. The oil refinery is today a major job provider but also main polluter in the area. A transparent fence allowed for a breathtaking sight of the company’s gigantic oil tanks. I was surprised that the route led then onto one of Semarang’s busiest arteries: Pengapon Street. Unlike some of the well-kept inner-city streets, Pengapon Street neither has sidewalks nor curbs. Walkers tried their best to stay off the road, allowing cars, trucks, and motorbikes to roar past them at a relatively safe distance. I realized that there was a pragmatic reason for taking the dangerous throughway: Kemijen’s wealthiest resident, who is a member of the municipal parliament, runs a garage by the road. People were handed water bottles and plastic bags containing deep-fried meat sticks through the metal bars of the garage’s closed gate in exchange for half of their door prize ticket.

I gave my snack to Ariel, because it was too greasy for my taste. Walking side by side, we enjoyed the opportunity for a chat. She was in a good mood and talkative compared to her usual taciturnity. I met her through her husband, Arief, who is a neighbourhood chief in Kemijen. Ariel visibly enjoyed the fun and workout. As she had grown up in Kemijen, she knew its geography and most neighbourhoods well. Walking slowly, she occasionally made comments about shifts in our surrounding. For example, she remarked on the neighbourhood that we entered after passing the pumping house: *di sini mulai kumuh* – ‘this is where the dirty part begins.’ I too noticed a shift in construction types. The landscape was suddenly dipped in brownish tones: streets were covered in mud or dust and wooden constructions outweighed concrete structures. The area was often flooded by an open sewage canal which merged here with the Banger River. We passed houses that had been ruined by intruding flood waters and now rotted in a stagnant brew of algae and
shit. Instinctively, I asked Ariel when her family would raise the front part of its house, because I knew that her living room was often flooded during high tide despite being in a ‘cleaner’ area. She replied unemotionally that they had to be patient. Actually, she added, it would be smarter to remove (bongkar) the front part of their home, first, where her twin sister sold juice and phone credit. That part, so she reasoned, narrowed the conduit (saluran) and often blocked the water. After all, the water had to be able to flow out and join the river. Ideally, that is, instead of drowning houses and flooding streets, shit and wastewater were supposed to collect in the river, which is in fact why the river is called ‘Banger,’ which means fetid or rancid.

Figure 1: Two distinct houses in West Kemijen – the drain (selokan) alongside the edge of the left house needs to be regularly deepened to absorb wastewater, while the alleyway is leveled up yearly. Therefore, the house structure itself is gradually shrinking. The house owner will have to increase its foundation soon to prevent recursive flooding. Foundation, entrance, and roof of the house on the right side are all higher and temporarily safe from waters.
The present thesis argues that residents of the poor coastal neighbourhood of Kemijen endure a meantime that is caused by tidal flooding and the plans – sometimes of their own making – devised to manage it. In this mode of life, the government, through the creation of local organs of state power, neighbourhood councils and bottom-up development agencies, reproduces a situation in which ecological disaster is recursive and requires constant managing – through repair and maintenance of infrastructure. This chronic mode is not a present in which other notions of the future cease to exist: residents and the government still hold on to visions of the area’s future – therefore, the present becomes a palimpsest of development projects gone awry, piling up, while also attracting further projects. Especially, I analyze the temporal effects of an anti-flooding scheme concocted by a Dutch-Indonesian consortium of public actors. In the end, however, it is predominantly residents who must develop individual and collective responses to flooding. Both the plans of the government and residents’ responses reproduce a meantime, a temporary location in which suffering is dispersed and socially normalized. While residents are used to auto-construct their lives in a dangerous territory, the recent spirit of development that converges upon the area adds a temporality that seems characteristic of a neoliberal remaking of lifeworlds at a global scale.

Toxic water and exhaustion are lurking everywhere in the oftentimes wet streets of Kemijen. When water shows up outside of its engineered conduits (rivers, gutters, and channels), when it presses up from underneath streets and tiles or seeps through riverbanks, it leads to bodily exhaustion from pumping, cleaning, and fighting bacteria. Allowing for regular flow – of water, sewage, and bodies – is an important and normal thing to do. But exhaustion is often waiting at the end of a normal day, because maintaining and reinstating flow costs energy. On certain occasions, like the walking event, residents are reminded to work towards flow and circulation:
the flow of liquids within their oft-tired bodies in order to prevent illnesses, the orderly trickle of participants through the neighbourhood, but also the organized filtering of water through gutters, canals, and floodgates. After all, people know that contact with flood water can cause nasty rashes and mouldy walls may lead to respiratory problems. These preventative efforts are nested in a specific temporality. It is a chronic present, I argue, that is governed by plans that relate to a near future – the constantly looming possibility of infrastructural breakdown and actual events of technological failure. The neighbourhood, built on wetland, stands on rapidly caving soil. The land is currently sinking at an exorbitant rate of 10–15 cm per year. It is oversewn by the capillaries and venules of a water infrastructure largely rendered dysfunctional. From this complex nexus of materials, flood prevention practices, and liquids originates a common but unequally distributed threat: toxic river water returning from drains and inundating peoples’ houses. Sometimes, this brackish wastewater remains trapped in homes and gutters instead of quietly disappearing, for example by flowing into the central regional drain – the Banger. This looming danger defines the present and near future, as residents must devise strategies and make plans to deal with flood risks. Actual events of flooding rarely disrupt daily rhythms, but occasion a regularized pumping, wiping, and sweeping. Strategies and coping mechanisms constitute a meantime, a temporal location that forces residents to carry out small repairs and wait for state fixes of infrastructure. It is difficult to say when this meantime started, given that colonial and postcolonial governments have vowed to improve Semarang’s Northern settlements for more than one hundred years. Thus, while infrastructure is sometimes fixed and provided by the state, it has become a mere placeholder for an imagined future, where residents will be safe from floods and toxicity.

When the floodplain rivers swell with tidewater, the smaller drains clog, like choked veins, resulting in infrastructural failure, such as seeping riverbanks and oozing house floors. The
infrastructures in place cannot deal with this feedback. Such events have distinct relationships with time and space, in that levels of inundation differ from household to household and from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. Though many people in several contiguous sub-districts might agree that the tide (*air pasang*) is particularly high (*tinggi*) on a given day, those are mere observations of the river’s water level. It does not mean that people will be affected by *rob*, as tidal flooding is called, to the same degree. Other temporal as well as spatial arrangements are tantamount, such as when were the neighbourhood’s streets last raised (*diuruk*); when did the government last repair the riverbank; where in the area did the government build a retention basin? There is no overarching logic of flooding that translates neatly into effects. The meantime, while enclosing whole communities, is experienced differently by individuals. As Ariel noticed during our walk, levels of flood exposure break down at the scale of the neighbourhood. For example, the wealthy council member, who sponsored the jalan santai event, just built a preposterous, elevated villa amidst moulding houses on the west bank, while Ariel and her husband are scrambling for funds to renovate a small part of their flood-stricken home (at the expense of dismantling her sister’s space of business). And there are yet others whose houses can be flooded *every* night, like some residents of areas that Ariel qualified as “dirty” or Deni, a poor resident I will introduce in the third chapter. These people just pump out the water with small electronic pumps at night, knowing that it will return soon, unforgivingly but quite predictably. Or they stack bricks against seeping river banks to prevent seepage.

Relief and exhaustion from unruly water flows and their consequences are thus distributed inequitably and people resort to distinctive architectures of time, often of their own making, to respond to them. These architectures serve to respond to and act on the “near future” outlined in plans that relate to a formally collective time horizon that, as Guyer (2007:416) argued, is often “thinned out of its complexity as a theory or doctrine embodied in guidelines and benchmarks and
indexed to a defined, more distant collective future.” Such plans for the near future and local responses to unruly water make up a complex set of interrelated temporalities.

When one zooms out from Kemijen to the scale of the city, the complex chronography of flooding, however, seems to obey a spatial hierarchy, one that is nested in a (post-)colonial order. The Northeast has not seen the same infrastructural investments in the form of drainage and housing improvement schemes as centrally located and uptown neighbourhoods. Semarang’s international airport is also located on marshland, but its private operator has recently implemented a sophisticated polder (hydraulic system) that allows the airport to process travelers all year round, unbothered by tidal or seasonal changes. By contrast, large parts of the swamp of Semarang form an abandoned territory, one that did not follow the futurities of postcolonial development discourse. Shifting regimes of power open up new spaces of both possible and impossible action to deal with these contradictions of urban development in Semarang. Government plans index the North as exhibiting inappropriate ways of adapting to new urban and ecological conditions. The phenomenon of tidal flooding has in fact renewed state efforts to save the North from sinking into decay, lifting its residents out of the “black” (hitam) swamp. But these programs rarely materialize and rather see residents being reabsorbed into the swamp, as in the case of normalisasi, a New Order infrastructure project that was meant to stop flooding, but in fact disabled drainage. Eric Cazdyn (2012:103) has argued that a new gap has recently opened in between “ever-shifting economic and political realities and the institutions and ideologies we have available to us to cope with these new realities – institutions and ideologies suited to another moment of capitalism and unfit for the present.” How does the present look like in Semarang?

Semarang’s spatial hierarchy of more or less managed areas requires acts of synchronizing with and adapting to water infrastructure or lack thereof. In view of infrastructures become obsolete through neglect and underinvestment, certain people are constantly out of sync,
scrambling to catch up. Residents solve the problem of being out of time through economic and social investments in a meantime. I call these investments ‘building on borrowed time.’ Building houses and communities along the Banger River allows residents to endure life in a declining area. Rob itself is the aftermath of previous developmental interventions, such as colonial projects drying and burying Semarang’s swamp. As Jackson (2014:223) puts it, “above all, repair occupies and constitutes an aftermath, growing at the margins, breakpoints, and interstices of complex sociotechnical systems as they creak, flex, and bend their way through time.” Jackson’s vision of repair suggests that colonialism has left Semarang’s littoral with a legacy: the aftermath of modern destructive construction. As the Dutch-designed drainage system is flexing and leaking its way through time, repairing and maintaining it constitutes a form of borrowing time. This time is borrowed from nature or the swamp and allows an extension of its infrastructures’ life. But like all modern artefacts, this system has an expiry date and capacity limits. The question is where individuals are positioned, in time and space, with regards to the systems’ breakpoints; when flexing and bending reaches a limit.

In Semarang, one important way of borrowing time is to level up or meninggikan. The root word tinggi, which means high or tall, can become an active noun in Indonesian; peninggian. Then, it refers to the increase or elevation of either a material thing, like a road, or an immaterial thing, like temperature. Peninggian has become a central bureaucratic as well as everyday category in Semarang and other coastal cities, such as Jakarta. In my view, it bears an interesting resemblance to and creates a productive tension with another category in Indonesian history and nationalist discourse, namely pembangunan. The meaning of pembangunan vacillates between construction and progress. At some point in Indonesian nationalist imaginary, these meanings became interdependent and even one and the same thing. Pembangunan was particularly dear to Indonesia’s long-time authoritarian president, Suharto, and symbolized the ascent of Indonesia to
a major economic player with global ambitions. On the other hand, peninggian, to many residents, equals “paying a rent to nature” (sewa pada alam). This rent is a composite investment combining public subsidies, donor money, and resident’s own funds. This kind of construction, then, neither accrues wealth nor translates into building, in a modernist sense. Elevating houses and streets does not lead to progress, but captures both residents and landscape in a meantime where future investments just reproduce the present. Peninggian represents recursion and dependence while pembangunan stands for progress and independence. Peninggian has similarity with Jackson’s idea of repair: a necessary act in a world that is falling apart and where (faulty) technology needs constant fixing. As such, I consider an anthropology of infrastructural breakdown and repair as a pressing (pre)meditation on the effects of climate change, an inevitable series of events that will duly test the limits of our modern ecological systems. However, while climate change has yet to develop its full grim potential in Semarang, a question that should be asked at present is why people have to live with chronic problems that in other places would be recognized as crisis?

Tidal flooding, as an unevenly distributed outcome of system failure, further raises questions of eventfulness. What counts as a critical event in Semarang in view of daily inundations that affect neighbourhoods and individuals to highly uneven degrees? After all, Semarang is well known to be prone to floods: the keroncong classic “Semarang, Kaline Banjir” is a sentimental ode to the subject. But unlike banjir, rob has a more obvious “double,” to use Nancy Scheper-Hughes’ term (2005:3): as a regular occurrence in Northern geographies, rob not only affects predominantly the poor but it also triggers “social and political responses to the catastrophe that amplify its disastrous effects to the extent that it is difficult to say which is worse” – the infrastructure breakdown that causes flooding and inherent suffering or the government’s response to it. This thesis grapples with the fact that rob, a result of infrastructural breakdown and socioeconomic inequality, does not cause a radical questioning of both. Rob is instead constituted
as a normality or non-event, an ordinary series of incidents of breakdown. The annual procedure of peninggian captures well the difficulty of imagining an otherwise. This vision of rob as chronic is reflected in bureaucratic cycles (proposal evaluation, budget distribution, surveys) mired in acts of fixing and repairing.

This distinct eventfulness of rob in North Semarang is examined from three angles in this thesis: First, residents underline the importance of autonomy and self-reliance in dealing with regular tidal flooding. They counteract dominant imaginaries of the North as defiant, backwards, and dangerous. While doubting the state’s ability to get a handle on flooding, they seek governmental attention to put into place and improve water infrastructure to overcome this stigma. Second, local activists ‘eventalize’ rob to insert transparency and accountability into state-society relations and get involved in channeling capital into community infrastructure. Their goal is to gain more say in governing the near future outlined in plans. Third, a Dutch-Indonesian anti-flooding project comes to provide a totalizing reading of the present: by mobilizing a crisis discourse, this project evacuates the temporal frame of the near future altogether, along with its multiple arrangements and political (im)balances. It depicts rob as an ecological and political crisis, conjuring up emergency and urgency. Its leadership argues that the drainage system requires a complete overhaul, including its political foundation. As Guyer (2007:410) argues, “to ask what becomes “near” when “near” fades from collective consciousness is to ask about social distance and access as well as conceptual horizons. It is to invoke material and political urgencies as well as time-space schema.” Keeping track of these different operative timeframes, this thesis reveals how different relations to time ultimately get swept up by a dominant time frame, that of river ‘normalization’ as the cure to failing delta infrastructures. Normalization reiterates a colonialist rhetoric of progress (pembangunan) without addressing the suffering-producing meantime.
In Semarang’s North, neither colonial nor post-colonial infrastructural investments serve a clear purpose anymore. Patched up riverbanks and dams, houses and roads, reflect at best a fractured teleology, the aberration of a grand plan. In view of an uncertain future, time has to be constantly borrowed against imminent collapse, while building on this extra time represents a risky venture, since the kampung, as a fragile social and material body, and individuals have to keep up with shifting environmental, infrastructural, political and medical realities. The jalan santai event related above, then, sums up modest but existential aspirations. In the context of recurrent exposure to toxic river water, requiring recurrent cleaning and renovating, caring for the body means caring for the neighbourhood, as a necessary form of exhaustion. In fact, walking events are promoted and encouraged by the sub-district government, which rewards harmonious and self-caring neighbourhoods with small grants as well as promises of material support. This caring is then a strategy that individuals hope-fully embrace. De l’Estoile proposes to consider hope as a “specific mode of coping with precariousness” (2014: S71). More specifically, Baxstrom (2012:144) has shown that in Kuala Lumpur’s Brickfields individual planning in the face of existential fragility not only introduces order into complex worlds, but also serves as an instrument of expressing hope in the present. Self-care is a strategy and an expression of hope.

As such, hope and self-care are expressed in individual and collective plans or “social projects” at the neighbourhood level that produce and reproduce the conditions of endurance necessary to survive in a flooding zone. Povinelli thinks of social projects as “activities of fixing and co-substantiating phenomena, aggregating and assembling disparate elements into a common form and purpose. The word ‘project’ means to convey the constant nature of such building as well as the constant tinkering with plan, draft, and scheme as the building is being made, maintained, and remade out of disparate materials.” Povinelli situates such projects in a “set of
dominant patterns.” These sets are “tinkered with and revised,” local materials and conditions permitting (Povinelli 2011:238). In Kemijen, residents depend on such social projects. This thesis pays attention to specific local projects. Especially, I show how the logic of borrowing time comes to re-appropriate communal and individual labour, which are enshrined in official kampung narratives, such as gotong-royong and kerja bakti).

One such dominant project is river normalization, a state-led project that was supposed to bring progress, modernity, and national unity to Indonesia. Since the New Order, it pervades plans at different levels of government. In Indonesia’s New Order (1965-1998), poor neighbourhoods in the North and the city’s representational spaces located in the city center drifted apart, economically and geologically. Indonesia’s economic boom produced gaping social inequality and Semarang’s littoral areas began to decline under the pressure of urban densification. Siegel observed how the rakyat (the people or the masses) felt in the New Order era as if the centre of power was dissolving. Under the first president, Sukarno, that is, they had been an integral part of the polity – an acknowledged symbolic and practical pillar of nation-making. Decentralization, the political motto of the Reformasi era, put the nail in the coffin: while it opened new political spaces of competition and self-governance, it also diverted economic and ecological responsibilities to local communities. The quest for recognition and symbolic reintegration into the body politic of the nation finds expression in recent attempts by kampung dwellers to become examples of good environmental conduct. State programs’ emphasis on the future heralds the role of the ‘grassroots’ (akar rumput).

Considering the development agendas of Indonesia’s current government, this dissertation tells the story of a marginalized neighbourhood located in the Northeast of Semarang whose residents have to hold on to the promise of progress and salvation, despite feeling abandoned by the state for decades. Building on borrowed time to outlast the present expresses both nostalgia
for early utopian state projects and hope for at least some kind of improvement.

Things have been decidedly worse, as people say with a tone of solace. In fact, unlike other coastal areas, Kemijen has been attracting growing governmental and media attention over the past ten years. This attention resulted in development initiatives that, although not boosting the local economy, might help redress the negative image of the area. Observing these changes, many residents hope that development will imbue the area with an aura of safety and prosperity. Throughout modern history, that is, the wetlands of the North are considered as a problem zone, inhabited by unruly, ‘black’, societal elements who resist regulation and hinder improvement. Then, in 2005, Kemijen, which lies on the banks of the Banger River, was selected as one of eleven participants in a Dutch anti-flooding pilot project. Suddenly, Kemijen was the stuff of political talk both locally and at a national scale. According to the head of Semarang’s Water Agency (PSDA) (cited in Suara Merdeka, June 2016), the president himself is concerned about the future of Semarang’s coastal neighbourhoods. Moreover, at the time of writing, an art collective called Hysteria is collaborating with locals to recover the history of Kemijen and get the neighbourhood’s name “on the map” even more. This sustained situation allows residents to imagine a reintegration into future state plans. What put this sub-district on the map of Indonesian policy-makers, politicians, and journalists, is Java’s ongoing rob crisis. Many cities on Java’s northern shore, such as Pekalongan or Cirebon, experience unusually high tides that inundate littoral settlements. Their plight is less known than the flooding problems of Indonesia’s capital, Jakarta, whose struggle with flooding dominate both international development discourse and research (Texier 2009; Van Voorst 2015). By analyzing the everyday experience of rob, I show that as imaginaries of scope and significance of this story emerge from less central places, pervading provincial and municipal meeting rooms, national priorities and local ambitions coalesce into distinct plans and reinforce each other. In fact, while researchers often turn to Jakarta
to study flooding, I believe that building an understanding of flooding in the political and spatial periphery of the capital can enlighten us to the role that the margin plays in shaking and reproducing dominant social projects in contemporary Indonesia.

In sum, tidal flooding in Semarang offers a unique ethnographic window on differential relationships with time as a resource, privilege, and stuff of hopeful social projects. Today, in the face of climate change, people are often marked out by development projects as potential future victims based on their position in (atmospheric) time as understood by institutions: how long before an island vanishes from the map; how can we slow down global warming through carbon taxes and renewable energies? Climate change, here, acts as something with clear timelines that explains peoples’ plans and their futures, it is not the thing to be explained. Instead, I suggest being open to alternative scenarios by focusing on the “nesting of temporalities and their relative emphasis and mutual entailment for different populations” (Guyer 2007:413). I adapt this focus to underline the perhaps obvious: that urgency is experienced differently. In many places of North Semarang, the rate of land subsidence easily outpaces the effects of climatic changes. The acts of borrowing time relate to distinct local structures of time articulated in plans, infrastructures, and everyday life rhythms (which doesn’t mean of course that these structures cannot be influenced by global processes). This thesis offers different and speculative epistemologies or ways of apprehending the contemporary transformations by zooming in on state-society relations, practices of infrastructural care, and temporalities of planning. I thus follow Whitington’s (2013) call for a speculative materialism in an era of accelerating anthropogenic changes which he defines as “practices of reasoning that are expansive and pluralizing” as opposed to unifying and universalizing reasoning. Speculative materialism does not consider climate changes a generic cause, but asks how this disaster unfolds through a “definite set of real relationships” (Whitington 2013:311).
In 2007, Jane Guyer wrote an article on the interaction of prophetic and neoliberal temporality, a process which, according to Guyer, causes an evacuation of the ‘near future.’ Guyer defines the near future as the “reach of thought and imagination, of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals.” Reaching via imagination, as a practice of ‘reasoning,’ allows individuals to implicate themselves in the “ongoing life of the social and material world” (Guyer 2007: 409). Guyer argues that social ruptures have led to the evaporation of this level of reasoning in theory and public representation. The near future has been replaced by religious and neoliberal visions of time which are far more totalizing in scope. In a response to Guyer’s article, Richard Wilk (2007) points out that such totalizing accounts of time in fact exist not only in the religious sphere. “There are many other institutions and cultural arenas that count and materialize time, projecting particular pasts into the future,” as Wilk (441) adds, calling attention to “fashion, mass entertainment, travel and tourism, museums, literature (particularly science fiction), education, and medicine.” All these institutions seem to evacuate the near future, that is, they wear away or remove the process of implicating oneself in public life and its material making. Wilk (id.) specifically draws attention to social institutions that manage risk “to anticipate all threats, to hold decay and disorder at bay.” While these institutions try to impose specific, all-encompassing accounts of time, Wilk understands the future also as an arena in which people with different and contradictory perceptions of social and historical inevitability compete. Visions for the future may thus coexist, since the predictability of futures always stays partial. Wilk and Guyer agree that visions of time are contested and that grand classifications of modernism, such as Jameson’s “end of history,” do not serve anthropologists whose analytical task is to bring to light the “small ruptures” in subjects’ lives. In other words, there is an empirical world in between the “ideological and pedagogic texts and media forms that instruct people about
living in these times” and peoples’ responses to and interferences with them. What I retain from Guyer, and Wilk’s response to her, is an interest in the projection of structures of time into individuals’ lives. To study the government of time in the face of infrastructural and material breakdown requires an attention to institutional frameworks of time and how they play out at the local level; how people resist or adapt to them. In the following, I will introduce a theoretical approach to the government of time that, while it was developed outside of anthropology, refers to processes that share similarity with near-future evacuation.

Eric Cazdyn considers time as “a privileged path to understanding our present moment” (2012:14). He reveals processes by which institutionalized movements try to measure and shape time as the capitalist “world-system reconfigures and institutions, corporate, national, and ideological, struggle to keep pace” (id.:101). For example, by affording the means to prolong and sustain life, medicine has successfully filled out the gap between the present and future. Based on medicine’s advances in prophylactic and palliative treatment, Cazdyn has diagnosed contemporary society with “having entered something like a new chronic mode, a mode of time that cares little for terminality or acuteness… so monotonous and stripped of urgency is this mode of experience that there is little reason to agonize, as long as the pain is managed and the possibility of any future change is repressed” (id. 13-14). This mode of time, which he calls the chronic, suggests that breakdown and disease are something normal, even banal, and that it can be managed, especially if diagnosed in a timely fashion. In this chronic mode, the risk of crisis is calculable and manageable (see also Beck 1992; Dean 1998; De L’Estoile 2014). But this risk never fully disappears in the worlds created by neoliberal capitalism. Crisis has simply lost its acuteness, failing to elicit on-the-spot responses from institutions. Moreover, the question is not whether crisis will occur but when. Cazdyn’s theorization of time as punctured by crisis, for instance, touches on ecology. As a key domain of capitalist value production, he argues,
ecological arrangements are structured in ways that must result in crisis and disaster. However, crises only serve to strengthen and reproduce the capitalist system which is programmed to be deficient. Ecological disasters are quite predictable from the viewpoint of the chronic. As Cazdyn points out, experts knew exactly what would happen if the New Orleans levees broke (see also Mike Davis’ discussion of San Francisco’s intimate relationship with seismic disaster in “Ecologies of Fear”). Instead of tackling systemic problems, we learn to live with nuisance. Cazdyn associates this attitude towards disaster with dominant ideologies of life and death: “once the malady is identified and understood, we can adjust ourselves to its presence” (2012:68). What capitalism thus needs is a cultural configuration that expects, anticipates, and plans for specific crises. In fact, symptomatic of this configuration is that, today, we easily confuse the terms crisis, disaster, and revolution. The function and effects of these rhetorical categories have shifted, “thus emptying disaster, crisis, and revolution of the transcendental force we usually invest in them” (2007:648). Crisis today merely demands of institutions that adjustments be made to take the edge off instability, as to enable a sense of continuity.

While Cazdyn mainly reflects on the issue of time in light of advances in contemporary medicine, he extends this time to other domains of life governed by various institutions. Instead of accepting an incurable state, governments, for example, devise treatments (bank bailouts, social reforms) that allow for minimum social stability. I find his theory concerning the experience of time through life-sustaining technology and diagnostics to be useful in thinking about the present situation of residents of coastal neighbourhoods in Semarang. The government claims to provide infrastructure and the means for progress to the North to solve its socio-ecological problems, such as rob and water contamination. Yet, residents are dealing with the breakdown of infrastructural systems on a daily basis, facing regularly the spatial contradictions of drainage plans and infrastructural improvement projects. They are confronted with the “inevitable gap between what
is attempted and what is accomplished” (Li 2007:1) by development schemes. Therefore, providing infrastructure, for example to reinstate water flow, has become a natural, remedial response to increasingly frequent tidal flooding events. At the local level, infrastructuring often interferes with the government’s official representations of the future that is inherent in the construction of dams, canals, etc. These interferences are not only occurring at the intersection of state and local society, thus neatly demarcating these spheres, but extend into the government’s very bureaucratic apparatus. Semarang’s government spends large parts of its annual budget on raising and repairing streets – expenses that lead nowhere. While infrastructure embodies a dominant, nation-centered vision of time that advocates investment in material structures as a means to achieve progress and modernity (Barker 2005), we should also appreciate infrastructure’s function as a mere placeholder for such a future. While some actors actually recognize this placeholder role of infrastructure, as I will show, they for the most part don’t see an alternative to constant infrastructural repair. My point is that the incompleteness of an expansive infrastructural future means that the near future is never fully evacuated in the chronic. Rather, breakdown (of water or human immune systems) leads to individual or more coordinated efforts that are deeply concerned with the present and near future planning. I ask with Cazdyn (2012:103): what role do humans play in relation to the system, “as both creators of its logic and victims of its effects?”

The “will to improve” is stubborn, Li (2007:1) says, but “it is no mystical geist or teleology.” It is expressed in rather mundane, banal ways. I see her “will to improve” as the expression of a governance of time that does not evacuate but increasingly colonizes the near future. The attitude “we can’t just give up” is precisely a reflection of the constant need to address and manage crisis as a result of failing development programs. In this chronic present, programs of development agencies simply cannot “expand the possibilities for thinking critically about what is and what
“Development as practice,” as Thomas (2000:774) has shown, becomes a way of constantly administering partial solutions instead of addressing the root causes of problems: “Indeed, liberal capitalism is so dominant that there appears to be no question of wholesale social transformation in any other direction. As a result, development appears no longer to be mainly about the transformation of the economic and social basis of societies, and is now often thought of in terms of dealing with problems rather than searching for grand alternatives.”

The title of this thesis, “Building on Borrowed Time,” then, refers to a specific mode of endurance and survival, in which infrastructure development forms an essential condition of life – medication, if you will – as it affords time. Borrowing time reduces the intensity of ongoing hardship. Despite being marginalized and discriminated against on the grounds of inhabiting the northern wetlands – a neglected area that turned contaminated – it is here that people have constructed houses and built families and continue to do so. The swampy grounds on which their houses stand have been particularly lethal throughout Semarang’s history. At the beginning of the 20th century, epidemics rotted out whole villages, while child mortality rates stayed relatively high throughout colonial times. Today, inhabitants are not only exposed to tidal flooding due to water infrastructure that was supposed to drain the swamp but is now obsolete, they also suffer from disproportionately high levels of airborne lead and particulates. In this toxic environment, people have learned to build the material scaffolding of a precarious existence.

I argue further that plans with competing notions of the future can be imposed especially on marginalized subjects who inhabit vulnerable areas. While the constant concern with the present makes planning the future difficult, development plans (for example, Indonesia’s five-year development plans, regularly revised master plans, or periodically changed drainage regulations)

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2 Perhaps this piecemeal management approach is not unique to capitalism and happened under socialist regimes as well.
continue to introduce new visions of the future that actors have to work with. Drawing together the description of a chronic that deals with the question of the near future and colonizes time through crisis management, this thesis investigates how breakdown becomes a field of action in which both local administration and citizens engage. It is an exercise of keeping multiple temporalities in a productive tension. This attention allows to actualize anthropology’s own epistemologies of time: claims that climate change is a global challenge and an existential one for certain populations can galvanize action but should not disregard other modes of counting and measuring time that are affecting individuals’ lives. Climate change is not the only way of framing the future (of coastal cities). Specifically, as I show, the differential life spans of (water and residential) infrastructures influence the experience of time by looming over the present and expanding it.

To explain how the chronic works in Semarang, I need to make the relationship between time and breakdown clearer. Elizabeth Povinelli’s notion of quasi-events allows us to rethink eventfulness and how it is built into the liberal economies of nation-states. She points to generalized distributions of risk that posit specific crises as quasi-events; a type of crisis that puts a repeated strain on the lives of subjects without essentially disrupting it. Povinelli (2011:4) frames the suffering of marginalized subjects in liberal economies as a series of quasi-events through which their lives digress into a “form of death that can be certified as due to the vagary of ‘natural causes’.” This is a kind of “dispersed suffering,” as she argues. Accountable predicament, as such, arises from specific arrangements of social tense that determine action in relation to dominant temporal structures. These arrangements, according to Povinelli, encompass human sociality, different kinds of material, and non-human forces (id.:7).

With regard to one such arrangement, infrastructure, Larkin (2016) has argued that dysfunction actualizes the relationship between the state and society. If a switch doesn’t work, a
pumping house remains unmanned, a riverbank collapses, a whole range of feelings, such as frustration and nostalgia, can arise. As such, the failure of infrastructures and its fixes can allow for a “new esthetic experience of the present.” If riparian residents realize “we need this,” they may decide to “reclaim the deadweight” of systems that have become obsolete, thus reclaiming autonomy from the state. In Semarang, it is thus often unclear who is the author of infrastructure: the state, the local community, or even a private firm? Local residents often engage in relationships with a variety of available actors that provide funding for repair and maintenance, which occasions a promiscuous maintenance and provision of infrastructure. Povinelli reminds us, even if such improvised arrangements or ‘social projects’ of fixing indicate forms of resistance, such projects not voluntary. These new aggregate forms (of social and technological life) are exposed to multiple stresses and often last only for brief moments. Instead of “making anything like a definitive event occur in the world,” (2011:10) projects often short-circuit; they can thus be understood as “efforts,” in an individual and collective sense, to endure ongoing structural harm. Efforts mostly fail to disrupt the temporalities of dominant social projects, yet exist as an ethnographic reality that demands our attention. In the context of my thesis, these dominant projects are participatory local development and infrastructural modernization.

From within contexts of stagnation due to failing infrastructures and shortage of resources, I show in this thesis, projects can emerge that agitate and divert (water) structures. Projects, like stacked bricks and purchases of neighbourhood pumps, always seem to pile up, but not in a conducive way. They end up demanding exhaustible attention from bodies and resources already stretched thin. Povinelli usefully draws attention to a rarely accounted for “violence of enervation” that can lead to bottomless exhaustion. The ways in which forms of eventfulness distribute the feel of enervation and endurance explains why certain individuals’ suffering never ‘shows’ or, alternatively, is taken for granted. Following Povinelli, I am thus interested in the “modes of
exhaustion and endurance that are ordinary, chronic rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime” (2011:132). In this kind of present, individuals have no choice but to embrace the cruddy texture of everyday life, that is, to make deals, hustle, renovate, and repair.

In this thesis, the suffering of inhabitants of certain estuarine neighbourhoods suddenly turns into a wider political issue, and new considerations, such as river pollution and participatory water management, play an important role in this process. A Dutch-Indonesian anti-flooding project resituates flooding within larger ecological and urban processes and seeks to address it through a polder for the people (“dry feet for all”). Yet, I reveal that this project ends up reproducing the chronic status quo and reinforcing structures that further narrow the choices of coastal dwellers. This case also demonstrates that in the chronic present development projects follow no specific goal, but mainly serve the purpose of solving problems and sustaining life at a bare minimum.

Breakdown and Quasi-Events

Crisis is a ubiquitous topic in social science these days. Truly, crisis has never been discussed as much as today in anthropology (think Greek crisis, financial crisis, refugee crisis etc.). Anthropologists grapple with various crises and draw creatively on different analytical toolkits in doing so (Roitman & Mbembe 1995; Vigh 2008). Narotzky and Besnier (2014:4), for instance, contend that “crisis refers to structural processes generally understood to be beyond the control of people but simultaneously expressing people’s breach of confidence in the elements that provided relative systemic stability and reasonable expectations for the future.” The sheer force of moments of crisis, they posit, erodes structures and can sow apprehension. In response, people innovate practices and institutions to deal with temporary uncertainty. I can sympathize with this view. For example, I show that flood water represents a negative space-time (Munn
that calls on residents to act.\textsuperscript{3} Reactions to floods, such as raising streets and houses, cleaning the river and neighbourhood, abound in my field site and arguably throughout coastal Java. Yet, they rarely produce lasting relief. Further, what exactly would a material structure look like that could provide systemic stability in Kemijen? Infrastructure does not exactly introduce certainty – depending on the quality of concrete, it has an unruly, unpredictable materiality with which residents synchronize everyday life. Residents welcome riverbank lifts and road improvement, but don’t expect such interventions to solve the problem in the long-term. While riverbanks are supposed to signify tamed water, such symbolic links have come to harbour uncertainty as well, with seeping and collapsing riverbanks being constant reminders of the arbitrariness of the lived world (De Boeck 2005:28). And the government, as a potential form of superstructure, does not seem trustworthy to residents, either. It does not symbolize continuity. Cracks in cement recently poured by government-hired contractors rather produce mistrust. The messy interplay of seasons and crumbling infrastructure plays into fears of flooding, forcing people to be prepared for the worst at all times. And yet, residents don’t see the present in terms of crisis. Recurrent breakdown describes the situation more accurately.

Reducing crisis to an interplay of structural and subjective forces in fact forecloses an investigation of discursive forces and different modes of time. As Roitman (2013) has shown in her book programmatically entitled “Anti-Crisis,” crisis-talk is imbricated with power and authority. For example, after the 2008 financial crash, subprime trading was quickly indicted for causing ineffable suffering, while it used and continues to be a well-established fact – an entirely

\textsuperscript{3} Munn has underlined the embeddedness of sociocultural practices in spatiotemporal systems. Going beyond Giddens’ view that time-space relations are organizing features of societies, she argues that subjects’ practices also create their own space-time (Munn 1992: 10-11): “Not only do the agents produce their world in a particular form, but they may also be seen as producing themselves or aspects of themselves in the same process” (11). This dialectical understanding of time is today a mainstay of geography and anthropology of how space and time structure life worlds.
mundane practice. Relating the subprime crisis to reckless trading obscures a systemic configuration and a mode of existence that harbours high risks. Roitman argues that analytical purchase is gained by considering crisis as a secondary observation of events. Relying on Luhmann’s theory of social systems, she reminds us that all social systems are self-referential and reproduce themselves by encoding their environment in a language that is specific to them. When encoding a given historical moment as crisis, a system self-consciously demarcates the present from the previous moment through autopoiesis (see Gershon 2005). Crisis can be identified and appropriate measures can be taken without ever having to address flaws in other social systems, such as the economy or government, and let alone the ways in which they interact with each other. This view of crisis gets us closer to questions of power and temporality. Often, powerful figures attempt to imprint their interpretation of critical events on history to usher in change. When George W. Bush compared the post-Katrina situation to a state of exception, he discounted segregation and poverty as playing an essential role in the making of the disaster while legitimizing the deployment of special armed forces. I show that claiming that the system is in crisis is what the Dutch supporters of the community-run polder system do. I speak to this particular assessment of crisis in the last chapter and show the processes that this evaluation sets in motion. The project treats recurrent problems with water and pollution in a way that casts flooding as a result of systemic crisis. It argues that both the local administration and residents engage in an ineffective, piecemeal way of responding to this breakdown. This crisis assessment introduces a new vision of time into the lives of vulnerable individuals. These visions do not address the ‘meantime,’ that is, they do not validate individual projects of endurance as ingenuous responses to chronic breakdown. These efforts are framed as quasi-events. I argue thus that the meantime remains a temporary location devoid of political mobility, despite the bottom-up design of the polder project.
Cazdyn argues that the chronic has turned the meantime into a permanent condition, thereby allowing the present to colonize the future. If we witness the emergence of a new time of politics that leads to the expansion of the meantime, one important question should be: who is “rolling [the meantime] out flat all the way to the indefinite ‘long term’” (Cazdyn 2012:47)? In other words, what are the institutions that (try to) introduce the long term in plans and maps, in regulations and policies? One could argue that development politics inherited such a thinking from colonialism (Ferguson 2005). A developmental timeframe still inheres in global capitalism which ferociously configures time through “spatial fixes” (Harvey 2001). Cazdyn’s vision of global capitalism as well as his theory of the chronic, however, are not grounded in ethnographic material. Just how the present sets about colonizing the future is not spelled out clearly in his work.

I employ a notion of the meantime that is slightly different from Cazdyn’s, in order to build more ethnographic complexity and nuance into the analysis of the government of time. Sarah Sharma’s investigation of time (2014) invites us to resist stereotypical qualifications of time – often thought to ‘speed up’ or ‘become global.’ According to Sharma, we require “more complex insights into the politics of time and space ushered in by global capitalism” (Sharma 2014:3-4). As such, we require an awareness of power relations as they play out in time. Spaces, by virtue of their imbrication with technologies, and materialities, bring together “multiple interdependent and relational temporalities” that reveal a tangle of individual threads. Global flows of people, goods, and ideas are often thought to produce a streamlining and homogenization that anthropology has long tried to nuance (Wilk 1995) or rejected outright (Friedman 2002). Disjunction, fragmentation, and discrepancy, as we know now, are always part of social becoming (see Appadurai 1990). Accordingly, for Sharma, peoples’ itineraries and practices represent
“discrepant forms of labor constituted in time in a variety of inequitable ways” (Sharma 2014:5). This complexity of lived time is often absent from contemporary attempts to understand historical shifts. Following Sharma, I ask what temporalities exist in a “grid of temporal power relations.” To understand this grid, Sharma explores differential moral economies that are rhythmed to the cadence of structures of power. How does the latter narrow or broaden individuals’ and social groups’ senses of time and possibility (id.:9)?

By describing experiences of and representations of time in five chapters – ‘becoming,’ ‘stuck,’ ‘floating,’ ‘figuring’ and ‘promise’ – this thesis explores the divergent temporalities of individuals, institutions, infrastructures, and events. I show how the chronic materializes in landscapes and practices, imbuing discourse and identities with its seeping logic. I examine the relations between the chronic and the quasi-events of infrastructural projects and breakdown. By juxtaposing the local time of chronic adaptation, an ethnographically rich site where visions of time contend, to dominant projects, their dynamic interrelation becomes palpable. The meantime is a form of reality in which individuals and the productive arrangements they inhabit are in a relatively flexible state. Yet, as I will show, the relationships with these arrangements are involuntary and politically limited. They seem unfit to stay in place for sustained periods of time. The meantime, then, shows how time is “worked on and differentially experienced at the intersections of inequity” (id.:14).

Sharma considers the very act of giving a meaning to time as a form of micro-management – a technology of self. The fixation over the control of time, so Sharma argues, “tends to leave [certain] individuals more vulnerable to bio-political power.” Various institutions can take over and begin to optimize and intensify peoples’ productive forces, “through both disinvestments and investments.” (id.:18). Capitalism, in this sense, needs a government of time that sets up more and more sites for the institutions of modern power, which in turn shape subjects in increasingly
invasive and inequitable ways. We see specific temporal regimes and strategic dispositions developing that “are cultivated in order to simply survive within the normalizing temporal ordering of everyday life” (id.:20). Such temporal regimes and strategic dispositions exist at the level of the kampung, as I show. Kemijen has been invaded by institutions of modern power, albeit more or less successfully. The rob crisis imaginary, by framing coastal residents as endangered, is an opportunity for neoliberal bio-politics to set forth its normalizing work. In 2014, unprecedented attention to Kemijen forced residents to inhabit relations with the state and its temporal horizons of development in new ways: governing schemes ‘empowered’ local councils and encouraged participation, while discriminating against idiosyncratic, that is untimely, investments in infrastructure. These fragmented municipal investments allowed for communities’ survival, as they funneled assets into the area and repaired the technological artifacts of colonial and postcolonial infrastructuring. Residents rightfully remained skeptical about public development programs, participating to varying degrees, while paying minute attention to arrangements of infrastructure, nature, and projects. The feeling of being ‘stuck’ in a hardening world is a direct outcome of a state intervention that undid many residential arrangements while introducing a life around broken infrastructure that needs constant repair. ‘Floating’ is, then, the result of residential efforts to synchronize with the inequitable effects of breakdown. Through public grants and private donations, the buoyancy of hundreds of urban communities throughout the North is preserved, for now. However, this buoyancy depends on increasing synchronization with dominant, that is, institutional rhythms and political culture. In the view of Semarang’s government, the highest priority is to replace peoples’ fragmentary interventions into water systems with a new standard of flood protection – that of streamlined polder technology. Constructing a polder is supposed to equip littoral communities with the timeless model of (democratic) Dutch water management. While Dutch water management suggests a “sociological
terra nova” of flood prevention, it ends up reproducing the chronic mode of life.

Cazdyn underlines that the overarching logic of the chronic does not mean that it is eternal or universal; rather, he claims that this logic of time is specific to the present moment of global capitalism. I date the beginning of the chronic in Semarang to ‘river normalization’ which began in the mid-1980s. More specifically, the uneven development of the North set the stage – the material relations – which made chronic management necessary. This is the context of the unfolding of the Dutch-Indonesian anti-flood polder system. The latter, I argue, ends up producing another meantime by installing a hydraulic system whose existence is threatened by ruination in view of galloping land subsidence.

The Swamp, the Kampung, and the Margin

“Something else stands out with this amphibiousness and that is the role in world history of people who live in swamps and adapt to the changing water levels at the mouths of great rivers. Much of world history includes such people, just as much of world history can be summed up as the drainage of vast wetlands and building of dykes against rivers and oceans. While a romanticized nomadism as a trope has caught the eye of many Deleuzians, the swamp people of world history seem predestined to invisibility. None of that wild movement on swift horses across the deserts and plains. Just vicious mosquitoes, sludge and wetness and kids making sandcastles on the sandy streets of riverbank villages in the dry season, awash with water and glue-like mud in the wet.” (Taussig 2015:63)

Although Kemijen’s kampungs are not officially slums, they are built in a ‘slum geology.’ According to Mike Davis (2007:121), a hazardous, health-threatening location is the geographical definition of a slum. Slum inhabitants are often exposed to extreme environmental conditions. They must come up with social and cultural strategies to survive in the face of heightened ecological vulnerability (Bankoff 2003:231). Throughout Semarang’s history, the coastal swamplands have been such a hazardous location. Yet, according to Michael Taussig quoted above, despite braving the elements of a volatile environment, swamp people seem predestined to invisibility. It seems difficult to romanticize, that is, appreciate, swamp life. The constant adapting
to changing water levels at the outlets of rivers, the labour required to keep houses, floors, and feet out of the sludge, has not been a central concern of anthropologists studying Semarang or other cities. I was confronted with this problem when I tried to capture the swamp: there are no photographs of Semarang’s coastal kampungs from the colonial period, or they remain to be found by a person with better archival research skills. In fact, large parts of Semarang’s swamp have been bulldozed over and filled-in. What exactly are the esthetic registers and epistemologies with which we appreciate human existence and world-making projects in the swamp? I propose to consider the swamp as a marginal space – both in geographical and epistemological terms. It is a place in constant transformation, evolving at the behest of infrastructural landscape-making projects in which its inhabitants play diverse but rarely directive roles.

Modern water infrastructure, such as pumps and riverbanks, which suppress the swamp (Giblett 1996), as well as the sociological and economic composition of Kemijen’s kampungs complicate a comparison between the swamp and the slum. Wealth, reflected in car ownership or the size of wedding ceremonies in Semarang, is unequally distributed. While showing the characteristics of a ‘slum’ throughout Semarang’s history, my field site was often portrayed by residents as transcending just that: as a space in transition, where promising examples of development and change were fomenting. Residents’ desires to transform the area were expressed in civil engagement in projects of cleaning and depolluting; relatively strong participation in community-based state programs; and esthetic as well as economic investments in individual property. For example, many neighbourhood groups organized pumping communities (pompanisasi) to prevent rob that operated within a traditional framework of communal caring.

The contradictions in such representations of the area have a great deal to do with rob. Underneath heaps of concrete and multiple layers of dirt – still – lurks the swamp. Tidal flooding and regular Monsoon floods, polluting vital kampung infrastructure, can reinforce the swamp
image which haunts Kemijen. Rob is a potent transformative agent, when it is interpreted as threat. Rob signals the persistence of Kemijen’s swamp geology and its imagined undesired elements – squatters and gangsters. Infrastructural labour is a kind of affective investment in the future of the kampung, I argue, as it prevents the community’s relapse into morally dangerous sluggishness. Therefore, I described forms of state-exacted and affective urban swamp labour in this section that, while being underexposed in the anthropology of urban Indonesia, transformed and continue to transform Kemijen, a marginal place in social, political, and spatial terms. Existing literature on the kampung allows me to interpret this labour as strategy to endure and overcome marginality and water-related problems. I will turn to this literature now to conceptualize relations between Kemijen’s residents, the state, and development agencies.

Pioneer settlers of Semarang’s swamp had to put up with malaria and other epidemics while living under colonial tutelage, which effectively dispossessed them of land, barred access to resources (e.g. agriculture and water), and forced them into wage labour (see first chapter). Today’s downstream communities continue to be disproportionately exposed to health risks related to environmental pollution. Yet, drainage technology, embankments, and dykes have changed the area profoundly, fashioning a concrete edge into the landscape and allowing for the expansion of a modern transportation network (roads and railway) into the former swamp. Due to being fragmentary, (public and private) infrastructure investments have turned the area into a frontier of urbanization. As I argued above, it is from this nexus of materialities that rob – as reminder of the swamp – started emerging. I suggest that transforming the swamp in positive ways

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4 I noticed how unwelcome the slum label was when speaking with residents about the recent increase in registered HIV cases in Semarang. While illnesses related to water supply, waste disposal, and garbage (digestive-tract diseases arising from poor sanitation and the pollution of drinking water that constitute 75% of the illnesses that afflict humans worldwide, according to Davis) are feared, they are ‘normal’ aspects of kampung life. Digestive diseases, moreover, can be treated ever since antibiotics have become available to most residents regardless of income. People wish to “ignore” HIV, because it is a highly stigmatized disease. Most residents refuse to educate themselves about it and disregard the calls from neighbourhood leaders to get tested, as the virus is associated with impure and morally degraded places – the port and its illegal settlements.
depended on being included in the imagined community of the state through a process of “strategic misrecognition.” This idea, articulated by Bowen (1986), refers to the role that state-sanctioned, cultural forms of kampung organization and labour played in founding the Indonesian nation-state. After being officially recognized in 1949, the Indonesian state tried to extend a system of political and cultural power to all its citizens. Subordinating the kampung to the state required the inclusion of state cultural representations in intervention strategies (Bowen 1986). These interventions were often framed by gotong-royong, an instantiation of Indonesian state philosophy that he translates as “mutual assistance” (id.:545). Gotong-royong, as a local system of reciprocity, defines “obligations of the individual toward the community, the propriety of power, and the relation of state authority to traditional social and political structures.” As a “cultural-ideological instrument,” gotong-royong defined the relation that kampung communities entertained with the center of power. While depoliticizing the kampung, that is, distancing it “from the rest of the state machinery” (Sullivan 1986:85), gotong-royong endowed the kampung, the outcast of the colonial city, with a new status. Vice versa, the government expected kampung residents’ “voluntary” engagement in state projects. Bowen identified a form of historical gotong-royong labour that resembled corvée⁵ – forced labour on mostly public infrastructure. It was such labour that allowed and continues to allow for the effective transformation of the swamp into a ‘dry’ space showing the potential to properly become modern. But ‘misrecognizing’ forced labour for cultural duty also helped develop a legitimate governing structure from within the swamp that was in line with the cultural norms of the state. In other words, draining the swamp and modernizing it, as an “outward conformity to state demands,” was a condition of becoming a member of the “imagined community” of the nation (Anderson 1983).

⁵ Bowen acknowledges that gotong royong existed before independence. He argues that the Indonesian state, however, relied in unprecedented ways on the exaction of affective and unpaid material labour.
Drawing on Sullivan’s analysis of affective kampung labour in Yogyakarta, I hold that infrastructural repair as well as kampung beautification efforts not only relieved the state of important expenses but also fostered a sense of community. While not being properly voluntary (or *sukarela*), this type of affective labour made the swamp into a concrete and legitimate space, through filling in and hardening out its marshy shallows. Gotong-royong created not only the cultural foundation (that is, legitimacy) of the Northern kampung, but literally its geo-ontological foundation. As Newberry (2008) has further argued, kampung communities are a form of spatial organization of labour. In turn, specific forms of toiling in the swamp aim to (re)produce the kampung.

Today, unpaid “community” labour, often referred to as *kerja bakti*, is coordinated by various actors that facilitate infrastructural repair, often through the cultural rhetoric of gotong-royong. I will briefly introduce them. A description of this nexus of actors offers up a sociological picture of the kampung as well as the relations of power that embed the kampung in structures of national and global governance. As such, this actor network is far from stable. Instead, this thesis’ description of ecological transformation attests to corresponding organizational, institutional, and cultural changes. Notably, the fourth chapter portrays unprecedented administrative and governing relations that emerge between residents, the state, and international development agencies, namely through the proliferation of NGO and public-private infrastructure projects.

As described above, Sullivan (1986) has shown the doubled nature of neighbourhoods in Java: they are both a de facto administrative organ of the modern Indonesian state and expressions of ‘traditional’ communal forms. These conceptions of the neighbourhood are, however, commonly folded into the single term kampung. Sullivan argued that this is “largely the result of a state-engineered misconception” of the neighbourhood as a culturally bounded realm. If taken as a literal entity, the so-called *rukun tetangga* (RT), which translates as group of “friendly
neighbours,” may be characterized as an urban neighbourhood typically composed of 20 to 40 households. Usually, one member is elected to represent each RT to an umbrella organization which is made up of several RT, the *Rukun Warga* (RW) or “community group.” Designed for the efficient administration of society, stretching all the way up to the provinces and ultimately the nation, the RT/RW (or kampung) system corresponds to a system of government at the local scale that has, over time, gained a sense of traditional cultural authenticity. In Indonesia, all neighbourhoods are made up of RTs and RWs. As self-regulating bodies, they play an important role in governing urban populations all over Indonesia.

In addition to this governing role, it has been argued that RTs foster “neighbourly cooperation” and a sense of community (Guinness 2009, 12–13). In Kemijen, drainage is a way of practicing community. Sullivan warns against a plain economic interpretation of social cohesion within neighbourhood groups. He describes them as cells, or even “closely knit families”, which “pool and divide labour to accomplish diverse tasks: household chores, home repairs, child minding, caring for the sick and disabled, shopping, and much else” (Sullivan 1986:73). Such transactions are not merely rational responses to often “bitter need,” but go hand in hand with sharing of “human warmth, hopes, fears, sorrows, and joys” (id.:75). In 2001 and 2004, the RT/RW system underwent changes in the wake of political reforms that were supposed to democratize local governance throughout Indonesia (Bunnell et al. 2013). The RT/RW system was thought to perpetuate social inequality and undermine development programs by allowing certain individuals to monopolize authority at the intersections of local administration and village sovereignty. For instance, one of my research participants, Arief, was the first democratically elected head of a community group in the wake of local democratization programs. Before he

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6 This is an incomplete portrayal of kampung communities throughout Indonesia. Some kampungs are more fractured and transient than Sullivan
became the head of the community, a man had held the position for twenty consecutive years. Arief strongly promoted the traditional values of community work, as outlined by Sullivan, and often underlined citizens’ responsibility to perform local labour. As I will demonstrate in the second chapter, he himself took daily labour as practice of Islamic worship (ibadah) and in the name of the neighbourhood very seriously. He cleaned the drain and road and maintained the community’s communal pump. Drains and roads, as Sullivan showed, are “foci of communal sentiment: hard evidence of neighborship. They help to confirm the existence and value of community for each member” (1986:79). While community leaders often function in their capacity as de facto state officials, they may have an ambiguous relationship with the local administration. Arief often distanced himself from state projects. He asserted that communities had to gain a certain independence. Yet, at the same time, performing community labour maintained goodwill between the local administration (kelurahan) and the community in question.

The sub-district (kelurahan) of Kemijen further consists of diverse institutions that carry out infrastructure maintenance in the spirit of Indonesia’s participatory development agenda. The BKM (Badan Keswadayaan Masyarakat), which operates mainly on governmental grants but may also attract private donations, has staff to oversee and implement infrastructural repair projects. In development literature, the BKM is defined as a “community self-help organization.” Throughout Indonesia, BKMs are supposed to facilitate and organize community participation in development projects. The BKM involves communities in decision-making, money management, and delivering services. They often receive funds through Indonesia’s National Program for Community Empowerment (“PNPM Mandiri”), a “national program that is at the heart of the Government of Indonesia’s effort to reduce poverty”. BKMs can self-implement infrastructure projects by hiring contractors. However, a study conducted by the Asian Development Bank

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showed that BKMs sometimes “functioned solely in the presence of development initiatives for which the participation of local government agencies was a requirement. Thus, once implementation of the initiative concerned was completed, the institution became dormant or vanished together.” Kemijen’s BKM is one of the area’s most active and successful organizations, according to the “faskel” (fasilitator kelurahan), a state-hired coordinator who facilitates collaboration between the sub-district administration and the BKM and implements various poverty reduction tools. Guinness has argued that PNPM Mandiri has contributed to fostering kampung residents’ self-perception “as responsible and capable citizens of the city and equipping them to seek out partners within the wider society in realizing their dreams” (2009:239). In a sense, the BKM is supposed to operate outside of the RT/RW system, which was judged potentially self-serving for corrupt middlemen by reformers and therefore unable to effectively distribute development aid.

The state apparatus of governance is not only represented by the RT/RW system, but also by the local administration (kelurahan), described in more detail in the fourth chapter. In addition to governmental authorities, there are a few religious authorities in Kemijen, whose residents are predominantly Moslem. The neighbourhood features one mosque but many residents frequent a mosque located in a bordering neighbourhood to worship. Research for this thesis was not designed to address the role that religious authorities play in the management of floods, but due to the ubiquitous presence of Islam in Indonesian society, I was certainly aware of the rhythms and obligations that religious practice weaved into the quotidian.8

Lastly, certain private and sometimes semi-public actors have shaped Kemijen’s ecology. For instance, the state-owned oil company Pertamina mentioned in the opening vignette provided

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8 For cosmological interpretations of water and the sea in Indonesia, see Hornbacher (forthcoming); Trumbull (2013). A historical overview of water in Southeast Asia is provided by Boomgaard (2007).
the bulk of local jobs, investing into neighbourhoods that housed the area’s (formal and informal) labour supply through corporate social responsibility schemes. These investments also often tried to mitigate environmental impacts from industrial pollution. While coastal communities depend heavily on infrastructure, resources, and aid provided by the state, it should be noted that other actors were involved in transforming the area’s infrastructure as well as reproducing Kemijen’s slum geology.

Overall, this set of organs played an important role in sustaining the chronic configuration of infrastructure, endurance, and eventfulness on the margins of Semarang’s drainage system. Yet, they could also become platforms from where other visions of the present and future could inform practices and the materialization of the kampung.

The Global Hyperswamp

French anthropologist Michel Agier (2009) suggests that we remain attentive to what emerges from the margins of world society. Anthropology, in Agier’s opinion, still requires and thrives on a decentered gaze. I agree with Agier, who draws on Wacquant (2007), that today’s ‘territories of abandonment’ are much broader in scale than often assumed. It makes no sense historically to view the numerous ghettos of the United States or the banlieues of Europe as isolated outcomes of world history – they are connected in that “they are intermediate spaces, neither properly urban nor rural.” Agier thus proposes the globalized image of the hyperghetto, a slot for the global “supernumeraries in their extra-territoriality as ‘human waste’ on a planetary scale” (2009:856). While waiting to develop, “in the meantime, these places are built and lived in as spaces of rejection” (my emphasis). Agier urges for a better and anti-culturalist understanding of “spaces that have been built up on the frontier, at the edges or other limits of the social and the national” (id.857). He grounds this frontier in global discourse and dynamics of social differentiation and fragmentation. To understand places of abandonment, one must observe these
frontiers, according to Agier. As Taussig stated (see quote at the beginning of this section), the swamp also stands out as a marginal space, ignored by world history and social theory. Concerns over (social) mobility – which is rendered very difficult by wetland in physical and metaphorical terms – pushed the swamp into a corner and turned it into an Other to be disciplined (Giblett 1996). Swamps too are intermediate spaces, neither properly land nor water.

As a liminal space, the margin has played an important role in the becoming of anthropology as a discipline. Trouillot (2003) revealed just how strong the paradigm is that articulates knowledge of a primitive Other with his exclusive experience of and position in time and space. Robbins builds on Trouillot’s concept of the ‘savage slot’ when he points to anthropology’s more recent fixation on suffering. “The subject living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression now very often stands at the centre of anthropological work” (Robbins 2013:448), he argues. While this emphasis on suffering seems to follow its own politics, that I will not elaborate on here, Robbins essentially deplores that this new focus leaves the “savage, the other, […] in darkness (or should we say, back in darkness?) because it no longer answered to our own culture’s most pressing concerns” (id. 450). Similarly, by focussing only on the suffering of swamp residents, I would run the risk of leaving larger processes of othering unaddressed. Thus, while I agree with Agier in his push for a decentered anthropology that is global in scale, I do not advocate an entirely anti-culturalist study of margins. There is something stickily cultural about wetlands. If there is something like a hyper-swamp – ecologies and subjects that we can empirically connect in view of their kinship in being disastrous outcomes of capitalist development –, this analytical perspective would certainly serve the purpose of revealing the systematic creation of disaster-prone shitholes across this revolting planetary eco-system. Yet, we would also run the risk of underestimating the culturally specific salience of local arrangements in wetlands from which, I believe, we can all learn something.
Today, the Banger River runs through two districts before flowing into the Javanese Sea: East Semarang and North Semarang. Technically, it constitutes a drainage “sub-system” within the city’s wider drainage plan (*Rencana Induk Drainase*). Kemijen, this thesis’ main site, is the northernmost sub-district of East Semarang district, located right on the northeastern border of the city of Semarang.

![Location of East Semarang District with detail of its northernmost sub-district Kemijen](image)

*Figure 2: Location of East Semarang District with detail of its northernmost sub-district Kemijen (yellow area is formally residential area; pink area is formally designated transportation area; purple area is permanently inundated land)*

The area inhabited by about 14,000 residents lies adjacent to an industrial zone featuring an oil refinery and a gas-based electricity plant (1,334 MW capacity) that relaunched operations in 2013 after laying idle for two years. Kemijen further borders on Semarang’s second flood canal,
a major drain with strong sediment deposits that traditionally causes flooding in Northeast Semarang during the rainy season. As I mentioned, banger means stinky or rancid in Javanese; the name refers to the strong smell of the river, which contains many toxic substances but mostly human waste. The Dutch built drainage canals into the low-lying delta in the 19th century, probably to dry the swampland and irrigate extensive rice fields. They also served as sewers to the non-European population. ‘Native’ residents settled gradually along the Banger, which is both a river and a canal. The Malay term for canal or river – kali – was used to refer to the Banger. In the following, I refer to the Banger as river, as its physiognomy prior to embanking in the 1990s resembled more a creek lined with plants and trees. I was unable to date or find out the exact origin of the river’s name, but all people I spoke with considered the river’s name as intuitive – an epitome as self-evident as seasonal change.

All residents could tell stories about times when monsoon rain and concomitant flash floods caused strong damage to kampung infrastructure and residences, sometimes even killing people. Monsoon floods, however, also brought welcome movement into the river’s water flow, flushing excreta and filling the riverbed with fresh water. Rain still produces movement. Today, seasonal floods, even when exacerbated by rob, occasion a festive atmosphere: kids play in the canals and adults get together to exchange about and assess the situation. The sub-district government traditionally mobilizes funds to set up a community kitchen which gives out free food to residents whose kitchens are not usable. Despite the smell and stagnant water, many everyday activities take place by the river – eating, cooking, gambling, selling food, fish and fresh produce, and plain hanging out. Two months into my research, I came across a spot that seemed well-suited for observing peoples’ interactions with the Banger River: a food shop set up illegally on the banks

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9 In the Dutch East Indies, Malay served the Dutch as surrogate language of governance, “because very few non-Dutch spoke their language” (Siegel 1997:14). As such, Malay was a language of authority and lacked a cultural basis for its non-Dutch users. The language most commonly used in North Semarang was Javanese.
of the Banger (drainage laws prohibit the erection of shops and houses on Kemijen’s banks, but they are seldom enforced. I describe this space and its sociology in more detail in the second chapter.) What emerged from conversations with its owner, Arief, and his customers was that the river had always been a dumping site.

In the absence of urban services, the river had traditionally served as a ready absorber of wastes, liquid and solid, but mostly organic. As one person put it, when the river was still flowing normally, all litter would drift out of sight, slowly, steadily, until – it was gone. Since about ten years, however, the river barely flows anymore, even in the rainy season, which is why waste stays well in sight or starts decaying right where it was disposed of. People relied on the river to absorb waste. Today’s acts of disposal are reminiscent of the former state of the river which permitted and sanctioned this kind of action.

Kemijen is separated from the shoreline by an elevated highway. As mentioned earlier, the
coast is zoned as industrial land and reserved to heavy industry and shipping and handling businesses. But a strip of land on the other side of the artery was settled by mainly fishermen and farmers in the 1950s. The settlement grew into a very dense neighbourhood called Tambak Lorok (“Poisoned Fishpond”) whose residents’ housing situation is highly precarious, since extension plans for the port have long threatened their relocation to remote sites for a long time. This would remove them from their only reliable source of income – the ocean. While I was conducting research, an urban renewal project promoted by the Indonesian president, “Jokowi”, who visited the area in person, promised Tambak Lorok’s residents a brighter future.

Aside from wage work in factories, most residents of Kemijen had, however, no business in the part of the city that immediately bordered the shore. The area was considered even more dangerous and unwieldy than Kemijen’s worst pockets. That is why most residents ran everyday errands in areas within, close to or south of Kemijen: while places closer to the city center generally inspired trust, orientation towards the south is most certainly also a result of the cigarette warehouse on Pengapon Street where in the past scores of inhabitants had worked. Built in colonial times by the British-American Tobacco Company (BAT), it was later taken over by the Indonesian company PT Sampoerna, which shut down production in the 1990s. Today, the warehouse lays idle and its main floor is permanently flooded. It is difficult to tell whether the warehouse has become a relict, yet, or just another dormant property that could be reclaimed from the past and brought back to life by foreign or domestic capital. But it seems, as long as tidal flooding continues unabated, the area will only see trickles of such investments.

Tellingly, the Dutch city government had always refrained from developing the marshy North, instead allowing indigenous city-dwellers to settle there. According to Pratiwo, “since any northward development was facing an unhealthy swamp, […] the municipality agreed to develop the city towards the hilly area in the South” (Pratiwo 2004, n.p.). Arguably, this negligence on the
part of the Dutch government already betrayed a sort of geographical chauvinism that infused urban discourse and which will be explored further in the first and second chapters. While development happened on the slopes and upstream parts of the city, the North was left to its own devices. This situation planted the seed of environmental degradation. Rahardjo (2000) points out that alongside rapid population increases, Semarang has also experienced constant economic growth in the last three decades – often at the expense of the existing ecologies and community systems. This destructive, unprecedented economic growth has “created a small privileged group of ‘new rich,’ while the gap between poor and rich has widened. Even worse, government interventions, supposedly to alleviate poverty, have often undermined existing traditional social networks, the very ties which, in the current economic crisis, proved to be crucial elements of the coping strategy of the poor” (Rahardjo 2000:444). The socioeconomic chasm was enhanced by modern city planning which, according to Rahardjo, was “tainted by a large gap between the rich and the poor.” In the city’s spatial configuration, the North always took a backseat to other areas of urban growth.10

The conditions of urban rivers are worrisome in Semarang. Surveys of river qualities in Indonesia paint a bleak picture: “studies conducted in Malang, Semarang and Surabaya reveal that the major rivers of these urban centers are heavily contaminated, (...) water is undrinkable and poses a serious health threat” (Miller 2003:130). Major urban rivers look and smell unpleasant, and communities discourage if not prohibit people from bathing in or otherwise consuming river water. Semarang’s ‘rancid river’ is a case in point. A recent study that included 71 sites in

10 That the North is a neglected area is further evidenced in the deplorable absence of diverse research on its populations. That is, a lot of research focuses on the informal and underdeveloped nature of the area’s economy; its comparatively high crime rates; and ecological decline. Most recent research projects further center on the tidewater catastrophe, such as the much-cited work by Marfai and King. Their research reveals that the inundated area of the northern part of Semarang now covers up to 2 km from the coast. Notably, emphasis is placed on the negative effects of the situation, leaving no room to an exploration of social, affective, and political responses (Marfai and King 2008:94).
Indonesia revealed that “chemical pollutants from toxic waste sites are a large and heretofore insufficiently studied public health problem in low- and middle-income Asian countries… Disease and death caused by toxic chemicals contribute to the total burden of disease in these countries” (Chatham-Stephens 2013:793). Specifically, the study says, if water contamination is documented, “the population at risk includes those individuals who use the water daily for drinking, food preparation, and other domestic purposes.”

Typically, the government blames riverside residents for the conditions of rivers. It seems to ignore the fact that throughout Semarang’s history, it prioritized drainage and sewerage improvement projects in southern and western areas. This trend is reflected in several semi-public projects: Semarang has undertaken expensive improvement works on its West Flood Canal and recently finished the construction of the Jatibarang dam in the western highlands, which was followed by the reengineering of the central Semarang River. Inherent in this trend is a spatiotemporal hierarchy placing northern and eastern areas at the bottom of the government’s to-do list.

On a map from 1913 used by Dutch public health expert and apothecary Henry Tilemma to illustrate the sanitary problems of Semarang, the area known today as Kemijen shows a disproportionately high rate of annual mortality.11 Residents of the area still bear the brunt of environmental decline. Inhabiting a degraded environment not only exposes people to waterborne diseases, but demands their constant attention and energy. Especially in poorer kampungs, largely invisible, that is, unaccounted labour is required from residents to keep waters at bay and flowing orderly. I was told by residents that hypertension (abnormally high blood pressure related to a state of great psychological stress) is one of the most frequent causes of strokes in North

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Semarang. It is the leading cause of mortality among Indonesians above five years of age, accounting for 15.4% of all deaths, according to Kusuma et al. (2009). In Kemijen, strokes were a very common affliction among adults.

Sinking (in)

Ethnography, Wilk argues, as a site where the “abstraction of the future comes into a gritty engagement with everyday experience,” can reveal how institutions contend over the measurable human future by studying a wide array of players. But how did I become attuned to local temporalities and the ways in which they structure peoples’ everyday lives, shape their aspirations, and are shaped by interventions? As with most ethnographic fieldwork, my research relied on letting observations gradually “sink in.” This means doing and living through things repeatedly, adjusting one’s senses each time. This slow pace of research allowed for the most unexpected insights. As Katz (2001) notes, anthropologists often painstakingly look for answers to research questions, while constantly agonizing over time and money restraints. A sudden breakthrough, however, almost never happens in ethnography. Rather, more often than not, a slow process of attuning oneself to the rhythms of everyday life, language, and local culture ends up revealing to the ethnographer that the answer was always already there, from the very beginning. I chose the metaphor of sinking for another, perhaps obvious, reason: my interlocutors’ houses were constantly in the process of sinking. Over the course of my research, I engaged in some activities that become necessary when houses sink: scooping water out of living rooms, unclogging shower drains, disinfecting skin and carefully boiling water before consumption. I’m not at all claiming that I lived ‘like’ my interlocutors. Yet, doing some of these regular chores helped develop a pragmatic sensorium to the challenges of people in my surrounding.

So I tried to sink deeper, while staying aware of discomfort and pressure, like a free diver
taking note of increasing water pressure on the body with every inch she sinks, trusting the reflexes that allow her to plummet to quite unnatural depths. James Nestor, the author of a recent book on Free Diving, which I came across during my fieldwork, describes the practice as follows:

“In the first 30 or so feet underwater, the lungs, full of air, buoy your body toward the surface, forcing you to paddle as you go down. You feel the pressure on your body double at 33 feet underwater. At this depth, the contracting air will shrink your lungs to half their normal size. As you keep diving, at about 40 feet, you enter a gravity-less area in the water column that freedivers call the “doorway to the deep.” Here, the ocean stops pulling you up the surface and begins pulling you down. You place your arms at your sides in a skydiver pose, relax, and effortlessly drift deeper.”

This confidence in reflexes and the pull of gravity – a confidence resulting from professional training and bodily conditioning (i.e. graduate studies) – eventually produces effortless drifting. After brushing up on my Indonesian and learning some key Javanese words to pep up conversations, everyday sinking felt more like the smooth drifting described by Nestor. Yet, letting gravity pull you down is a risky undertaking, as you never know when you run out of air and where the stream leads you. Back in Toronto, consequently, I had to deal with suspected hemorrhoids and acute Giardia, not to mention the flashbacks of mosquito attacks and witnessed incidents of violence.

To let go of buoyancy was in fact quite difficult in the field, for medical and cultural reasons. Walking around in sandals when the neighbourhood was flooded caused within seconds an itchy rash on my legs. But testing the waters was the expected thing to do. My academic future of course also hinged on successfully conducting “deep” research. Gratefully, Adin often lauded my ethnographic approach to studying kampung life, contrasting it with the methods of other research teams that would never stay for a long time in the neighbourhood and only interview him once. Yet, below the surface of kampung life, away from academic expectations, the importance of writing a thesis slowly faded out of view.

This also had to do with the charity and warm-hearted nature of my friends, who kept inviting me to local celebrations and tea or dinner. Over the course of my research, I became
amazed by the sense of buoyancy in riverside kampungs. Instead of agonizing over flooding and necessary repairs, people often found energy and time to host events to which numerous guests were invited. Further, festivals were put together to celebrate community projects, cheerful preparations for the National Holiday (Hari Kemerdekaan) took place every year, and men played chess into the night. Seasonal flooding moreover brought people closer together.

Sinking, thus, wasn’t visible to the eye and can’t be ‘felt’ with the physical senses. It wasn’t easy to correlate suffering and flooding. Through an optic focused exclusively on the everyday, the long-term bodily and social effects of sinking couldn’t be fully accounted for. I needed to hear about peoples’ lives, their itineraries, and life decisions. While floods demand daily attention to the materiality and functionality of infrastructures from residents, other events, such as migrating to the city, meeting one’s partner, or leading an activist life in the Suharto era also inflect the experience of flooding.

Studying the permutations of the river, substances, and existence also required an openness to serendipity and spontaneity: an ability to make decisions on the spot and step outside one’s routine. Community meetings (forums for investment decisions and project development) take place regularly but some weeks may turn out particularly busy and random. Sometimes, I would receive a text message only minutes before a meeting began which sent me racing my bike through rush hour traffic. Alternatively, I would suddenly hear my name being shouted across the street; minutes later I would be sitting on the back of a motorcycle, heading off to some impromptu debate. On one occasion, I learned coincidentally that an art exhibit on rob was reaching its end the following day, while I was vacationing on a close-by island. The next morning, I was on a train to the coastal city hosting the art show. In the lives of riverside dwellers, serendipity plays an important role, as well. The ways in which subjects position themselves to development projects, politicians, and bureaucrats, demonstrated especially high flexibility. The resident
Wahyu struggled to catch up with his many discrepant tasks: in between delivering ice cubes to clients, coaching two soccer teams, and ordering kiosk supplies, he met with local authorities, drafted and redrafted invitations to community events (*sosialisasi*), designed festival banners, and attended government meetings. This serendipity comes into being through other rhythms, of institutions or budgetary cycles. Sometimes, the way these institutionally fixed timelines figured into the daily lives of the riverside dwellers I frequented produced quite unexpected encounters.

At times, another discernible temporality succeeded in competing for peoples’ attention, which was constituted by the making and reviewing of maps, plans and regulations. While I decided not to include findings from my fieldwork among municipal planners in this thesis for reasons of coherence and scope, knowing the timetables for infrastructural projects and the timing of governmental regulations was highly important for understanding the differential experience and projection of time. These worlds also constantly overlapped, as residents showed up to municipal planning meetings, dropped off formulas and infrastructure proposals, and carried out voluntary work in the municipality, thereby running into me and finding time to discuss latest developments, news, or just family issues.

**Thesis Architecture**

The first chapter (“Becoming”) introduces the reader to the north of Semarang with a focus on the emergence of settlements in the coastal marshland. I draw on secondary literature and colonial maps to argue that the development of Semarang’s littoral was intimately connected to the pathologization of the northern wetlands. The industrialization of Semarang’s shoreline and the expansion of Java’s railroad system towards the end of the 19th century produced an increased demand for labour, but often squeezed rural migrants into socioecological niches. Unwelcome in the quarters of the Dutch and Chinese, who controlled trade and government, these migrants began to auto-construct houses and farms, taking advantage of the water channels, as they helped irrigate
rice fields, and provided space for agriculture. The administrative treatment of such spontaneous settlements (already called kampungs) was based on cultural and racial differentiation.

The result, a geographical divide between native settlements in the North and the cosmopolitan south, owes its origins to colonial rule and spatial planning and is actualized in today’s urban politics. The second chapter (“Stuck”) describes more recent government interventions in the northeast. As an urban planner told me often in conversations, his agency didn’t know how to help the poor populations of Semarang’s northern kampungs, because, in his opinion, the gap between the government and these places was too big. This gap, as I show, is partly a “heritage of colonial rule” (Tsing 1993:26), but is reinforced by contemporary urban politics. In the 1920s, an indigenous observer compared life in native settlements to living in “backwater” (stagnant water). How come this hasn’t changed much in the span of a century?

Through the 1970s, a time of dramatic economic growth, Semarang experienced repeated waves of urbanization. Neighbourhoods in the North grew dramatically. Kemijen’s boundaries moved slowly northwards, and houses and streets gradually replaced fishponds and swamp. Access to land and reliable sources of income became scarce, while the environment deteriorated. The government came to consider Northern kampungs as problem zones made up of illegal squatters and reigned by criminals. The North’s dark aura was thought to emanate from preman; criminals or gangsters that posed a threat to the New Order’s autocratic rule. In the wake of unprecedented economic growth that produced stark social inequalities, the state portrayed kampung populations as a hazy mass that could hide dangerous societal elements. The New Order regime thus aimed at controlling the kampung by means of infrastructure. River normalization – the widening and embanking of rivers – went hand in hand with evictions and displacement, similar to more directly political ‘normalization’ efforts under Indonesia’s authoritarian president Suharto. Residents mourn the disappearance of a lush and self-reliant environment, while river normalization also
made the kampung more transparent and, most importantly, promised to reincorporate the area into the body of the city by virtue of its cleanliness and integration with the city’s grid of modernity. The last section of this chapter is an outlook on Semarang’s future which seems determined by further investments in river normalization. I show that the notion of ‘killing rivers’ is the latest iteration of improvement works that pathologize the swamp and its residents.

Today, what does everyday life look and feel like in present-day North Semarang? The third chapter (“Floating”) provides an impressionistic account of the lived quotidian by focussing on the experience of recurrent and permanent flooding. A poem by Djawahir Muhammad (Semarang Surga Yang Hilang, 2011) initiates a reflection on life in the swamp: the experience of a temporal and existential cul-de-sac expressed in chronic infrastructural insufficiency. Water seeps through the cracks of floors, abrades water banks, and remains trapped in kampung streets and peoples’ houses. People have organized politically and socially around such flooding: they have acquired pumps and formed pumping associations to restore water flow, often by taking on crucial governmental tasks. As a result, rob has become the pulsating vein of economic life and a structure of feeling. Through instances of hardship in inhabitants’ lives, I describe their predicaments: how many times have they leveled up the floors of their houses without knowing the exact speed of subsidence? Where does the community diesel pump really get them? I show how residents’ endurance is textured by prescriptive state programs that encourage participation and self-governance. The rob ‘crisis’ at least attracts new infrastructure and community development projects that allow residents to improvise and repair prevention mechanisms. But these programs never reliably repair the ruined riverbanks; they just patch them up. The result of the coming and going of projects is that residential coping efforts are framed as quasi-events that do not disrupt the order of things (material and social).

The fourth chapter (“Figuring”) speaks to the political ‘affordances’ of river infrastructure,
by showing how locals develop sensibilities to hydrology as a result of shifting political circumstances. Broadly, it asks what it means to be a political subject in contemporary Semarang—a city lauded by the World Bank for its bottom-up development style and considered acutely endangered by climate change. The chapter looks at small development projects of neighbourhood groups (activist and non-activist) and how they lobby for increased governmental support by posing as endangered subjects concerned with the environment and local wellbeing. I describe the perks of governmental projects in the sense that they often subsidize more than just infrastructural adaptation to rising sea level and promise follow-up projects—they also maintain a socioecological status quo. The result is a constant hustling for projects at the municipal and provincial level. Describing busy organizing around projects, funds, and government policies in light of Semarang’s government’s late fixation over grassroots politics, I show how strange new assemblages emerge, for example between former activists and the sub-district administration. While the latter used to be a governmental tool of social control, neighbourhood organizers and the administration now tightly collaborate to qualify for injections of funds through state development grants (like PLPBK) and the municipal participatory development scheme called “Musrenbang.” These funds are mostly used to level up streets and kampung infrastructure (peninggian), while little money is provided for community development, education, and internal economic growth. Kampung residents thus remain the agents of state-concocted processes of progress and development. However, I juxtapose the concept of pembangunan, a powerful nationalist scheme that suggests that development is a process of awakening, building, and construction (Heryanto 1988; Barker 2005), to peninggian. The latter suggests that infrastructure has undergone a change in meaning: stacking layer upon layer of pavement does not afford a glimpse of a glorious future. This type of building is not identified with nation building. Rather, it suggests a meantime, a temporary location, where Northern residents can ‘float’ for the time
being (sementara).

The last and fifth chapter (“Promise”) zooms in on an ongoing anti-flooding project initiated jointly by the Indonesian Ministry of Public Works, the municipality of Semarang, and the water authority of Rotterdam, Netherlands. The story of this project forms the backbone of the last chapter, because it allows a glimpse into the future of Semarang’s coastal neighbourhoods. Despite its promise of gradual transformation, the project both fosters another meantime and ultimately works out to be a mere extension of the present. To explain this, I reconstruct the genealogy of the polder project based on interviews, archive documents, and news articles. In 2005, the Indonesian government committed officially to implementing a participatory polder scheme designed by Dutch engineers. While pilot projects are standard currency in Indonesia, this project is quite different from most Dutch developmental initiatives in that it offers little flow of development money. The Dutch partners sponsored the technical design and running costs of a small administrative organism (badan) modeled on Dutch water authorities, but the biggest financial burden is carried by the municipality and the local population. That is, both maintenance and operation are supposed to be financed via a communal tax (iuran) paid by local resident and private companies.

A main line of interrogation concerns the crisis imaginary of the project. Drawing on Western scientific knowledge and “centuries of experience” with water management, the Dutch project leaders conjure up an unprecedented flood ‘crisis’ by foreshadowing a crippled and retreating shoreline – whole neighbourhoods swallowed by rob in the near future. The municipal government consubstantiates this crisis, while never actually taking the blame. The problem, in their view, arises from accumulated stresses on the drainage system, solvable through normalization. As brokers of the Dutch-Indonesian project alliance, two residents try to rally support in the affected kampungs for the new anti-flooding scheme. I describe their work in the
project, following closely their emotional involvement, their doubts and hopes.

The polder attempts the ultimate incorporation of downstream communities into a dominant narrative of time, embodied by the installation of five pumps in an embellished pumping house that regulates water circuits. While this feels like a tremendous achievement for many residents, it is a deceptive promise. The polder is set to expire after about 15 years of operating in view of dramatic rates of land subsidence. The project has therefore to be considered as one step in a series of measures to manage breakdown. Residents, educated to act as enlightened and empowered citizens, thus find themselves reabsorbed into the chronic present, where crisis is managed by a largely unaccountable state and its agencies.

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My dissertation shows that tidal flooding in the coastal neighbourhoods of Semarang unfolds through various timeframes: the life spans of infrastructure, the maintenance activities of residents and government interventions, and the chronic meantime. Tidal floods cannot be explained by pointing to climate change only, nor to poverty or failure of development. Rather, the many ways in which people and institutions deal with floods reveal a multiple, layered, and uneven catastrophe. I see this thesis as a cautionary tale: the meantime, if colonized by the chronic, doesn’t leave enough room for conceiving of alternative worlds. As my friend and informant, Adin, once put it in a conversation, perhaps the best would be to let the sea reclaim the swamp along with its communities. Precisely this acceptance of loss, of the city to the swamp, could harbor the most promising future. But Adin and I knew that he was just joking.
Semarang’s Swamp in Late Colonial Times

“When the promised pay raises and promotions were not forthcoming, De Roever and Lientje left Semarang, ‘that accursed mosquito ballroom,’ for the Netherlands. Standing on the deck of their ship, they watched the islands disappear behind the horizon, ‘where we lost three years of our lives.’”

Jan-Jacob Blussé van Oud-Alblas about the departure of Dutch engineers from colonial Semarang, excerpt from his Master’s thesis entitled Missionaries of Modernity, (2012:133).

“Biopolitics’ last domain is, finally [...] control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live. This includes the direct effects of the geographical, climatic, or hydrographic environment: the problem, for instance, of swamps, and of epidemics linked to the existence of swamps throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. And also the problem of the environment to the extent that it is not a natural environment, that it has been created by the population and therefore has effects on that population. This is, essentially, the urban problem.”

Excerpt from Lecture 11 in “Society Must be Defended” (2003:244-5) by Michel Foucault.

In this chapter, I ask what kinds of relations with nature, infrastructure, and power were cultivated in Semarang’s North in colonial times that preceded and foreshadowed today’s cohabitation with, interventions into and projects surrounding drainage and water. To my honest disappointment, evidence of Semarang’s early kampungs, specifically those located in the coastal lowland, is scant.12 However, I believe in the words of E.P. Thompson (1975:24) that “something that left so little trace in the public print of the time [...] is a matter which should be explored

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12 For this research, I spent one week in Rotterdam’s Het Nieuwe Instituut, whose collection contains sketches, correspondences, and articles from many Dutch architects and town planners who resided or worked in Semarang. I further had access to the KITLV archive in Leiden for one week to collect historical data on North Semarang.
further.” While neither trained, nor equipped to perform the work of a historian, my exegesis of secondary literature and archival material aims to both restore historical specificity to Semarang’s littoral settlements and place their emergence in the context of the city’s urban development and political organization. May others continue and nuance my work. Moreover, bringing postcolonial studies of water governance to bear on a description of the transformations of Semarang’s swamp through drainage reveals the special discursive and material forces at play in the becoming of Kemijen. These forces, which were to induce hygienic behaviour and order in the North, as will become clear throughout the following chapters, are in part still alive.

In this chapter, I touch on colonial representations of the urban kampung that variably posit this environment and its inhabitants as a source of danger or victim of colonial modernity and capitalism, but always as the counterpoint to a desired urban future. The inhabitants of the North were ‘backwards’ and lagging behind the trend of human evolution in the eyes of Semarang’s colonial elite. In particular, their geographical position was thought to be the cause of their evolutionary stagnation. Imperatives of capitalist development as well as the racial-hygienic concerns of the European population played crucial roles in the materialization of the kampung and its relations with water. Clearly, colonial urban planning was motivated by what Foucault (2003) considered the biopolitical turn in governance, where the state’s “strategies of rule” (Stoler 1995:1) revolve around the protection of life (Cooper 2008). Yet, as Stoler (1995:12) has pointed out, biopolitical concerns in the Indies articulated with the politics of race. She showed that an “implicit racial grammar” backed the sexual regimes of European bourgeois culture. This racial grammar also informed the “grids of intelligibility” of Indies town planners, in that the swamp, placed particularly low in the hierarchy of livable places, was associated with a degraded human being in need of (hygienic) discipline. Evidence gathered in this chapter, however, suggests that
profundely changing the lives of coastal dwellers by lifting them out of the swamp and resettling them was judged too expensive. What the Dutch treatment of Semarang’s North shows, then, is a form of governance that not only differentiates between populations based on the milieu in which they live, but also bases its strategic investments in populations on a racial hierarchy. This racial hierarchy – perhaps because it was never straightforward in the Dutch East Indies (Vickers 2005: 25) – in turn became inscribed in urban space. Yet, unlike Mitchell’s concept of a colonial disciplinary order that was to be expanded over the “whole surface of society” (Mitchell 2002), reaching deep into the social fabric of villages across Egypt, order in Semarang was more contained in plans and ‘dreams’ than found on the ground. While Indies plantations were controlled with the same brutal violence (see Vickers 2005:17) as Egyptian villages, to increase crop production, surging indigenous exodus from the countryside to Javanese cities made them much more difficult to govern. Under the Dutch Ethical Policy attention was therefore centered on urban public space. “In the first three decades of the twentieth century the Department of Public Works sponsored major public buildings and introduced city planning” (id.:23). As I will show, public health programmes aimed at providing clean water and better living conditions to control diseases, perceived as a distinctly ‘urban problem’ that emanated from the swamp. The north of Semarang was thus addressed by city planning but also considered as a space apart.

The purpose of this chapter is to reveal colonial imaginaries of the Indonesian kampung as well as conceptions of subjects inhabiting the marshy North of Semarang. To Semarang’s elite, the ‘urban problem’ seemed to originate precisely from here. In the following chapter, I will show that these imaginaries still have a huge influence over contemporary images and ideas of Semarang. Uncovering their roots means looking at the beginnings of industrial urbanization in Indonesia, as this period of “rapid development” between 1900 and 1930 (Wertheim 1962) brought ‘problems’ of “native welfare” and control to the forefront of colonial discourse (Vickers
2005:23). In fact, according to Pratiwo (2004:6), this period also laid the groundwork for a “spatial fragmentation” of the city, which persists until today.

Semarang’s poor kampungs often occupied and flourished in zones that exposed inhabitants to unfavorable and dangerous environmental conditions. Specifically, the beginning of the twentieth century sees the emergence of urban peripheries filling up with the “waste” that ethnic segregation and capitalist exploitation produced in the archipelago. Without focusing on a specific neighbourhood, this chapter describes the ‘becoming’ of northern kampungs in the wake of rapid urban growth before independence. The segregationist character of cities in the Dutch East Indies forced migrants to settle within the confines of rapidly growing kampungs that were often located on the outskirts of the city. Engaging in small-scale agriculture, fishing, and aqua-farming on reclaimed land allowed native settlers to eke out a living, but the growing labour demand of factories and businesses that was a result of Dutch free market philosophy implemented in the 1870s led to increasing commodification of indigenous labour. Gradual loss of access to land as supplementary source of livelihood as well as the densification of kampungs exacerbated hardship and thus had devastating impacts on the living conditions of dwellers. Kampungs turned into surplus labour ghettos at the beginning of the twentieth century, as the city’s economy was not able to absorb the new floating population of uprooted peasants. Arguably, the relegation of this excess population to the margins of the city also created a growing sense of community, despite ethnic diversity, as economic and ecological hardship overlapped with racial discrimination. Within the kampungs self-help systems with their own social hierarchies developed.

In the context of governmental reforms that emphasized a more ethical handling of native issues, water management became increasingly important at the beginning of the 20th century. Epidemics had killed several thousands of Semarang’s native population. As such, introducing sewerage and drainage into kampungs served both as protection for European inhabitants and
expressed a new form of paternalist colonial politics that framed kampung residents as “victims” of modernization (Coté 2002). The land on which Kemijen was built lies within the territorial boundaries of Semarang, which was spatially defined by its two flood canals. Therefore, the area is likely to have qualified for Dutch kampung improvement. Water infrastructure located within the territorial boundaries of the city was maintained and policed by the municipality. The Ethical Period (1901-1942) increased colonial surveillance of kampungs located in these confines. Based on archival material and the sparse literature written about Semarang’s early kampungs,13 I show how, under Dutch rule, indigenous residents living in the North were pushed to cooperate with the colonial regime, while having virtually no say in infrastructural and environmental interventions by the city council. Based on these findings and their analysis, a particular kind of kampung subject emerges. I end with a note on this subject’s relation to time.

My focus on processes that occurred in early twentieth century Semarang obviously does not do justice to the long durée of urban development, which would have to address processes set off prior to colonization and during the first two hundred years of Dutch rule. I will, however, provide a synopsis of these processes: The area south of contemporary Semarang was probably settled in the 8th century. It belonged to the Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Mataram which dispatched regular convoys of merchants to Semarang. By the first half of the 17th century, Semarang had become an important regional trade hub with a sizable population (20,000 to 25,000). A road connecting Semarang with the center of power of the Mataram kingdom, that had withdrawn far inland, was of strategic importance to Sultan Agung and maintained under great efforts (Reid 1993:58). The shoreline had continuously advanced north by river siltation, allowing people to cultivate downstream land. That is why coastal neighbourhoods in contemporary Semarang are located

13 This stands in contrast to the abundance of literature on Batavia’s (now Indonesia’s capital city, Jakarta) kampungs.
about six kilometers north of Semarang’s earliest settlements (Brommer et al. 1995). This slow, nature-permitting process of urbanization was to change after the arrival of the Dutch. In 1678, Semarang was handed to the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC). When, beginning in 1708, the VOC established a fortified European city (Kota Benteng Europeesche Buurt) on downstream land west of the Semarang River, they were not alone in the delta: indigenous, Malaysian, and Chinese settlers had already been living on the marshy land for centuries. Until the 19th century, the area east of Semarang River remained mainly uninhabited and used for aquaculture.

Throughout the nineteenth and into the first half of the twentieth century, many of Semarang’s kampungs were quite literally spaces on the side of the road. They provided shelter to the indigenous population in the employ of Dutch companies and government offices. Colombijn (2002:610) noted that before the completion of the Great Post Road (Grote Postweg) in 1811, Semarang’s urban functions were concentrated along the Semarang River. Many functions were subsequently moved to the post road or to parallel and side roads. Developing a sophisticated network of roads was of utmost importance to the colonial government, as early maps projecting the urban expansion of Semarang show. The Dutch were invested in connecting the low-lying delta, a hot and humid zone where trading, shipping, and some production work took centre stage, with the cooler and romanticized highland as well as the crop-producing hinterland. They further intended to connect Semarang with other coastal settlements, such as Demak and Pekalongan.

By the end of the 1920s, Dutch maps14 make mention of kampungs that had formed on the eastern entrance of Semarang, right in between the East Flood Canal and a river that possibly was already called Kali Banger. When Semarang’s port businesses started attracting Indonesians from the rural inland and other parts of Java, the living spaces of this indigenous workforce became

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14 Pont, H, Maclaine: Schets Van De Verbinding van de Boven- en Benedenstad van Semarang, 1918.
increasingly crowded. Over a short period of time, Semarang’s “Indonesian population was augmented daily by hundreds of workers (...) to work on its wharves and factories” (Coté 2002:320). Gradually, the native workforce populated vacant space outside of the city’s ‘primary’ network of streets and rivers (Pratiwo 2004). Here, indigenous dwellers often cultivated land to generate additional income, probably taking advantage of the downstream drains that the Dutch had constructed, because they mitigated flooding and helped irrigate rice fields. The map (fig. 4) provided below, which dates from 1913, shows Semarang’s Northeastern swampland, which contained fishponds and stretched from shoreline to the railway (spoormeg). Residences (black rectangles) with adjacent farming fields (landerijen) are recognizable along Pengapon Street, which connected Semarang with Demak. A later map (fig. 5) from 1918, also provided below, by the Dutch architect H. Maclaine Pont indicates these roadside residences as “kampungs at the eastern city entrance.” Ideally, these unwieldy desas or villages of the ‘natives’ lying on the edge of the city would one day be integrated into a functionalist network of urban spaces. Or as Mrázek (2002:67) put it, “there was a copycat order on one side; on the other side, the disorderly urban rest was to be swept away or under.”
Figure 5: Semarang’s Northeastern swampland with fishponds and river
Figure 6: “Kampoengs aan den oostelijken toegang der stad” – emerging kampungs at the eastern city entry.
The “Kampung Question” and Semarang’s North

Northeastern kampungs were roadside offshoots whose existence was intimately tied to water. The marshy delta was crisscrossed by rivers and canals that were part of the expanding Dutch drainage and canal system. The proximity to sewer and drainage infrastructures was a trade-off: while it allowed for irrigation of paddies and other farming practices to supplement their families’ income, it exposed kampung residents to waterborne diseases and regular flooding. Tellingly, at a public meeting of the city council held in 1922, a ‘native’ council member compared living in a city kampung to living in “backwater” (a part of the river where the water is stagnant). This environmental allegory referred to an economic and political reality: urban expansion and privatization of previously indigenously owned land had left kampung dwellers with “no property, authority, or autonomy” (Cobban 1988:280).

In view of the “disorderly urban [and dispossessed] rest” piling up in the kampungs and calls for intervention from indigenous representatives, the Dutch government decided that money had to be found for improvement, either by relocating residents or sanitizing, that is, drying the swamp and building roads into it. As Coté (2002:322) has argued, many members of Semarang’s colonial society had developed sensibilities to the incongruences of “colonial modernity” and promoted an ‘enlightened’ style of urban governance. The entrepreneurial and reformist spirit of Dutch residents new to the colony increasingly found expression in grand visions for the future of Javanese cities, articulated and illustrated in maps, housing schemes, and exhibits. Here, economic and social evolutionary theories most often provided the justification for a “dramatic intensification of colonial intervention into native life” (ibid: 323). During the last thirty-five years of Dutch rule in Indonesia, the treatment of kampungs morphed into the defining object of municipal authority. Administrators of colonial urban centres, such as Semarang, worried increasingly about the “squalid living conditions of the indigenous people within the cities”
How were municipalities to deal with the visibly uneven distribution of prosperity, or the “juxtaposition (...) of contiguous areas varying in physical attractiveness, population densities, hygienic conditions and standards of living” (Cobban 1974:403)? Public repugnance at the destitution of the indigenous population and fear of epidemics called for more control and stronger state involvement in the fate of urban native subjects. The new tangibility of starkly uneven living conditions in the colony’s cities fueled transcontinental debates over the ethical responsibilities of the colonizer in view of the irreparable damage it inflicted on ‘weaker’ civilizations (and sometimes the pauperized European population of colonial cities). As such, the uneven distribution of life and death in colonial cities produced “intensive colonial introspection” (Coté 2002:325) and called into existence a lively discourse about the extent and techniques of colonial rule in cities. Decentralization of the colonial state apparatus had led to the creation of municipalities which further opened spaces for reflection on the “new conception of the duties of the state” (Coté 2002:327). The principle of indirect rule and minimal intervention that characterized the ‘liberal period’ was considered outdated. For progressives, it was European identity as bearers of Enlightenment and progress that was at stake in educating the colonized population and assuring their welfare. The Indies were thus always more than a site of exploitation, they were also a “laboratory of modernity” (Stoler 1995, drawing on Rabinow 1989).

Making the indigenous population of Semarang’s North “even with the times,” as a Dutch study showed, was considered to necessitate eliminating “the slum-dwellings situated in the Northern, marshy district of Semarang” (Wertheim 1962:232-3) to destroy their ties with an epidemics-ridden land. Marshland kampungs were considered “neither wholly on the pre-capitalist nor wholly on the capitalist side” (id.: 230). Relocation was therefore considered one remedy to native misery in coastal settlements and a strategy to “enframe” (Mitchell 2002) subjects in industrial labour. But as it turned out, neither municipalities nor the central government
could find the means to achieve this feat. The central government, in particular, was slow to come up with solutions. In the absence of commitment from the central government, the city of Semarang became the focus of private investigations that informed an extensive debate about modernization and reform. Semarang is often considered an example of progressive colonial policy, departing from the general trend of Indonesian cities. In Semarang, the city became the object of intellectual investigation, curiosity, and knowledge production that tried to define governing problems and formulate improvement strategies. In combination, the questions of how to address the problem of the impoverished native underclass and in whose authority such acts lay morphed into the so-called ‘Kampung Question.’ The Kampung Question foremost demonstrates that political power was hampered by organizational and economic considerations.

The Dutch architect J.J. Rückert noted that elementary steps towards improvement would require new “housing statistics, proper maps, legislation [and] financial possibilities” (Roosmalen 2008:297). Rückert also warned that intensive maintenance would be required after improvements had been carried out. Instead of intervening quickly, Semarang’s city council rather envisioned a future in which it would become intimately involved in the private lives of kampung dwellers – “during all phases of activity, administrators and planners should engage themselves in direct and close contact with the population” (id.).

Politically engaged residents of Semarang, like the apothecary and businessman Henry Tillema or famous Dutch architect Thomas Karsten, played important roles in informing the Kampung Question. Their publications and work have already received intensive scholarly scrutiny (Nas 2002; Coté 2002; Mrázek 2002). Apparently, Tillema and Karsten argued for a gradual integration of native quarters into the body of the city (Coté 2014). Although the option of ‘slum clearing’ was never off the table, it was generally judged too expensive, hence unrealistic for municipalities. Visions for moving the coastal population to the sparsely inhabited highland,
first brought up by the Dutch wealthy lawyer Conrad Theodor van Deventer (Wertheim 1962:233) in 1906, were entertained for a long time but eventually dropped. Instead, modernity was to be introduced gradually into the outlying indigenous areas, by introducing sewage and water infrastructure.

I should mention that while the Kampung Question and the welfare of the ‘native’ population remained a major preoccupation of Semarang’s city until the Japanese invasion of the archipelago in 1942, Semarang was also the home of many architectural and planning projects explicitly ‘modern’ in character. The renowned Dutch architect Berlage called Semarang the “loveliest city of Semarang” for its great examples of modernist thought and form. As “hallmarks of European cultural production” (Stoler 1995:15), the colony allowed the world to glimpse the future of all cities, especially in contrast with the low-class, indigenous quarters. Coastal kampungs were thus a stain on the project of colonialism, while equally justifying its continuous ‘work.’ This work, yet, neither happened in a swift or expeditious way nor through massive interventions. While concerns over the ‘inferior’ race’s welfare alarmed colonial observers and shaped urban politics, the way in which colonial biopolitics shaped the North was fragmentary and not particularly linear.

Separation and Fragmentary Intervention

In addition to the discursive and spatial separation of indigenous settlements from the colonial city, Cobban has pointed out a jurisdictional separation of kampung life from the affairs of the European settlers. This separation, however, was repeatedly suspended in the name of public management. Thus, “in practice many ordinances of the city council extended into the kampung areas, generally over the complaints of the natives.” To Cobban, the distinction between jurisdictions was ‘fuzzy,’ which somewhat misses the point. Formal ‘separation’ belied a reality
in which kampungs existed as discursively and practically dominated spaces and in which everyday activities of residents were subject to colonial surveillance, especially in the wake of the ‘Kampung Question.’ In fact, as a response to epidemics that affected Indonesian cities, such as Deli (1905), Malang (1911), and five years later Semarang (1916), inspections became even more regular. For example, indigenous householders were obliged to bring their furniture outside “and the whole house was made clean” (Cobban 1974:276).

The beginning of the century in fact saw the development of a scientifically driven interventionist discourse based on ever more detailed measurements of indigenous life. As Kooy and Bakker (2008:378) have noted, concern over hygiene in the colony sparked after repeated epidemics of cholera and typhoid in Batavia (now called Jakarta) and other cities. New medical theories of disease transmission via bacteria fueled imaginations of cross-racial contamination (Stoler 1995). European residents were, as a result, advised to consume and use water more carefully, and to avoid the neighbourhoods of the ‘natives.’ Tillema, who called himself an “engineer of health and hygienist” was perhaps the person to draw attention to the problem of water (Mrázek 2002:56-57). He dreamed of a sanitized and regulated colony that would improve the lives of European and native residents. In his books, he documented in detail practices of native hygiene as well as colonial water regulation ‘in design and action.’ In Tillema’s first publication “Rioliana” (from Dutch riolerin; English: sewerage) published in 1910, he urged the introduction of a general sewerage system. He argued that “as well as providing fresh water, the key to urban public health was the adequate evacuation of sewerage and drainage water” (Coté 2002:331). But the districts of the Javanese population were unsuited for the construction of such

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15 The municipalities and the central government quarreled for more than twenty years over the legal framing of interventions into indigenous affairs, while people succumbed to recurrent epidemics and starved in the kampungs (Cobban 1974). Though some scholars have lauded Semarang’s council as ahead of its time, the situation must have felt quite different for the native population – more like a protracted state of legal exception, the end of which would be decided by Dutch democrats arguing introspectively over the colonial agenda, fair budgets and subsidies many thousands of miles away.
infrastructure, according to him. Therefore, “adequate urban planning was essential and had to be based on hygiene considerations” (id.:331). Tillema was a strong proponent of state-induced social development based on rigorous modern science and urban planning. Despite such voices which claimed the ethical responsibility of the colonial state, the interventions into kampungs were fragmentary, at best.

In fact, as Kooy and Bakker’s (2008:379) study of drinking water provision in Jakarta exemplifies, technological improvements of urban infrastructures were exclusive to the Dutch population. Drinking water provision is one example: “in contrast to the surface water from the city’s *kalis* (canals) upon which natives relied, European households now had access to scientifically monitored groundwater, circulated through iron pipes rather than the corporeal networks of ambulatory water vendors.” The differential distribution of access to potable water not only created highly uneven landscapes, separated by the newly designed artesian system, and levels of regional integration, but also translated into distinct practices of hygiene and water consumption. As Mrázek (2002) pointed out, “the water ordering, in dreams, plans, and actuality, in the Indies – in a special sense – worked,” as the ‘dirty’ world of ‘native’ kampungs formed the contrast to European water sophistication. But water could never be fully mastered. The use of chemicals around wells is a potent example of constant Dutch anxiety of spectral diseases; dangerous particles that would somehow slip through the cracks of the water system. Not only did the Dutch want to control water flow, they also intervened into the quality of the water by spreading artificial agents to kill bacilli. Controlling water required ever increasing control of water quality and use. Between 1900 and 1925, Semarang grew by 100 percent, which, according to Mrázek, also stoked Dutch apprehensions of tidal waves of immigrants without knowledge of modern hygienic norms. How was the city supposed to absorb this incoming population? One can already see that Semarang’s water infrastructure is deeply entangled with fear and the imagined
necessity of population control.

Anxiety of the kampung was not only related to the containment of bodies and diseases. In view of increasing collectivization in the 1920s and 1930s (Wertheim 1962), such as the creation of budding trade unions in cities (Ingleson 2001), the kampung was also conceived of as subversive body politic. Rückert, for instance, warned the city council that letting the situation of the kampungs worsen would eventually force the colonial government to intervene more violently to prevent unrest. He claimed to understand why indigenous leaders were “not at all enthusiastic about the kampung improvements” (cited in Roosmalen 2008:300). In 1928, he made a plea before the People’s Council (Volksraad) for a government subsidy for municipal kampung improvement works. He urged the municipality to intervene as quickly as possible, as there was no “better thinkable means of propaganda” than letting the situation further deteriorate. The council had better be forewarned: “up until now the kampong population has remained quiet but the source of unrest, the perpetual threat to peace and order remains in the so badly neglected kampongs” (Versnel and Colombijn 2014:134).

In conclusion, I would like to underline how differentiation formed the fundamental principle of colonial order in Semarang. As Kooy and Bakker have shown (2008:385), “residents whose domestic water practices did not demonstrate a familiarity with scientific rationalities, modern concern for bodily health, or an appropriately economical use of water” were marginalized materially and discursively. In colonial Java, difference was constructed based on race and scientific assessments of water and hygiene. The Kampung Question was based on producing specific urban subjects as Others, framing Indonesian kampung residents as exhibiting primitive behaviors and thus in need of assistance and education. Efforts to sanitize the kampung led to an interventionist character of governance that, however, remained fragmentary in practice. With regards to Semarang’s urban development, Cobban (1974) has usefully argued that political and
economic marginalization post-Independence can be traced back to a set of colonial discourses and decisions made by the authorities. He contends that the difficulties of kampung improvement and urban infrastructure development in colonial Semarang show that “many of the problems present in Semarang today are of long standing: they were exacerbated but not caused by the rapid increase in the size of the population of Semarang after the end of the Second World War” (Cobban 1988: 269).

Based on the material presented above, I close with a note on the relations that residents of Semarang’s colonial swamp entertained with time. While having recently arrived from elsewhere in the archipelago and in search for work, they sought to establish themselves in the city by settling on vacant land and farming to supplement their income. These migrants were thus embedded in multiple temporalities – the standardized time of wage labour, the seasonal cycles of (aquatic) farming, and the risks of Monsoon flooding, to mention only a few. Wage labour, however, probably eventually became the kampung residents’ main timeframe, as the city industrial sector grew. Another, less regular occurrence in Northern residents’ lives seem to have been acts of top-down infrastructure improvement as well as inspections, as the colonial administration considered indigenous settlers as backwards and incapable of living hygienically in the moist environment of Semarang’s coastline. Interventions, however, remained fragmentary, creating an underinvested ecological niche that stood in ever-starker contrast with the sophisticated European sections of the city. That engineers weren’t all that successful at creating a modern utopia becomes clear from the quote at the beginning. Here, Dutch engineers, the ‘missionaries of modernity,’ grumpily leave Semarang – “that accursed mosquito ballroom.” Based on the scant historical material presented in this chapter, a mixture of utopian plans that attempted to modernize the Northern swamplands and idiosyncratic ways of fitting into an ecological niche reproduced each other, as colonial improvement plans remained largely ineffective due to massive immigration and settlers’ need to
stay flexible in economic terms. The ‘becoming’ of Semarang’s Northern settlements was influenced by multiple temporalities; those of colonial intervention in the name of progress, work availability, and seasonal flooding.

The next chapter looks at how subsequent, postcolonial governments have kept the kampung at arm’s length, producing it as the Other of progress, which enabled specific interventions, but also allowed kampung residents to renew a sense of ownership and construct novel relationships with the administration.
2) STUCK

A ‘Dark’ Ecology

“There is a gap between what we provide and what people really need. The thing is we actually don’t know what they really need.”

A Semarang government official and urban planner about the problem of kampung development in a casual conversation with the author in 2015.

Once, on my morning walk, I noticed that strong winds had unhooked my landlord bird cage. It was lying on the porch of his beautifully wood-adorned house. My landlord’s daughter-in-law told me that the precious songbird had been taken away by stray cats. In that moment, my landlord, whose name was Eko, returned from hunting the cats. He was carrying something green in his hand. Apparently, he retrieved the bird whose lifeless feathers, however, looked pretty roughed up. Eko had a sinister stare in his eyes and didn’t greet me. The cats killed it, he told us soberly.

Then he lifted the empty cage with his free hand and walked towards the river. First, he tossed the cage, then the dead bird followed. I tried to look unaffected despite being dazzled by this aggressive and meaningful act. He mumbled: “the people at the bridge will fish it out.” Then he disappeared in his house, letting out an angry roar on the doorstep.¹⁶

To residents of his neighbourhood, my landlord, a calm and friendly man, was a retired strongman whose wealth resulted from shady deals made in the past. They never elaborated on these deals. Instead, they simply called Eko nakal (naughty) and keras (tough) when we spoke about him or his infamously rowdy son. At the same time, Eko had been elected RT head.¹⁷

¹⁶ Based on a jingle well-known to the residents of Surabaya, Lucas and Djati (2000) have argued that it was not only common to use rivers as a dumping ground for rubbish and industrial waste, but also for dead animals, such as dogs. In the wake of new environmental regulations in the 1980s, dumping into rivers became outlawed in Surabaya.

¹⁷ RT or rukun tetangga are administrative divisions of the RW or rukun warga, a network of local sovereignty described in the introduction. Interestingly, Guinness (1997:113), who has written extensively on Javanese kampungs, has also remarked on the social standing of his landlord while doing fieldwork in Yogyakarta. His landlord was a “resourceful innovator.” His success in independent business ventures “gained him status within
private conversations that we had, my landlord, who grew up in a house by the Banger River, sometimes referred evasively to things he did in the past that he regretted. I never learned what these things were, but they had to do with his place of employment: the nearby oil refinery. Now, as a retiree, Eko owned a small furniture factory and ran several profitable boarding houses in the area. He had no intention of leaving this neighbourhood, although he could afford to live downtown or even in an uptown residence. Throughout the week, he was mostly at home, playing calmly with his grandchildren or hanging out with friends on a bench in front of his house. Eko seemed convinced that he had made amends. While admitting to wrongdoings in the past, he tried to be a caring neighbour and loving father. His material wealth, most conspicuously expressed in two towering homes (one he and his wife inhabited while the other one was rented out to his son’s young family, an undergraduate student and myself) built on the banks of the Banger River, stood in stark contrast to his immediate neighbours’ situation: right next to him lived Deni’s family, whose five members occupied a wooden house consisting of two humble rooms with dirt floors. On the other side of the alleyway lived three elderly sisters whose traditional Javanese home was on the verge of collapse, as it was regularly flooded. While being aware of peoples’ hardship and aspirations and trying to embody positive change himself, Eko’s act of disposing of the dead bird and cage suggest an intimate knowledge of his surrounding: while some people, him included, had improved their economic and social standing, this area had not. The river running through his neighbourhood remained a dump and someone downstream would “fish out” his cage and find a use for it, despite being second-hand and damaged.

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The neighbourhood and contributed to his election as RT.” Eko’s election to RT head is therefore not that surprising.
About a year after witnessing my landlord’s reaction to losing his songbird, I attended a late-night meeting in Kemijen’s sub-district office (balai kelurahan), which was located about 300 metres northwest of my home. I had expected a small informal scheduling and organizational meeting, but the balai (hall) was packed with residents and the atmosphere was official. The residents sat on rows of green plastic chairs. Many residents that I regularly met and had conversations with attended the meeting: Arief, Rendy, Adin, and Wahyu had come. The only wooden table had been placed center stage; the projector was displaying a resident-produced trailer on rob (a vernacular concept for tidal flooding and the object of further discussion in following chapters). The lurah, the head of the sub-district, had driven down from his upstream residence and was accompanied by his wife. It turned out he had to make an important announcement concerning the upcoming mayoral neighbourhood inspection. Namely, that it had been canceled. The lurah began his speech by expressing his sincere disappointment to the attendants who had anticipated the inspection. Then, he surprised them by saying that they still had a chance to receive Semarang’s mayor, the highest official in Semarang’s municipal hierarchy. The mayor had offered them an earlier date – a weekend one month from now. Sure, it would not give them much time to prepare the event, the lurah admitted. Shouldn’t they still try to make it happen? His address took on a more motivating tone. Of late, Kemijen had been “showered (digelontor) with funds.” He knew that residents cared – “there’s visible proof.” They should show this proof to the mayor. There were people in this neighbourhood who could “care and stop being defiled (jorok) and dirty (kumuh).” The inspection would center around the Banger River and coincide with the annual river cleaning event (pelaksanaan resik-resik kali). He hoped that they would clean a good stretch of the riverbank. They would begin cleaning in the south, an already orderly area, and because there was enough parking space for the invited members of
SKPD\textsuperscript{18} – the municipal government working unit. He ended his speech by reminding them that they should send a signal to the mayor: their kali (river) will be free of waste (terbebas dari sampah). Although some residents were still unaware (belum sadar) and offset their efforts, he was convinced that “you all already care (peduli).”

The lurah’s pitch was followed by another speech. The representative of the LPMK,\textsuperscript{19} who sat next to the lurah, gave a passionate address: they had struggled for a long time to build a “great” Kemijen. Their neighbourhood was suffering most (paling menderita) from the river, because they were at the receiving end of the stream – where waste accumulated. They were also located at the junction of river and ocean and therefore often flooded. Yet, they always seemed to be the government’s most left-behind target (sasaran paling tertinggal). The most recent development efforts, however, especially community-based environmental regulation efforts, represented indisputable proof that they had a clear plan (gambaran jelas). According to this plan, they would move the sub-district forward (memajukan). The representative summoned their support: “let us please unite (mohon bersatu)!” United, so it seemed, they would be able to bring progress to Kemijen. Before ending his speech politely, he urged the attendants to see the mayor’s visit as an opportunity. They should ask that “normalization” (normalisasi) be soon prepared and carried out.

The two vignettes at the beginning demonstrate two apparently contradictory views and relations with time. In the first story, I show that the Banger River quite commonly functions as a dump. Downstream, people may find a use for the empty cage that my landlord, Eko, threw out, he insinuated, but it had instantly lost its value in his eyes. Neither his relative material wealth nor

\textsuperscript{18} Acronym for Satuan Kerja Perangkat Daerah.
\textsuperscript{19} The Lembaga Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Kelurahan or Neighborhood Community Empowerment Board is a sister organization of the BKM (see introduction). It replaced its predecessor, the Lembaga Ketahanan Masyarakat Desa (LKMD) in 2007 in the wake of decentralization regulations. See Peraturan Daerah Kabupaten No. 13, 2006.
his family members could “contain,” in a psychological sense, his anger and sadness, but the river could at least absorb it; perhaps take it away. Here, I suggest, Eko enacted a representation of the North as a ‘dark ecology.’ This ecology is stuck in its ways, forever polluted and poor. In a sense, the river ‘hailed’ Eko – making him enact a well-rehearsed vision of the area and invoke a specific resident-subject that inhabits this milieu. Over the course of my research, I realized that the local population indeed bore a significant responsibility for the pollution of river water: everybody used the river as a dump, albeit in more or less visible ways. Even though some people abstained from throwing waste into the river publicly, preferring to use designated garbage disposal sites, all inhabitants channeled their wastewater into the river; the boys and men smoking on the riverbank threw their cigarettes into the river; women dumped food rests and dishwashing water into the Banger. And even respectable neighbourhood leaders and important civic figures, such as my landlord, contributed to environmental pollution. It is important to note that these acts were not always perceived as transgressive. In a previous time, the river used to readily absorb waste (organic and inorganic) and flush it out to sea.

In the second story, residents are portrayed as “already caring” and inclined to protect and clean the river. Here, the river’s state appears as a stain on the reputation of the sub-district; visible and odorous evidence of lagging behind the general trend of development and a sign of being abandoned by the state. The waste-clogged river reflected badly on the area’s kampungs and their residents. As subject of official visits, the river was an indicator of development – both moral and economic. The river needed to be clean, that is, presentable for the area to progress and be cured from periodic flooding. From both vignettes, the river emerges as an interlocutor or companion, a political and cultural reference point, and a site of local place-making. Both stories portray meaningful interactions with the river that also indicate a relation with time: my landlord’s act seems to say: ‘this is how it is,’ while the meeting represents a resounding interest in and reliance
on the river as a development potential for the neighbourhood, imagining ‘what it could be.’ Like my landlord’s slur, the speeches invoke a subject. Yet, this subject has a potentiality, a potential trajectory, if residents unite and mobilize their energy to unleash this potential. This subject is the subject of normalization, one that has internalized the function and meanings of drainage infrastructure. It is a subject that ‘sees’ pollution and acts on the degradation of the environment.

This chapter hones in on these official representations of the river, and on riverside residents’ self-representations. I describe the negative historical and contemporary views of the area, one that is thought to harbor crime and immorality. I go on to describe how both kampung residents and the state have attempted to change these via infrastructure development and a shifting relationship to the river. Especially, I show how negative portrayals of the area are reinforced by both the state (by identifying the area as one in need of improvement) and by residents (by buying into a narrative of the North as ‘dark area’ and perpetuating it). While trying to make sense of ways in which the river and its infrastructure relate to narratives of the area’s moral backwardness, this chapter also serves the purpose of familiarizing the reader with key contemporary social entities at the neighbourhood level whose social imaginaries of the river converge upon the landscape, thereby shaping it and infusing it with meaning (Rademacher 2011). These social entities are: (1) riverside kampung residents and the administrative forums in which they form ideas about the neighbourhood; (2) local activist groups and their river-focused advocacy activities; and (3) state agencies concerned with the normalization of drainage infrastructure. As I will describe the work of local activists more in detail in chapter four, this chapter is more slanted to state-backed institutions, such as the RT/RW system (see introduction). In the reproduction of negative stereotypes, the latter sits uneasily between visions that reinforce a negative portrayal (bordering sometimes on self-flagellation) and an evocation of positive local virtues.

Björkmann (2015:12) has pointed to the important relational work that infrastructures do. She
argues that their embeddedness in everyday life tends to obscure how infrastructures are themselves relations among things. In her ethnography of Mumbai, it is disruption of water flow that reveals critical nodes of urban infrastructure, forcing them to come into focus. These moments can “work as methodological entryway to the sociopolitical and material forces underpinning otherwise taken-for-granted urban processes and geographies – a means by which to explore the technologies, materialities, and politics that infuse everyday life in the city.” In Kemijen, moments of overflow and seepage provide such a methodological entryway as they reveal relationships between the everyday struggle with inhabiting a risky ecology and wider urban politics. But overflow, or banjir, is a semantically rich concept in Indonesia. Banjir air mata connotes excessive crying, while banjir pengungsi refers to floods of refugees. In most cases, banjir refers then to excess (berlebihan). Although this chapter pays attention to technologically mediated urban development, taking seriously the ambiguous nature of banjir required that I neither strictly focus on infrastructure nor water. The semantics of banjir are simply too pervasive and often interwoven with commonsense categorizations, so that my focus needed to be wider. The North of Semarang, as a whole, is considered as producing excess; not only in terms of water, but also population, waste, and crime. It is threatened by tidal flooding (Marfai et al. 2008), but it is also itself seen as a threat to the rest of the city. Infrastructure in Semarang never just controls floods or reduces pollution, but it implants specific worldviews in space and tries to infuse everyday life with top-down temporalities. By espousing these worldviews, residents also forge new links with the government through which sentiments of pride and investment can be signaled.

Evidence for this chapter stems mostly from participant observation conducted in riverside neighbourhoods belonging to two sub-districts located in the northeast of Semarang. I focus on the poor neighbourhood Kemijen, but I also consider contiguous areas. The chapter further offers an overview of postcolonial state interventions – past and more recent – that have shaped this
downstream area and, more specifically, the way in which neighbourhoods figure into the larger social, discursive, and spatial hegemony of Semarang. Notwithstanding the economic success of my landlord, life can be particularly difficult in Kemijen. I perceive the area both as a product of state neglect and weak governance (Das 2004), and a deeply relational, if ‘disconnected’ space (Ferguson 1999). Marginalization, as a historical and social process, works through differentiation: cultural, spatial, and administrative (Tsing 2003:42). Living on the margin of the city has specific temporal consequences, as the following chapter will demonstrate with emphasis on the built environment, as it locks inhabitants into precarious relations with infrastructure and nature.

As a young urban planner working at Semarang’s municipal planning agency, Bappeda, often told me in conversations, his agency didn’t know how to help the poor populations of Semarang’s northern kampungs, because, in his opinion, the gap between the government and these places was too big. It sounded often as if the government felt alienated or at least deeply confounded by these places. This gap, as the previous chapter suggested, is partly a heritage of colonial rule (Tsing 1993:26), but it gets actualized in today’s urban politics. Residents, as citizens and communities that participate in state programs, rarely question the categories that separate them from the state and, by extension, access to a better future (through infrastructure). Note how the mayor’s impending visit occasions the use of these categories. The area had been “showered” with funds, which meant that they could be “caring” and responsible citizens instead of “unaware” and “defiled.”

Sections

In the first part of this chapter, I enmesh oral history and archival material to explain how the North came to occupy a dark and terrifying slot within the urban imaginary. I show how
contemporary transformations of the area – called “the darkest Semarang” by the influential Dutch reformer Henry Tillema (Coté 2002) – are shaped by imaginaries that view the North as a space apart that harbors subjects with attitudes and powers that are antagonistic to wider society. This section thus builds on the previous chapter in which I described the material transformations and discursive representations of the swamp during colonial times which contributed to constituting the ‘dark’ ecology of Semarang’s marshland.

The second section examines the relationships that riverside communities have developed with water infrastructure since the beginning of the twentieth century, when new, centralized concepts of canalizing and governing water were put into practice. In the context of a national river “normalization” program in the 1990s, scores of residents were displaced, houses razed, and new policies introduced. Importantly, many residents date the beginning of rob to this disruptive intervention, but they also value the new transparency, safety, and sense of community brought on by the restructuring. In its wake, residents developed a new sense of belonging (with the city and the nation), expressed through local events, such as river cleansing rituals and work parties, which practically compensated for the lack of state assistance and insufficient investment in canal infrastructure. Growing engagement in river-focused events in recent years suggests that the Banger River is an important element of local identity. In the wake of river-focused development programs, activities such as working by the river and littering it, are supposed to be replaced by caring for and cleaning it. I show that by engaging with the river residents try to establish a new relationship with the city and the government. By caring for the river, residents attempt to create a new social imaginary more focused on the social value of the river to the public interest. By doing so, the residents attempt to counter the bad reputation of the area as a “dark space.”

Finally, the last section provides an outlook on the North’s future. Planned macro-infrastructural projects to protect the littoral and its populations and industries depend on
modernizing the region and streamlining social relations with river infrastructure. There is a renewed state commitment to engineering and completing the modernist project of drying the coastal lands. The introduction of so-called polder systems is an important step in continuing the management of relationships between the kampung and urban water. The extensive character of this project leads me to compare ‘poldering’ to ‘enframing,’ a state method to impose social order (Mitchell 2002).

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Much has been written about the Indonesian kampung, or urban neighbourhood. To be clear, this chapter neither wants to do away with or append existing definitions of the kampung, nor does it want to add specific nuance to the ethnography of kampung life by offering an exhaustive description of its forms and conditions, as others have done (Siegel 1993; Newberry 2006; Guinness 2009; Simone 2010). Rather, it is an attempt to understand the development of poor neighbourhoods of Semarang’s North against a background of urban ecology and political change, expressed in water governance. What further motivated me to write this chapter was the wish to critique the discriminatory treatment of riverside dwellers by successive governments. While renewed governmental attention to the area signals a turn to more inclusive policies, note the community-run polder discussed in the last section and final chapter of this thesis, the logic of these programs is still very much influenced by the imagined necessity of controlling and remaking riverside kampungs to bring them up to speed with elite visions of the city’s future. The marginalization of Kemijen, I argue, is the corollary of specific urban transformations: the underdevelopment and (partial) implementation of sewerage and drainage infrastructure.

Fear and Danger in North Semarang

As I had come to Semarang to study flooding, I followed the (natural) course of the Banger
River on a daily basis. On foot or by bike, I looked for signs or events of breach and observed or participated in activities on the banks. I got to know members of contiguous neighbourhoods connected by the Banger. Ironically, people living downstream contended that the most dangerous people lived even further downstream – or north. Such accusations drew a rather diffuse image of the area, one which contained violence and unrefined manners, but was undergoing a shift. In that shift, negative characteristics were displaced northwards. Going downstream meant following some kind of moral slope in peoples’ imaginaries as well as a timeline. I came to understand that this moral geography overlapped with representations of local history and time: the “wild” (liar) communities of the far North lived on land that sank most rapidly and they were flooded more regularly; neighbourhoods are also called “wild” if they were located on land that isn’t officially designated for residential purposes.

In the following, I explore how the marshy area of Semarang became equated with moral and social decline and how local imaginaries of this moral geography in turn gave rise to transformations of space. I focus on residents with riverside dwellings or houses that are within 200 metres of the river, as they were affected to varying degrees by infrastructural works on the riverbanks. When I spoke with them about the current state of Kemijen, especially the effects of tidal flooding, they did complain about regular flooding of streets and houses, but they also said that things had markedly improved – looking up at last. At first, this optimism, as evident in the orations given at the kelurahan, deeply confused me for two reasons: first, in (national and regional) newspapers, reporters and interviewed politicians were painting rob in increasingly dramatic tones (“Semarang Joins the Sinking City Network,” Jakarta Post 2012). Were my interlocutors not concerned about the increase in tidal flooding events? Second, my contacts at Semarang’s Urban Planning Department (BAPPEDA) called the area I had chosen to study extremely poor and a “problem zone;” the state has grown estranged from this area. Hearing
residents speak positively about the present made me wonder what could have caused such thinking bordering on optimism. I knew better than to assume that people were unaware of flood risks. After all, most families residing in North Semarang had defied floods for decades. Listening more carefully, I found out that people were referring to specific parameters of improvement – criminality and sense of belonging. In their accounts of the current state of Kemijen, these parameters colored peoples’ notions of the past and present. Over the years, access to medical and social services, such as health insurance, had improved; state subsidies and aid projects flowed to the area; and people began to feel safer. This imaginary of improvement was, however, at no point inclusive. Rather, it could speak to one neighbourhood while shutting out another. Yet, it could encompass a whole sub-district when people evaluated differences between areas (daerah) according to their ‘advanced-ness’ (kemajuan). “Dangerous” (bahaya) and “violent” (keras) people still existed in the North, according to this imaginary, but they lived in downstream pockets. Despite improvements, the North of Semarang was still considered a hiding place for gangsters. (As will become clear below, the state played a significant role in emplacing this imaginary.) For example, when I once walked along the river, I was invited to ‘hang out’ (nongkrong) in a so-called angkringan (Javanese for food stall) by two young men sitting by the river. I gladly accepted and sat down across from them. This illegally set up angkringan was owned by Agus who grew up in the area. His young daughter was playing on the low river wall (talut) and Agus reminded her to be careful not to fall into the river. Agus introduced me to his friend Henri who had two conspicuous tattoos. After asking me whether I would like a tattoo myself, Henri said that “tattoos don’t always mean gangster” (tidak selalu identik dengan preman).

The floodplain is often referred to as “black” area (daerah hitam), a place that emanates danger. Both residents and non-residents consider the area as filthy (kumuh), as does the
government. More generally, such considerations resonate with negative images of people living in coastal regions (*daerah pesisir*). *Hitam* also refers to the putatively darker tone of their skin. In the title of this chapter, I deliberately use the term ‘dark’ because it resonates with other aspects of the field site: the river water shimmered dark; the violent past of the area was shrouded in mystery; and the future of the delta looked somber in scientific studies (Marfai & King 2008).

Residents are aware of these attributes, as Henri’s remark on tattoos showed. In the following, I continue to query the roots and meanings of these attributes. I show that Kemijen is a place marked by stigmatization and that river infrastructure plays a crucial role in attempts to overcome stigma.

In colonial times, the “chaos” piling up in the margins of the state repeatedly animated and brought centre stage questions of control. As a place of informal authority (Barker 2007) and autonomy, the *kampung* still breeds apprehension among affluent urbanites and the political elite.20 How did the *kampung* become tinged with worry and trepidation? In order to get to the bottom of stigmatization, I need to back up a little. The relegation of undesired subjects to the fringes and niches of the city in colonial times planted the seed of a particular social image of the *kampung*. As I showed in the first chapter, fear of excess (spread of diseases and criminals) found expression in colonial attempts at controlling the living environment of the ‘native’ population.

In 1937, a journal for Indies technicians, *Tecton*, argued that *kampungs* were a “source of danger. Fires and epidemics start there (‘flies, mosquitoes, rats, fleas, stench, etc.’) and spread beyond the *kampong*’s limit; thieves come from there” (cited in Mrázek 2002:68). How were the authorities to monitor the generative nature of the *kampung* if not by prying into this ‘dark’ realm? Most of the Dutch interventions therefore aimed at opening the *kampung* up – by aesthetic and infrastructural means. The ‘dark’ North of Semarang was to become a transparent environment,

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20 Today, this fear often has a class character, since *kampungs* are primarily home to the urban proletariat and the socially disenfranchised.
with monitored waters that were used with hygienic care. For example, narrow paths were turned into wide alleys and arbitrarily planted trees made place for curated lawns. In creating transparent and airy habitats that replaced the ‘dark’ and putrid houses of the natives, interventions made the kampung inhabitant more (ac)countable. Mrázek (2002:29) has noted a characteristic interest in the Dutch East Indies in things visible and measurable. As one of the measures to make natives more identifiable, for instance, dactyloscopy was introduced to the government’s array of surveying methods: by taking photographs of fingerprints feeding ever-growing registers, “the natives could be made to stand still” (id.). In line with central government directives, Semarang’s council “directed that the natives carry lights during the evening and night hours” (Cobban 1988:274). The obsession with the visibility and mobility (and perhaps fluidity?) of ‘native’ subjects meant that the Dutch put themselves increasingly in charge of indigenous residents’ most private affairs. For instance, kampung inspections that took stock of native housekeeping were “undertaken in all parts of the city including the kampungs.”21 The Indonesian fight for independence and national stability required shedding the image of an impoverished proletariat and bringing the masses into line with the nation. As a result, there was a moment in Indonesian history when the kampung symbolized unison and hope instead of disenfranchisement and danger.

21 Reviewing academic literature on colonial town planning in Semarang, I found an interesting, lingering representation of the kampung as chaotic and disorderly. In his economic-historical work, Cobban represents the kampung as an unconsolidated, unorganized mass that “could not have done much more than contribute in an inchoate way to the general desire for change in the conditions of their existence under colonial rule” (Cobban 1988:287, my emphasis). The ‘inchoateness’ of kampung communities is a trope that continues to animate Indonesian urban governance, as exemplified by community participation programs and bottom-up initiatives involving mapping and social restructuring. While the ‘disorderly’ kampung is a trapping of Dutch rule and racial politics, its legacy is powerful and it can be glimpsed in scientific literature on the kampung.
Sukarno, Indonesia’s first president, held that the kampung was an important anchor for the working class and its nationalistic virtues, a place from where Indonesian nationalism derived its legitimacy. Reviving the visions of Dutch planners, who wanted to build a healthy kampung workforce – a stream of men, united by the pursuit of wealth and progress – urban planners took to the living spaces of the impoverished masses. In state propaganda, kampungs sheltered the rakyat – the mass of wage-workers and migrant peasants in whose name the Indonesian state was proclaimed. Sukarno amalgamated the rakyat and the state in an attempt to “limit their social
revolutionary impulses” and consolidate his power (Siegel 1998:3). But when Sukarno’s influence dwindled and Suharto’s military regime took to power in 1966, the kampung once again started to elicit fear. James Siegel delineated a discursive shift under Suharto that turned the rakyat into a hazy mass that could hide dangerous societal elements. In fact, in the 1980s, the kampung became the stage of deadly violence against assumed ‘criminals.’ The oppressive regime behind Indonesia’s New Order wanted to eliminate the subjects that once agitated against the Dutch; to curb their revolutionary power. While former political discourse had equated the rakyat with the nation, members of this class, their livelihoods and habitats turned into objects of public suspicion. Joshua Barker showed the New Order state’s attempts to appropriate local power and “give it a place in the confines of the state” (1998:8). In sum, the discourse that saw in the kampung the cause of poverty and criminality seemed alive and well in the New Order.

I had numerous conversations with research participants about the Petrus massacres that occurred between 1983 and 1985 which targeted “tattooed” kampung dwellers, committed by soldiers in mufti. As elsewhere in Indonesia, the typical story is that “jeep-loads of masked, armed men drove to the homes of supposed criminals in the middle of the night, abducted them, repeatedly stabbed or shot them, and left the bodies on the streets or in rivers where they became spectacles” (Siegel 1998:2). One person told me that he had to drive one such death squad through his neighbourhood “once or twice.” Many of my male interlocutors had memories of a frightening time when “black lists” circulated and bodies were found in canals and streets. This was a time when a great many of Kemijen’s current residents were adolescents or young adults. In conversations with me, they often pictured this period as “frightening” and “mysterious.” In his analysis of the 1980s mass killings, Siegel insightfully argued that the New Order needed to control the very idea of death; a notion associated with the criminal, whose hiding ground was the

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22 The acronym Petrus stands for Pembunuhan Misterius (“Mysterious Killings”).
kampung. Like these marginal spaces, the criminal was “always on the edge of Indonesian society, but never outside it” (id.). Importantly, Siegel’s analysis encompasses socioeconomic shifts within society that had their origins in Indonesia’s economic boom since the 1970s. The New Order brought economic progress, but at the cost of violent political suppression.

Memories of the killings and the criminalization of the kampung as dangerous space strongly inform people’s attitudes towards the North. For example, Rendy considered the environment of the North as morally toxic. A thirty-five-year-old father of two children, who was elected twice director of Kemijen’s organization for neighbourhood empowerment (Badan Keswadayaan Masyarakat, BKM), Rendy told me that he used to be neko-nekon (colloquial term similar to nakal: naughty). Back in the days, he hung out with criminals, some of whom were sent to prison. He now occasionally bumped into them in Semarang’s bustling marketplace, Pasar Johar, where they sold stolen goods and contraband. They always marveled that he had made something out of himself; that he had become the head of an organization. While being grateful that his situation had improved, Rendy deplored the negative effects that the Northern “environment” had had on his behavior: “my environment wasn’t right” (lingkungan saya tidak benar). This environment made Rendy at first ignore the aid programs of youth organizations, such as Karang Taruna (see third chapter for more detail), that tried to give young people living in poor neighbourhoods a different perspective on life. A close friend and mentor eventually made him realize that there was more to life and that he was badly needed by his community: their streets were constantly flooded. He decided to make changing the dire situation of his neighbourhood a charitable mission (amal saya untuk kampung).

Working for the kampung symbolized the “right way” (jalan lurus) for Rendy. As head of the BKM, he managed an annual budget of 350 Million Rupiah (about $26,000) and he rejected any remuneration for his work. Rendy eagerly attended most meetings of his neighbourhood
community (RW) as well. I remember one particular night where heads of local RTs discussed deep into the night, drinking tea and coffee on a rug laid out on the pavement in between two rows of kampung houses. Rendy participated in a hot debate concerning the obligations of new residents: were they to simply tear and thereby nullify their old identity cards (KTP) or keep them (which posed the problem of dual residence and allowed for fraud)? Arief (introduced in chapter two) suggested to withhold all new KTPs if residents’ old cards had not been “scratched out” (coret) in a correct manner. His statement was challenged by some attendants, because this procedure would affect quite a lot of residents, as the neighbourhood had grown considerably in the past ten years. Perhaps, one attendant suggested, they could warrant an exemption for residents whose papers were issued by the former neighbourhood chief. Arief tried to abate the issue by instituting an idiosyncratic handling: although they had national (undang-undang) and provincial (perda) laws, each RT could implement these at their discretion. That stance was not strong enough for Rendy, who asked for a stricter handling (ketegasan) of the issue. To prevent undesired people, he continued, “such as members of ISIS, from moving into our neighbourhood, we have to be watchful.”

In Rendy’s opinion, that is, the neighbourhood still attracted criminals. The ‘dark’ environment still existed in certain parts of the sub-district, even though his own neighbourhood had undergone a change. He admitted that residents could be “persuaded and inspired” (bisa diajak, jadi terinspirasi) in his neighbourhood. But in his view, the transformation of the North from a dark to a socially progressive area had occurred unevenly and remained incomplete.

The kampung as a space of negative influence and source of problems also came up in my conversations with Udin. His complicated self-image of kampung development proponent and distant critic attracted my attention. Before getting married, Udin spent whole weekends away from the kampung to escape it and experience the “outside world.” Trying out drugs and doing
little pranks, feeling free, he mingled with vagabonds in the “modern” spaces of the growing metropole, such as the central entertainment district Simpang Lima, where they would stay up all night. He still liked to escape from his home in the North and cruise around, a desire that is congruent with his profession – becak (pedicab) driver. However, he regretted mingling with criminals and feared that this time took a moral toll on him. When he was offered to become RT a few years ago, he refused. Not only was he often away, so he explained, at meetings or on the job, but he also felt that he had become mentally unstable. Although he was convinced that he had the skills of a good RT, he was afraid that he would not serve the people (rakyat) well. In fact, he didn’t trust himself to be a local leader because of his temper. He told me that he often got emotional and angry (tinggi emosi), “from his feet to his head,” when someone provoked him. For instance, when he once got into a motorbike accident, the other driver turned aggressive and started hitting him. He took a few blows, trying to calm his temper, before exploding and beating the man even after he was lying on the ground. Udin traced his aggressive behaviour to the time he spent with criminals towards the end of the 1980s. From the beginning, Udin emphasized that he didn’t want to become like them. He simply wanted to understand how they lived and how it felt to have even less money than himself. These criminals were not from Semarang, but newcomers (pendatang) from Solo or East Java. Only when his friends robbed a gold seller (tokoh emas) and his friends were searched by the police, he dropped out of the circle and avoided their company.

The stories of Udin and Rendy demonstrate that many in the kampung consider high moral standards to be very important for the area’s positive development. Rendy demanded a strict enforcement of regulations and oversees infrastructural development projects. Udin liked to marvel at the modern spaces of downtown and contrasted them with the place in which he grew up. I would like to add another story that shows the link between infrastructure and morality. The
resident Marsudi’s more recent life decisions speak to moral transformations that resulted from infrastructural modernization programs. Marsudi, who turned blind due to an eye infection, grew up by the Banger River and was strongly involved in communal administration and efforts to create a livable and safe environment. The state, according to Marsudi, played a minor role in this process. He underlined that they built the neighbourhood “on their own” and tried to keep criminality at bay. At the end of the 1990s, however, the situation became intolerable. The family decided to move to a different part of town, in fear that their oldest son would become like the many rowdies and gangsters that roamed Pengapon street at night. In particular, they fled from the increasingly violent fights that often broke out in the vicinity of their house.

“I didn’t want my children to have such a mentality. [Where we moved] there was no fighting, there were no drunks. We didn’t move to evade flooding. Flooding just happens once a year. Here, if it floods once a year, that’s considered natural [wajar]. Once a year is normal. We’re flooded, yes, but actually just once a year. That’s not dangerous anymore. People living here, they’re in for it. We always say, we’re happy anyways [senang sama saja].”

Despite being exposed to flooding, the family decided to return to their old neighbourhood a few years ago and now occupies a small house off Pengapon, where they run a laundry business. The situation had dramatically shifted, Marsudi informed me; crime rates dropped, making the area less harmful to their children’s moral development.

“It is said that criminality dropped drastically, yes. By more than 60 percent. In terms of criminals, you can say that along the river... perhaps 25 percent [of the criminals] remain. They disappeared, because, you know, residents were more able to control; people who lived by the river. If there’s someone who shows no respect [ndobol], [they find out] where that person could be from. Previously, people were more afraid of gangsters [preman]. They’re not afraid any longer, because people pay attention to safety.”

In Marsudi’s depiction, the community recognized the responsibility for handling crime and creating safer streets – not the government. However, he noted that material transformations played a central role in facilitating neighbourly control: “[Before] there was no embankment, right? So he [the criminal] tended to be down there, by the side of the road, where you can directly descend to the water. That was his hiding spot. But now, we have the inspection road (jalan
inspeksi). Previously, we would lose track of him down there. The sight was hindered by houses and by the public toilet building [semacam MCK].” This statement, first, depicts the river as a magnet for criminals. Second, control of this space was made possible by material changes of the neighbourhood and the river. More specifically, infrastructural changes are credited with returning authority to the local community. Marsudi mentioned two specific components of this river infrastructure: the inspection road and embankments.

While I was doing fieldwork in Semarang, another phenomenon sent ripples of fear over the town. Newspapers reported so-called “pegal” events on a daily basis. If I planned to visit a field interlocutor or have dinner with friends after dusk, I was regularly warned by my host family that by using a motorcycle after nightfall I ran the risk of being robbed and potentially killed by merciless crowds of young gangsters who preyed on lonely drivers and stopped them at gunpoint. Allegedly, they particularly liked to assault drivers on bigger roads that had bad street lighting. I was better advised to take kampung alleyways or smaller roads, where communities had reinforced neighbourhood watches in response to such incidents. Interestingly, the gangsters’ acts were generally explained as desperate attempts at making a buck from selling stolen vehicles. This misled youth was seeping out from the poor neighbourhoods to haunt urban spaces like major traffic corridors. While they spread out from the kampung, it was here that I would be safest. This dual imaginary of the kampung has to be kept in mind when we think about development projects. Throughout the past, kampung residents have been the subject of interventions that tried to control the dangers that emanated from and roamed this imagined and real realm. Aspirations to a safer environment among kampung residents led to a domestication of fear of the kampung. The belief that criminals still seep out from the kampung signals that preserving the positive features of the kampung and eradicating its bad ones is an ongoing process, in which infrastructure plays an important role.
‘Normalisasi’ – sterilizing kampung space

This section zooms in on a specific state-led infrastructure program that allowed for a restructuring of the kampung to increase policing through mainly civil authorities. The state intervention that all inhabitants of Kemijen remember is “river normalization” or normalisasi sungai, which was initiated in 1985. These infrastructural changes pursued under Suharto can be seen as one of the first, if not the first, significant infrastructural intervention into the lives of coastal residents after the colonial project of draining the swamp. The colonial intervention consisted of mainly fragmentary attempts of ‘opening up’ the kampung and introducing Western-style drainage. While this state program purportedly aimed at reducing floods and river pollution, it coincided with regulatory measures to bring the kampung within the purview of the state, taken by the Suharto regime since the early 1970s. These measures were intensified in the 1980s, a “watershed period in both economic and political terms” (Barker 1998:10) that elicited more authoritarian state measures of social control. Budiman et al. (2012:51) argued that normalization was “part of the effort to sterilize the public space from any revolutionary potential amongst the masses.” Whereas public space had been the theatre of mass mobilizations under Indonesia’s first president, Sukarno, the Suharto regime instilled an image of the street as a dangerous place roamed by criminals and thugs, and discouraged people from associating themselves with it (Kusno 2000). Barker (1998:10) sees the “criminal specter” as a “symptom of a structurally weakened state (and society) and as a convenient excuse for actions aimed at trying to overcome this weakness.”

Another well-known example of counter-revolutionary measures is the state-sanctioned program called NKK, which stands for Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus (Normalization of Campus Life). Implemented in 1978, NKK discouraged students from “any involvement in so-
called ‘politik praktis’ (practical politics)” (Budiman et al. 2012). Similarly, river normalization intended to deter people from settling along rivers which were thought to constitute a realm in which subversive subjects lived and flourished. The intervention especially targeted so-called squatters and ‘illegal’ residents who on top of being social outcasts due to their legal status were (and still are; see Van Voorst 2014:342) often blamed for floods. While today municipal governments put forward sanitary arguments in favor of normalization, river bank settlements are still considered as a major problem. They are cast as an informal space that defies state control. Illegalization, as anthropological studies have shown, mainly serves the purpose of categorizing subjects which makes it possible to subsequently distance them from the moral and social realm of normalized state-society relations.

As should be clear by now, the river normalization program had historical predecessors: both colonial inspections and landscaping interventions cast Northern kampungs as an ‘urban problem.’ After the defeat of the Dutch, the question what to do with the often-degraded habitats of poor Indonesians was at the heart of Indonesia’s national development agenda. These spaces were perceived as pockets of poverty and a stain on the image of the nation. Notably, the infamous “Kampung Improvement Program” (KIP) of the 1960s tried to tackle the problem of abject urban poverty by equipping high-density neighbourhoods with new infrastructure. I mention this national program, because the fact that sub-districts along Semarang’s coast weren’t included in the infrastructural upgrading program can tell us something about their perception by the state.23

23 Garr showed that KIP was driven by a humanitarian ethic and plain economics: “in some kelurahan [sub-district], kampung self-help efforts constituted as much as 91% of the local share of KIP resources, virtually eclipsing the role of the municipality.” In Semarang’s southern neighbor, Solo, “nearly 60% of KIP funding consisted of contributions from within the assisted kampung. And in Semarang, an important seaport to the north, nearly two-thirds of KIP project costs came from this source.” Garr concludes that while KIP selection criteria were initially biased toward deficiencies in physical conditions, they rather became skewed to the magnitude of the local contribution. Deficiencies in sanitary conditions determined whether kampungs were eligible for support in Semarang or Surakarta. However, the ‘worst first’ criterion was mostly outweighed by economic expedience (Garr 1989:80). In Semarang, only three kampungs were selected for improvement works: Bandarharjo, Bugangan and Kuningan (Direktorat Tata Kota dan Tata Daerah 1989). None of the Northeastern kampungs received direct attention. Though comprehensive in theory, the state’s effort to “regularize the legal status of popular settlements
With actual help unforthcoming from the state, residents continued to resort to informal means of making the area livable. For example, residents self-constructed a bridge over the Banger River. The bridge was built without substantial government help, but fulfilled the building requirements of the local government (kelurahan). I learned from Marsudi that, in the 1970s, not all buildings had been residences; the riverbank was also used for animal farming. By 1980, most farms had been converted into houses. In the following quote, Marsudi mentions the manifold purposes of the river before it was embanked:

“Initially, there was no embankment (talut), right? There was only a slope. So that was used by kids at the time; for playing, for gardening, also as a hiding spot. From here to the South and to the North there were plants by the river. Hummingbird trees (turi). They had this spiky fruit that one could eat. There was lamtoro, too. And they also had a function: they prevented landslides along the river. But there was even river cleaning. The [municipal] Agency for Cleanliness (Dinas Kebersihan), right, was using that long bamboo with a sieve at the tip. That was used for pulling waste to the shore. You know, before the river wasn’t as dirty as today.”

The river had once been a source of enjoyment and food resources. But Marsudi also refers to the river bank as a space of concealment: here, in between trees and shrubs, criminals could become literally invisible and evade arrest. He is saddened by the loss of joyful river bustle and lush riverbank vegetation, but also welcomes riverbanks that are clear of undesirable subjects, such as criminals. This ambiguous nature of river banks, defying the panoptic surveillance of the state (Barker 1998), was a thorn in the side of the Suharto regime. Concerns of national security outweighed economic and ecological diversity.

While normalization was a top-down measure at the outset, its ideology is developmentalist. The “will to improve” (Li 2007) runs through Semarang’s normalization agenda. Framed as a development project, normalization projects often claim to employ modern river infrastructure and homeownership” (Kusno 2012:33) actually contributed to polarizing urban space, improving the infrastructure of strategically located areas while postponing improvement in less central ones. In view of KIP’s strong reliance on community labour, it is no wonder that the Northeast was not conceived of as a candidate for successful kampung upgrading. In the 1970s, this area struggled with high crime and poverty rates due to advanced marginalization and thus probably didn’t count as a potential candidate for near improvement.
and technology to improve the life quality of riverside neighbourhoods by reducing flood risk and curbing environmental degradation. In fact, inappropriate environmental conduct is often referred to as primary reason for flooding before lack of adequate infrastructure. Normalized riverbanks are thus supposed to stop pollution by residents. As a technocratic project focused on a dualistic relationship between kampung dwellers and the environment, normalization projects often fail to take into account other factors that increase flood risk and pollution. For example, many residents argued that increasing industrialization of the coastline was the prime cause for river pollution.

Marsudi remembered that…

“… there was contamination from leather treatment with alkali, so that it could be used in products, like bags or shoes. Maximally, once a month they would clean [their factory] with hot water. Hot water used for flushing out the acetals would be later evacuated. (...) Compared with today, that water was quite clean. Like the river in Penjaringan [a neighbourhood of Kemijen] that comes from Pertamina [an oil refining company]. That river was quite wide before, almost three meters. Its water was pristine. It would flow over here [into the Banger]. The river was very clean. Children bathed in it. It was even warm – it was wastewater from the evaporation process.”

Although Marsudi contrasts past social benefits of the river with its present, strongly degraded state, his memories reveal an already industrially polluted environment. Residents could still tolerate these levels of pollution, but normalization in fact tipped the scales: riverbed deepening and land subsidence made the river vulnerable to intrusion of oceanic water. Land subsidence can be traced to ground water extraction and soil settling. Between 1971 and 1980, Semarang experienced unprecedented population growth (average annual increase of about 45,000 individuals). Coastal neighbourhoods, like Kemijen, quickly built up, accelerating soil solidification with increased ground water extraction. Taken together, ground water extracting and build-up caused a phenomenon which became known as “land sinking” (keturunan tanah). Normalization’s focus on sterilizing riverbanks screened out far more complex ecological processes.

My point is, however, that normalisasi had lasting and unpredictable effects on Kemijen. It
changed the physiognomy of the Banger River substantially: not only was the river embanked and widened, but the government also enforced a minimum space between the bank and the first line of houses – for inspection purposes. This *jalan inspeksi* (inspection road) was to introduce more visibility into the densely inhabited riverside kampungs. Nowadays, the *jalan inspeksi* (inspection road) is one of the liveliest spaces of Kemijen. It is policed by communities who enforce traffic regulations and norms of conduct (for instance, women are discouraged from walking alone after nightfall; drinking alcohol and consumption of drugs are barred from this public space). At the same time, in many neighbourhoods the *jalan inspeksi* was also appropriated: not long after the riverbanks were constructed, they were reclaimed by residents – sometimes, former landowners laid claim to a parcel, mostly with prior permission of local leaders who might expect a bribe in return, and built wooden structures that served as tea shops or hang-out spots. Further, the riverbank features dwellings here and there that were built by newcomers after normalization. Members of these households often don’t have direct relatives in the neighborhood, they are considered newcomers (*pendatang*), and are socially more isolated. Building makeshift or more permanent houses on the riverbank is considered illegal, but often tolerated by the sub-district government. While considered as ‘illegal’ residents, they still pay an informal land tax (*retribusi*). Deeply altering the kampung-water relationship, normalization pushed the formalization of land and land use begun in colonial times. Both technological intervention and the extension of a state regulatory framework to the kampung were supposed to introduce a different set of human relations with the river. The ‘parasitic’ influence of kampung dwellers on this modern infrastructure had to be curbed, by creating a proper distance between the river and residents. ‘Illegal’ riverbank dwellers are not only discursively posited as disturbing a harmonious coexistence with water, but also marked out by the government for inhabiting a formally space.

Interestingly, normalization didn’t put an end to littering. Most people, like my landlord,
didn’t suddenly engage in prescribed ecological practices. Rather, what happened was that they internalized the condescending state discourse that framed their environment as filthy and undeveloped. Today, in view of continued littering, blame can be deferred to ‘illegal’ riverbank settlers or alternatively the government, when it fails to enforce official laws. Displacing blame is evident in Eko’s slur: “the people by the bridge will fish it out” – there will always be people that are even poorer and worse off than the litterer, that is, people who live directly by the water. Living in a close relationship with water in Semarang’s North, a hot and difficult place, breeds crass people with strong temperaments (*tinggi emosi*), as my friend Adin, a social activist, once explained to me.

While certain forms of cohabitation with the river were lost and others outlawed and criminalized in the normalization process, something new was created: tidal flooding compounded by monsoon floods. People generally hold that, in the past, flooding used to be tolerable. Marsudi reminisced that “when the raining stopped, the flooding also stopped.” Normalization streamlined drainage canals, which increased the overall water debit: “Three rivers became one: Banger River, the [East] Flood Canal and the *Babon* River; the one at the edge of the city. All those became one. It’s like narrowing the current. Eventually, it spilled over into peoples’ homes.” Adin also noticed that the rerouting of Banger River led to more inundation. The river’s flow used to resemble a straight line, but according to the government, it had to curve before connecting with the Javanese sea. While bending rivers is in fact a well-known practice used to reduce flash floods, most residents speculated that the central Agency for Public Works (*Dinas Pekerjaan Umum*) acted solely in the interest of the port businesses. Bending (*pembelokan*) the Banger allowed to reclaim marshy land in the port area that is now used by the city’s electricity plant. Notably, the swamp functioned as a protective belt from tidal waves. Adin pointed out that Kemijen used to be separated from the shoreline by a mangrove forest, which
was gradually destroyed over the course of coastal industrialization.

Normalisasi took a long time, as Marsudi remembered. Many residents living along the banks had to be resettled with most of the landowners refusing to accept housing elsewhere in the city and instead claiming monetary compensations (ganti rugi) with the intent of buying property within the area. The project eventually terminated well behind schedule in 1992. The remaining riverbank dwellings suggest that normalization never really achieved its ultimate goal and is an ongoing process. Tellingly, rumors circulate that prior to normalization works the government was too afraid of resistance from local preman (gangsters). It thus didn’t carry out the planned evictions. Others believed that the government had embezzled project funds and used the preman-story as a cover-up for running out of money. In other words, normalization neither rooted out fear and the specter of criminality nor achieved public monopoly over urban space, which is why the government is upholding normalization plans. What normalization did achieve was to re-inscribe the dominant image of deviation and backwardness in the North. I therefore now turn to a government-sanctioned river imaginary that showcases attempts by residents to change these images and moderate state fears around banjir. Here, the enrolment of the normalized riverscape in festivals is a way of linking locality to the state’s plot of modernization.

Normalisasi and Local Festivals

Since 2000, strong tidal flooding affecting coastal areas and some neighbourhoods closer to downtown increasingly garnered the attention of both media and the government (which, it should be added, often entertain strong nepotistic ties in Semarang, as I learned from journalists and residents). In an attempt to harness the attention of municipal politicians to problems with deficient river infrastructure, some residents of Kemijen have repeatedly organized events that explicitly revolved around the river and flooding. In 1998, a river cleansing ritual (ruwatan) was
first organized by inhabitants of Kemijen. This event also marked the launch of the resident organization Komayu, whose subsequent and ongoing river-focused activities I describe in chapter four. In 1998, Indonesia’s long-time president Suharto was forced to step down in the wake of mass protests against his corrupt and self-serving administration. Yet, as this subsection attempts to show, residents stage river festivals to renew governmental commitment to normalization, a formerly authoritarian urban project launched by the Suharto regime.

The co-founder of Komayu, Adin, explained that ruwatan ceremonies (he also referred to it as slametan or cie suak, which are Javanese and Chinese terms, to underline the ceremony’s deeply idiosyncratic and non-partisan character) served to “sidestep dangers or disturbances” (meninggirkan bahaya atau gangguan). In 2005 and 2006, they organized such a ruwatan along the Banger River. These ruwatans were devoted to the river. Ruwat means cleansing in Indonesian. Cleaning the river would help prevent flooding which caused repeated disturbances in the region. While a religious figure conducts such ceremonies, they also involve the ordinary population. The newspaper Suara Merdeka stated that families placed bamboo sticks (obor dari bambu) on the riverbank. While having spiritual overtones, these ceremonies were vehicles of political expression; they served primarily to “push the government” (mendorong pemerintah), as Adin said. He therefore also called the event a “demo” cloaked in culture. This ‘demo’ served to remind the “peoples’ delegates” (wakil rakyat) of society’s problems (permasalahan masyarakat).24 A news article actually put the term ruwat in quotation marks, probably to underline the slightly quirky use of ritualistic language for clearly political purposes.

The 2005 ruwatan failed to attract substantial attention from Semarang’s government. The workshop (sarasehan) that residents had organized to discuss the continuation (penindaklanjutan)

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of normalization was poorly attended and apparently of little appeal to politicians and bureaucrats. The festival idea was, however, not abandoned and continues to play a role in civil organizing to this day. In 2006 and 2007, the local NGO Perdikan co-organized so-called “climate change festivals” with riverside dwellers using funds from the international non-governmental organization Mercy Corps to raise awareness around the potential impacts of climate change. Again, the event had infrastructural connotations, as these events, sometimes also referred to as “festival of the people” (pesta rakyat) specifically drew attention to flooding. Furthermore, in 2008, engaged residents organized the first “boat competition” (lomba perahu) on the Banger River. In terms of outcomes, festivals always led to some form of improvement, as Adin noted. For example, embankments were often repaired after they had celebrated a festival (I focus on the topic of repair in the next chapter).

In sum, these festivals then aimed to remind the government of infrastructural improvement works begun in the past: more specifically, residents would ask in the context of cultural festivals for the construction of floodgates (pintu air) and river walls (talud) along the whole river. Festivals often took and continue to take place on the jalan inspeksi, which demonstrated a local embrace of normalization. Blom Hansen has pointed to the rise of festivals in postcolonial Bombay. Such public festivals “are closely tied to the locality’s wider politics of representation, to the production of the neighbourhood.” To produce a neighbourhood is, according to Blom Hansen (2001:54), “to claim a certain identity, a belonging, and thus, by implication, a set of entitlements for a particular area and for the people living there.”

In 2015, news broke that the city government would expedite a delayed anti-flooding project (the polder project that I analyze in the last chapter) by using municipal funds. The project was to get residents closer to a significant improvement of the Banger system than they had ever been. In view of this impending feat, the mayor was going to visit Kemijen – a highly important and
anticipated event, as the opening vignette of this chapter showed. His visit was supposed to coincide with the celebratory announcement of plans for a kampung beautification project. Again, residents cooperated with the kelurahan to organize a festival entitled Caring for Banger River Festival (*Festival Kependulian Kali Banger*). Tellingly, the organizers explained to me that in previous iterations of the festival, they simply used Festival Kali Banger as title. But that title only related to the betterment of river infrastructure. This time, they wanted to show that humanity could also be “built” (*tapi manusia juga dibangun*). The “caring” for the river in the title appreciated the human role in infrastructural maintenance, a tenet of local worth since normalization. Building on spaces and infrastructures that were created in the wake of normalization, these festivals cast normalization as a desired, participatory, and resident-driven project.

At another neighbourhood meeting, which aimed to prepare RTs for a visit from the mayor and followed the meeting described at the beginning, the lurah held a zealous appeal that underlined the role that residents’ behavior (*perilaku*) played in improving the neighbourhood – although the community had shown exemplary commitment and willingness to cooperate with the local government, they had to send the right message on the day of the mayor’s visit:

“Concerning the mayor’s visit for the river cleaning, our collective behaviour has to reflect a clean Banger River and local youth. [...] I want to show that the residents of this area care about waste – that’s where I’ll be pointing. Sure, our drainage system is still not working... but garbage makes rob look even worse. [...] Those are old habits but they have a strong impact. I want residents to look united (*guyung*) and motivated so that we come across as residents that are actually interested in creating a better environment. The mayor told me that if he gets re-elected, we will receive more help.”

The lurah asks residents to refrain from complaining about the current situation – the still deficient drainage infrastructure. Instead, he encourages them to show commitment to the city’s drainage plans, as this could set processes in motion that might cure the system’s dysfunctions. ‘Caring,’ as opposed to indulging in ‘old habits,’ is the affect that festivals and other public events
also showcase. The speech and festivals urge residents to distance themselves from the past and those that still inhabit it, such as ‘illegal’ riverbank dwellers. Embracing the drainage system is a prerequisite of local progress and it is a process that is mediated by caring for infrastructure. Normalization has thus seeped into social practices and peoples’ outlooks on the future. Though infrastructure isn’t perceived as a panacea, improvement is contingent on building a good character and showing care for the neighborhood’s environment.

Epilogue – “Killing the River”

A Jakarta Post article from 2012 paints the future of Semarang’s low-lying delta in apocalyptic tones: “Like Venice and Mexico City, the city of Semarang (...) is slowly sinking. Rising sea levels as a result of global warming further add to the burden of these cities.” Expected sea level rise casts a dark shadow upon the future of Semarang’s littoral. According to vulnerability assessments conducted in Northern kampungs and frequently cited in journalistic reports, residents “experienced” increasingly high rates of land subsidence, “ranging from about 10 to 15 centimetres annually” (The Jakarta Post 2012). In a Jakarta Post article, a reporter tried to capture reactions to a nearing catastrophe:

“For Mrs. Elizabeth, who was born [here] and lived in the village for 43 years, the problem of the sinking houses is caused by the “rising water” coming from the sea. However, she didn’t make any connections to global warming as some people in the city might have. We asked a group of boys in the village what they thought caused houses to sink and their answers were similar to Mrs. Elizabeth’s. We further asked the boys: “Which one is true: Is it the sea water that is rising or is it the houses that are sinking?” The boys apparently became confused and shrugged their shoulders.”

The residents’ answers sound ignorant and naïve given Semarang’s future painted in grim colors. The newspaper article seems to enlist these kampung inhabitants as extras in a familiar

media staging of Semarang’s backward North. They come across as ignorant and uninformed. The government is not prepared to wait for residents to grasp the gravity of the situation. “Some people in the city,” however, have already made the connection. Based on scientific “evidence,” such as IPCC reports and vulnerability assessments conducted by foreign experts, Semarang’s government is poised to undertake a range of infrastructural projects that aim at protecting the littoral from floods. The plans foresee the fortification of the coastline by installing breakwaters off the coast and building seawalls along the shore. Another step in this process is the closure of river outlets to stave off river-ocean interaction. The municipality pays external experts to monitor river debits and simulate flooding. One of its trusted advisors strongly suggested to implement multiple polders (closed hydrological systems) in order to fully regulate water flux throughout the city and prevent flooding. He generally referred to closing the rivers as “killing” them (mematikan). The perceived crisis of rob has renewed a commitment to developing the North by infrastructural means.

The scope of these suggested interventions is nothing less than monumental. Incrementally, the shore will be fortified and rivers running through residential areas will be dammed and re-embanked. Infrastructural changes will coincide with crucial adjustments in the “social” and “cultural” spheres of floodplain communities: engineering flood control requires educating riverside dwellers so that they treat rivers as delicate parts of an organic system. The technical details of Semarang’s drainage bylaws are so tedious that Semarang’s Municipal Planning Agency, Bappeda, had to outsource a lot of its planning work to specialists. In 2014, Bappeda crafted a new drainage law which can be summarized as a roadmap for building a coherent and integral drainage system that is recognizant of future environmental challenges. To scale this grand vision to the local, the plan provides a long list of all the parts (bagian) of the drainage system. Here, it clearly delineates authorities and responsibilities (wewenang dan tanggung
jawab) of state, private, and civil actors. Section six on pengelolaan (management) outlines the governing role of a so-called local management body (badan pengelola), which is strongly encouraged to assist government agencies in operating and supervising the system. The role of civil society is further specified in paragraph 59: here, civil actors are given the “opportunity” to join in the supervision of the drainage system. They are encouraged to form “work groups” (kelompok kerja) to consist of “affected” (terkena) community groups. These groups consisting of flood victims are expected to funnel communal aspirations to the government and “formulate ideas” (merumuskan pemikiran). In a conversation with a lower-rank member of Bappeda, I learned that this section was probably the most innovative addition to drainage policy. However, the agency had admittedly still difficulties to imagine the “way” in which the civil work group would come to cooperate with the government. It would have to be specified at a later stage through another by-law (perwal).

Publicly, the new drainage law was heralded as a symbol of rare prestige: Semarang was considered the first Indonesian city to adopt such ‘participatory’ measures. While the plan has not yet been realized, conjuring a specific future has already translated into concrete changes in the urban fabric: currently, Bappeda is strongly involved in finishing a much-awaited polder project (the spatiotemporal effects of which I describe in detail in the last chapter). Suffice it to say that the pilot project pioneered in many ways a novel form of association between government and society. Partly improvising on the new regulatory environment created by Bappeda, the polder project was able to assemble diverse actors and became a launch pad for further projects, imagining the future kampung along with its riverine environment and making it at the same time.

For example, the consultant hired by Bappeda to conduct a review study of the drainage plan was also chairman of the advisory board created to guide the implementation of the polder. The drainage regulation was in fact pre-tailored to the legal requirements of this project, as – for the
first time in Semarang’s history – it allows non-governmental organisms to raise a ‘water tax’ from citizens. As the chairman pointed out to private stakeholders at an informational meeting: “when the drainage law is out later on, we’ll have the right to take contributions (nanti Perda drainase keluar, kita berhak ambil iuran). What congeals here is a unique cooperation that sees donor requirements justify the expansion of state authority into the everyday lives of kampung dwellers.

Figure 8: Drainage roadmap for Semarang’s delta. All rivers are framed by river banks (tanggul sungai).

In an interview, the polder board’s chairman said that the Polder Banger is the beginning of a complete refashioning of water management. All rivers will be fully embanked all the way from their upstream source to the littoral. He likened these new embanked and fully controlled rivers to the “Jalan Tol” (toll roads) as they would channel surplus water to the estuarine. His comparison could not have been more telling. Kusno (2000) has analyzed the New Order imaginary of urban fly-overs – throughways that allow for unobstructed flow of cars within cities.
He explained that modern urban infrastructure required residents to develop infrastructural aptitude, thereby constituting specific political subjectivities.

As current plans of the government show, dreams of taming and channeling water are still being dreamed. While the political conditions of their articulation have shifted, they stem from concerns that are often still the same as in colonial times. Enrolling the community in new programs that abide by ‘normalization’ principles follows well-rehearsed arguments that patronize kampung inhabitants and see in their environment the reason for moral and environmental misconduct. ‘Killing the river’ (matikan sungai) indeed means carrying out a specific incision into the body of the kampung, a problematic extremity. As this chapter and the previous one have demonstrated, the environment and the kampung (subject) have been deeply entangled in state discourse since the beginning of Semarang’s urbanization. Semarang’s city council in colonial times aimed at modernizing the ‘dark’ North of Semarang and thereby laid the ideological groundwork for subsequent technological modernization (“normalization”) schemes. Today, it is through the ‘democratization’ of water management that the parasitic relationship between coastal kampungs and the city’s drainage system is supposed to come undone. By pointing to the environmental impacts of normalization and its ecological consequences – tidal flooding – I have outlined the flipside of this intervention. The next chapter will look specifically at present struggles of residents to deal with its outcomes.

One century after the colonial government of Indies Semarang tried to formalize and morally undergird the expansion of its colonial rule into the ‘inchoate’ kampungs of the littoral, I showed that the delta of Semarang is still in the making. The findings discussed in this chapter suggest not only that the kampung and the river are contested objects, subject to shifting economic and political interests, but that both the government and the population perceive them as unfinished. Conjuring up commitment to development and environmental ‘care’ has become a main interface
through which inhabitants and the government set the terms of change. I outlined some possible reasons for this sense of incompleteness: first, residents have turned paternalism and state anxieties into catalysts driving the infrastructural improvement of the area, in which some residents, such as Rendy, find an active role. Second, the government is striving to contain potentialities; trickles of immigrants, crime, and water, that could turn into floods of sorts. Kampung inhabitants’ marginal position with regards to the political processes and powers that shape their environment, its infrastructures and biophysical processes, re-materializes in state programs and infrastructural schemes. The Northern subject is still in the making. Recent political shifts force the local administration to involve residents in the infrastructural re-making of the delta. Equipping the delta with polders, as Semarang’s drainage roadmap suggests, reminds me of Mitchell’s concept of enframing (2002:9). Drainage infrastructure, with its various components like inspection roads, pumps, and riverbanks, can be seen as a technique of order that affords the “possibility of coordinating and increasing individual effort.” According to Mitchell, enframing further creates a division in social space and, therefore, an “ordinary way of effecting what the modern individual experiences as the really real.” As such, the method of embanking provides vantage points, the inspection road, from which to observe the kampung.
3) FLOATING

Endurance and the ‘Quasi-Events’ of Living with Flooding

Thereupon, in the journey of time
The sea retreated from the continent
The mud was reborn as swamp
And the swamp grew into a city

. . .

Sticky air, dirty skies, stuffed gutters
traffic jam
Nature has become savage,
values being calculated in fixed sums
O my true cover. Is there still
the light of full moons
for all the urbanites and unemployed
for the losers who lost hope
for the urban citizens logged
in tidal and river water
for the rest of time?

Hatta, dalam perjalanan masa
Laut menjauh dari benua
Lumpur menjelma menjadi rawa
Rawa pun tumbuh menjadi kota

. . .

Udara pengap, langit kotor, saluran mampet,
lalu lintas macet
Alam telah menjadi ganas,
nilai-nilai dihitung dengan uang pas!
O, hamparan kesetiaanku. Masih adakah
purnama cahaya
Bagi para urban dan pengangguran
Bagi orang-orang kalah yang kehilangan harapan
Bagi warga kota yang tergenang
rob dan banjir
sepanjang zaman?

Djawahir Muhammad (2011), from Semarang Surga Yang
Hilang (Semarang, A Lost Paradise)26

Prelude

At a meeting between Indonesian provincial agencies and a Dutch consortium of NGOs and technical consultants, I had the opportunity to speak with a member of an organization tasked with rehabilitating a sizeable stretch of coastal mangrove forest east of Semarang. Intrigued by the surging presence of Dutch development projects in Semarang (see also Yapp, forthcoming), I asked her why her team had decided to work on the margins of Greater Semarang. Her answer was straightforward: “The coast of Semarang City is too hard for this kind of project” (my emphasis).

The excerpt from Djawahir Muhammad’s poem cited at the outset of this section also speaks

26 I want to express my gratitude to the poet for allowing me to cite his work. Further, I wouldn’t have come across his writings if it hadn’t been for my good friend Wahyu Ambari. The full poem was published in Membela Semarang! by Pustaka Semarang 16.
to physical mutations that make the North of Semarang hard. But he is offering a poetic description of how these transformations had made life hard. As such, the poem initiates a reflection on the hardship of dealing with an everlasting present, a meantime, textured by chronic disaster in this chapter. I describe the experience of a temporal and existential cul-de-sac mirrored in and lived through chronic infrastructural deficiency and breakdown. A complex array of infrastructures that are remnants of previous plans gone awry limits peoples’ own agency in creating viable long-term plans that have a shot at a better future. In the locally famous poem, Djawahir describes the dawn of a coastal settlement in which people cohabit harmoniously with the delta’s nature; a nature that is benevolent, malleable, and pregnant with possibility. The passage of time goes hand in hand with change and ecological metamorphosis, until suddenly the nexus between time and nature stops working for its human inhabitants. Having been enclosed and commodified in the wake of industrial capitalism, nature grows ‘savage’ and rebels against humanity. The north turns into an eternal hell. The poet, who grew up in North Semarang and calls himself a witness (saksi) of the area’s inhabitants’ plight, specifically refers to poor residents whose lives are depicted as stagnating in a toxic mixture of air pollution and filthy flood water. A feeling pervades of being stuck in this stretched-out present that feels like an extended apocalypse without the usual catharsis at its end. After describing the effects of normalization, this chapter zooms in on its aftermath, including the stench of stagnant outflow and the repetitiveness of improvement projects that don’t lead to improvement. Hardening is shown to be an ongoing, layering process that forecloses futures in specific ways and forces individuals to deal with the present through disparate strategies and distinct architectures of time (Sharma 2014). In the poem cited above, peoples’ lives end up enclosed in an era (zaman) the exact ending of which seems uncertain.

I argue that the process of river normalization has produced a disposition that Baxstrom
(2012) has called ‘baroque.’ Similar to interlocking development schemes that shaped the urban fabric of Kuala Lumpur in the 1990s, river normalization introduced new realities and temporalities into the lives of Northern dwellers. The baroque disposition is a response to plans that attempt to govern time. It allows residents to fold ruptures, variably experienced or witnessed due to evictions, house erasures, or floods, within their actions and movements. In this chapter, I’m also interested in the subjective experience of urban worlds that De Boeck (2014 [2004]:80) calls “in crisis.” De Boeck argues that people in Kinshasa and elsewhere “have no choice but to continue to live in a world that seems to be falling apart before their very eyes” (id.). De Boeck queries if and how people come to terms with the many, “daily experienced ruptures and breaches in their lives” (id.:81). In North Semarang, it is often government plans that cause such ruptures. One way in which ruptures get folded into peoples’ lives is through repair. Here, I rely on Jackson’s (2014) critical notion of repair to maintain the extant yet failing systems of modernity. In view of constantly required repair of domestic and public kampung infrastructure, I suggest to see both the “baroque” disposition and repair as integral expressions of the chronic.

Decomposition and Repair in the Meantime

De Boeck traces the sudden popularity of apocalyptic visions of time to a quest for completion; in contrast to the chaos of everyday life in the city, the apocalypse is envisioned and longed for as the end of breakdown and a path to liberation. Notably, the decomposition of peoples’ lifeworlds in Kinshasa coincides with a war-inflicted memory crisis – a breakdown of the production of history – which results in the “impossibility to place or posit death” (De Boeck 2014:81). The present moment, in which the idea of doom is a function of hope, turns into a stretched interlude, a meantime, with death embedded in its diffuse time scale: “not only is death no longer as before, it is no longer the end of the world either” (De Boeck 2005:25). In this
extended moment of breach, the absence of reliable historical narratives ultimately renders impossible the proclamation of an era’s death. I showed in the previous chapter that river normalization, as a vehicle of modernization of the North started in colonial times, never actually ended. While being a new developmental order laid on top of colonial hierarchies, it does not realize the promise of modernity. In the wake of failed national development, De Boeck (id.:108-109) observed that people try “to escape the contradictions and the disjunctures” of this postcolonial experience by reviving communitarian ideals. This exit strategy is, however, systematically frustrated by the contradictions of postcolonial reality. For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on attempts to endure the disjunctures of the postcolonial experience, by pointing to the revival of pumping communities (pompanisasi) and the hopes articulated with the realization of a municipal polder project. However, I relate these attempts not to the promise of apocalyptic deliverance, but variably to a religiously motivated work ethic and promise of economic progress.

According to Jackson (2014), (infrastructural) repair invariably constitutes an aftermath, an activity following the failure of technological systems that are embedded in social worlds. Narotzky and Besnier (2014:S8) have argued that, when dealing with a world in crisis, actors draw on the resources of an environment that is “largely not of their own making but in which they have to live.” Repair draws together limited resources, such as time and material. In a similar vein, De Boeck (2004) considers crisis as a ‘catch-22’ situation. Far from dispelling action, a catch-22 does afford possibilities, none of which seem satisfactory. I rely on this notion of dilemma to describe disaster in Northern kampungs. Northern kampungs attract a sizeable amount of small-scale infrastructure projects and a considerable influx of materials. Gravel, cement, brick, sand, and labour keep flowing into the kampung, but instead of making inroads in reducing flood risk, the projects supported by materials and strenuous effort fizzle out, or worse, even tighten the
grip of toxicity and disease.

The premise of this chapter is that people don’t cease to exist or act in the face of this dilemma. On the contrary, I contend that there is lively movement in this everlasting present. This steady movement produces a differential buoyancy, an equitably distributed ability to ‘float’ or stay afloat. From within the crumbling postmodern swamp, projects can emerge that suspend decline, while also confirming this trend. Povinelli qualifies these projects as quasi-events, because they are mostly misrecognized and overlooked. Quasi-events can be the result of an intentional consolidation of energies (labour, capital, or material resources), but they are prevented from passing critical thresholds of “eventfulness.” The critical evaluation of what counts as eventful has to be understood in relation to the tense of late liberalism, according to Povinelli. Occurrence, here, is rhythmed to specific regimes of social belonging, such that “people experience the kinds of events that make up their lives not only as ordinary but generalizable” (2011:133). Quasi-events are costly and have consequences. Povinelli pays attention to a “violence of enervation” that leads to bottomless exhaustion. In the realm of projects, materials and good ideas always seem to pile up, but not in a conducive way. When such projects get eventually cut off at the pass, they will have used up attention and energies from exhaustible bodies. The ways in which forms of eventfulness distribute the feeling of enervation and endurance explains why certain individuals’ suffering doesn’t show or is taken for granted. I’m thus interested in the “modes of exhaustion and endurance that are ordinary, chronic rather than catastrophic, crisis-laden, and sublime” (id.:132).

This chapter describes the experience of staying afloat from different perspectives and what floating looks and feels like for different people. For these people, recurrent events of tidal flooding demand timely adaptation, increased perceptiveness and being tuned into environment and infrastructural repair projects. It also means mobilizing energy for their own projects of repair
and flood prevention. Yet, tidal flooding never forms a window onto the long-term future of the neighbourhood, its relations with the wider city, and the place occupied by poor people within it.

In the photo-ethnography part of this chapter, I examine specific techniques of recursive flood prevention at the level of the house(hold). These techniques – “architectures” – demonstrate the relations of residents with the temporalities of development plans and their outcomes, and the uncertainty these introduce into decision-making. Relying on first-hand experiences of residents and observations of the rhythms of everyday life, I capture the ‘savage nature’ of North Semarang.

I pay particular attention to two northern neighborhoods that belong to different yet neighboring sub-districts divided by a main road. Let me restate that these neighborhoods have developed in the “margins of the state” (Das & Poole, 2004). I don’t mean to say that they are autonomous, because power barely manifested or has not been fully articulated here. Rather, I hold that kampungs have been assiduously constituted by different regimes of power, both colonial and postcolonial, that capitalized on an unequal development. Today, the Indonesian state efficiently relies on kampungs as partly self-governed housing projects for the workforce – auto-constructed social housing, if you will. By withdrawing from the scene of the kampung, the Indonesian state makes its otherwise ubiquitous presence less felt (Newberry 2008). While this chapter doesn’t speak directly to this kind of state presence or the role of state programs in giving shape to local projects, the following chapter hones in on the claim-making strategies of particular residents in order to capture state-society relations.

Act I: Bric-a-brac

On rainy days, the humid kampung air can reek of sewage and wet debris, intensified by waste flushed into the Banger river through polluted drainage capillaries. Imagine the pool of an abandoned home filled up with debris, waste, and many toxic substances. I sat many times with
Deni and his family in front of their riverside house, breathing the smelly exudations of the Banger. Deni is married and has three children. His youngest son, Putra, is a lively, constantly babbling boy and superhero fanatic. He is a source of entertainment for the whole family and neighbours and rumored to have the gift of seeing ghosts. The family’s small brick house, inherited (warisan) from Deni’s parents, is separated from the river by a narrow embankment road (jalan inspeksi) mainly used by pedestrians and motorcyclists. Cars and trucks avoid it. Alternatively, we would chat at Deni’s food stand by the main street. Here, heavy trucks of the state-owned oil company Pertamina and travel buses would roar past us, while thirsty mosquitoes whirred around our heads. Most of Deni’s routines take place between the river and his food stand, which are connected by a short, paved alleyway (gang). He often contrasted the smallness of his everyday life to a past life rich with activities. For example, he told me that he used to be an English teacher and tourist guide. “Now, I can barely remember English. But it’s like that.” He sometimes asked me for phone numbers of other Westerners, so he could offer them tours to Java’s cultural sights.

Deni’s oldest son, Toni, who would like to study abroad, once told me that many neighbors have already moved uptown (naik ke atas) to escape the floodplain and socially stigmatized area. Economic success in Semarang often translates into social and geographical ascension. If residents have the means, they prefer to leave their downstream residences behind. Toni deplored that the few successful residents stopped caring about the floodplain kampungs, as if they wanted to excise this place from their identity and present. Deni himself regularly complained about lacking public commitment to improve water infrastructure in his sub-district, and a dearth of public figures (tokoh masyarakat). Getting worked up, he lamented that nobody stepped up for them, not even the wealthy neighborhood chief (RT), in whose flood-safe house I was renting a room, as mentioned in the first chapter.
Deni’s family especially worried about high tides during dry season months, when the embankment (tanggul) barely withstood the additional pressure of in-flowing tidewater. At high tide, the Banger looks like it is on the verge of bursting. Because the river water doesn’t visibly flow, the river’s physical mutation is better approximated by the notion of gradual swelling. Multiple times residents have informed the sub-district government of the river bank’s damaged state in view of increasing water pressure, but nothing had been done, according to Deni. The dirt floors of his house are flooded almost daily due to the river’s tidal expansion. Stacking miscellaneous building material against the bank in hopes of increasing its stability doesn’t quite cut it, because the water somehow finds its way through cracks in wall and pavement. With flower pots placed on top of and red bricks stacked against it, the riverbank looks like a shelf cluttered with bric-a-brac. There is something romantic and nostalgic about the space in between the house and the riverbank. The low frangipani in front of the house provides pleasant shade, a space that especially Deni’s daughter, Eny, seemed to enjoy in the morning, when the air was fresh and breezy; an escape from the moldy inside of the house.

Not only in Semarang, but also in other Javanese cities struggling with increasing tidal highs and land subsidence, tidal flooding events are called rob. Upon visiting the street in front of Deni’s house, a resident of the flood-prone area once told me that most residents welcomed rob for two reasons: first, its regularity allows to make reasonable predictions of flood risk, as people know what normal and abnormal river levels amount to. If rob is strong, for example, coincidental rainfall will assuredly cause rivers or canals to overflow. Second, tidal floods provide rezeki, a term that can variably mean livelihood or luck. When I asked him what he meant, he pointed to the streets. Lifting them required labour and local oversight. Rob is the pulsating vein of economic and social life in most of North Semarang. In the presence of flood risks, residents have made their lives, pursuing their own projects with more or less success. More importantly, however,
floods are not regarded as necessarily impeding economic or personal success. With the regularity of rob, the challenge becomes one of succeeding in life in an area whose economy is stagnant, whose infrastructure is outdated and porous, and whose built environment shrinks yearly. Welcoming rob is then not the same as normalizing crisis and risk, but assuming a relatively stable place in society from which to try your best shot at social ascension or wait for better times. It is this generalized distribution of risks and opportunities that frames efforts to prevent and live with flooding as quasi-events – something that puts a repeated strain on the lives of dwellers without essentially disrupting it. Povinelli (2011:4) frames the suffering of marginalized subjects in late liberal economies as a series of quasi-events through which their lives digress into a “form of death that can be certified as due to the vagary of ‘natural causes’.” This kind of “dispersed suffering,” she argues, depends on socially consubstantial ethical responses to such suffering. For example, when Deni complained one day about chronic bleeding from his anus, Eny joked that he always liked to whine. Even when Deni added that he also regularly had fevers, his daughter only laughed. Deni’s physical suffering was compounded by unrequited attempts of hustling and protecting his house from floods. His actions were determined in relation to the temporal structures of neighbourhood-level and large-scale plans, such as infrastructural improvement projects. While his own plans seemed doomed, his daughter mocked his ailments as petty and unwarranted, as if they didn’t deserve attention. Baxstrom (2012) considers plans as events that respond to other, more prominent, events, such as institutionally driven, or dominant, development schemes. He shows the abilities of individuals to sense and respond to the multiplicities and complexities of daily life in urban places (around the world). When individuals’ plans fail, though, they also produce events. How do we account for those?

While Povinelli holds that dominant plans can provide the stuff from which the scaffolding of individual “social projects” is made, she shows more firmly and plausibly than Baxstrom how
such projects are rarely voluntary. Deni’s family’s attempt to stop flooding by stacking found bricks against the river wall disaggregates aspects of the material world which is a result of plans, with the intention of mounting an individual project that produces momentary relief. These new material scaffoldings of “endurance” are, however, exposed to multiple stresses and often last for brief moments. Instead of “making anything like a definitive event occur in the world,” (id. 10) such attempts quickly short-circuit; they can be understood as efforts, in an individual and collective sense, to endure ongoing structural harm. Despite failing to disrupt social grids of time they exist in concrete ways that express modest aspirations. Povinelli’s considerations of power in relation to planning are closer to Deni’s reality than Baxstrom’s idea of intersecting plans. He places emphasis on innovative and congenial responses to dominant projects. But how can we account for an ethics that downplays the suffering ensuing from failed projects, as expressed in Eny’s critique of her father? Baxstrom doesn’t think about the interplay of power and planning as having definitive, exclusive and demoralizing effects.
When I came by Deni’s house a few months later, I saw the whole family sitting by the river. I stopped to talk as I noticed with curiosity that workers (tukang) were busy dredging the gutter (saluran) in front of the house. Wider and deeper, the gutter now looked like a small water conduit with concrete edges. Putra was absorbed in overseeing the works and ran around cheerfully in his Spiderman pajamas. Deni explained to me that they were carrying out kampung improvement work (kerja bakti) as they had received IDR 16 million (ca. USD 1200) from the government for repairs. He added proudly that he had been elected substitute neighborhood head (wakil RW). Repairs were deemed necessary, because water in the gutter had been barely flowing. After the deepening, it could run more easily to the pumping station from where it was pumped into the river, Deni explained in a workmanlike manner. He leisurely snapped his cigarette stub into the river. We agreed, though, that they still had to raise their floors if they wanted to be out of rob’s reach. In fact, that was why they saved the brown soil from dredging the gutter in an adjacent
roofed part of their house. Eny said smilingly that this free dirt (tanah uruk) will come in handy in the future. That is, when the time is ripe to level up their house.

In view of the importance of repair in a world based on creative destruction, Jackson (2014) has urged scholars of innovation and media to rethink the relationship of technology and infrastructure to broader social worlds. He challenges us to take erosion, breakdown, and decay as a basis in thinking through technology. ‘Broken world thinking’ questions the belief that only innovation and construction provide the way forward. Infrastructure, the scaffolding of progress, has taken a crack. This is nowhere more visible than in Deni’s case: cracks show in the embankment and road in front of his house, seemingly stretching as far as the façade of his own broken-down abode. Jackson suggests paying attention to and appreciate the manifold and ongoing activities by which some kind of stability is maintained in this world of breakdown. These invisible arts of repair restore infrastructure, “one not-so-metaphoric brick at a time” (Jackson 2014:222). Rearticulating materials to achieve stability can occasion hope, as Deni’s daughter’s smile suggests. In this world of suffering and possibility, repair is a labour of care “by which order and meaning in complex sociotechnical systems are maintained and transformed” (id.). Jackson points out that re-articulation falls under “practice” and not “representation,” which is a crucial observation. Deni’s activities of repair don’t deserve representation. They count as cunning and unofficial; while some residents shrugged them off as inefficient, officials I spoke to suggested that they might even undermine the original principle of river infrastructure, by disturbing its technological logic. But in a world that is always breaking, generating excess and risk, Deni and his family have to put up with such accusations. As Jackson puts is, “repair inherits an old and layered world, making history but not in the circumstances of its choosing” (id. 223).

Act II: The Neighbourhood Pump
Another daily fieldwork interlocutor of mine was Arief. Although not native to the area of Semarang, but originally from the Central Javanese town Magelang, Arief devoted much of his leisure time to maintaining order and cleanliness in his adopted neighborhood and home. “This is my turf (wevenang),” he once said laughingly, gesturing to a stretch of about hundred meters along the embankment. Even before being elected as a neighborhood head (Ketua RW) three years ago, Arief felt deeply responsible for the cleanliness of his ‘turf:’ he swept the street separating the river and his house daily, he cleared waste off the gutters manually, and he assigned space for garbage disposal. He attended most meetings at the neighborhood level and convened the neighbourhood heads (RT) every month. Arief’s commitment to cleanliness, civil engagement, and honesty have produced tangible results in his eyes. He was convinced that his turf was the cleanest in the whole sub-district. In fact, when the mayor announced an official visit shortly before Ramadan, the sub-district head (lurah) suggested a solemn inspection of Arief’s territory, which served as an example of successful local governance. His volunteer work often left Arief exhausted to the point of passing out during conversations. When we attended neighborhood meetings together, Arief was often the first to doze off on a plastic chair in second row. His wife, Ariel, was sometimes worried about his permanent somnolence. During the day, Ariel sold snacks and beverages in a makeshift canteen by the river. (The warung might not outlast normalization plans, as I will explain later.) Arief’s family relied on his daytime job earnings – he made the minimum wage in a local baseball factory. After returning from work in the early evening, he would check in with his family and closest neighbours, have chats, and then help out in the canteen. His devotion to his community overlapped often with his snack-selling business: many older constituents of the neighbourhood association (RW) would come by to chat, hang out, and eat, which is why their canteen was quickly nicknamed dewan (parliament or council) after it

27 The minimum wage was IDR 1,685,000 per month in 2015 which equals USD 117.
opened during Indonesia’s presidential elections in 2014.

Located on the river bank and about 1m below street level, Arief’s house is flooded every second day. Whenever I visited the family, the floor tiles were inundated; chairs, benches, and dressers standing in a brownish liquid. But it used to be even worse. Two years ago, Arief’s neighbourhood purchased a pump with a pro-poor government grant. If it was midday, that diesel pump would usually be running to bring down the water level in the street gutter. The pump dumps sewage water and run-off into the river. During high tide, however, rob prevented them from pumping surplus water into the river, because it could not absorb it. “It makes no sense to pump out the water now as it would return just as quickly,” Arief explained to me, indicating the uncertain usefulness of their collective effort. This year, his family was able to save enough money to raise the floors of their bedroom so that they would not have to sleep in a dark puddle. But the other rooms would have to wait. Private investments and communal efforts work towards relief

*Figure 10: Rob in Arief’s house.*
from floods, but they are rarely coordinated.

A few years ago, Arief started advocating the aforementioned communal pump. His engagement as neighbourhood chief earned them the cherished diesel pump, which they run as often as possible. Arief suggested a nonbinding monthly community tax (iuran) to pay for maintenance and operation expenses – a rule most of his constituents gladly comply with. For now, rob was “under control,” many claimed, since they were taking water management in their own hands. When I asked him why he invested so much personal time and labor in the neighborhood organization, he answered:

I tell my friends not to expect help [from the government]. Poor people (orang tidak mampu) ask for help. Help comes only once. But we work in the name of God (ibadah). Our thinking has to be focused on the long term. In the past, we didn’t have our own pumps (pompanisasi) and everybody had to see for themselves (masing-masing harus bertahan).

In view of increasingly frequent occurrences of rob flooding, Arief distinguishes philanthropic support offered by state programs from long-term investments done in a communitarian fashion. He also contrasts sporadic repair (of neighbourhood infrastructure), the kind of work on which Deni’s existence depends, with schemes that put resident groups in charge. However, the neighbourhood pump, too, is susceptible to damage and breakdown. As the pump turned into an object of everyday use, repairs quickly became necessary. The neighborhood’s communal coffer (tabung) didn’t always suffice to pay for essential maintenance. I witnessed several times how Arief reminded his constituents at community gatherings (rapat RW) of their financial and ethical responsibility. Arief justified the added economic burden on riverside dwellers as ethical work in the name of the future of the neighbourhood.

Framing auto-construction as a form of religious labor is typical for Indonesian kampungs. Self-governed kampungs on the margins of urban centers can be traced back to colonial land governance (Cobban 1974), which strictly divided Dutch property and native land (see first chapter). Economically autonomous but politically marginalized, kampungs developed
sociocultural mechanisms to compensate for the absence of welfare structures and public infrastructure. While the Indonesian state has devised several bio-politically motivated schemes to improve living conditions in kampungs (Kusno 1998; Silver 2011), urban neighborhoods retain a certain degree of social autonomy. Newberry (2008:241) described kampungs as community forms “reproduced through governance across various regimes but also through daily exchanges and support between inhabitants.” The case of Arief underlines the tremendous role that personal labor plays in creating and maintaining a viable environment and working infrastructures. In a social-entrepreneurial spirit, Arief has urged his community to take matters into their own hands. But in the absence of long-term public investment in the area’s infrastructure (see previous chapter), even his collectively owned pump, protected from water by a massive concrete hedge, simply loops water, effort and labour into short circuits.

In fact, the government evaluates local labour, such as performed by Arief, as a positive example of self-help and progress, because it showed that residents acknowledged the importance of working towards collective well-being by caring for the environment. At a certain point during my research, after news broke that the city government would expedite a delayed flood control project (namely, the Dutch-designed polder discussed in the last chapter), Arief was jubilant. In the neighbourhood, there was a feeling of content and change in the air. Residents felt assured that rob would soon lessen or disappear and that their efforts had played a significant role in this. They had made it through the rainy season without major flooding; seasonal and economic rhythms proved successfully synched, as the kampung infrastructure was raised just in time to resist rising water levels. At a neighborhood meeting presided by Arief, which aimed to be ready for the mayor’s visit, the lurah held a zealous appeal. Of note is that the lurah, a state representative, rarely attended such meetings, but, as mentioned earlier, Arief’s community had shown exemplary commitment and willingness to cooperate with the local government. The
community would play an important role in the mayor’s upcoming participation in their annual river cleaning event.

“Concerning the mayor’s visit, our collective behavior has to reflect a clean Banger river and local youth… I want to show that the residents of this area care about waste, that’s where I’ll be pointing. Sure, in the meantime, our drainage is still like this, but garbage makes rob look worse… Those are old habits but they have a strong impact. I want residents to look united (guyung) and motivated so that we come across as residents that are actually interested in making a better environment. The mayor told me that if he gets reelected, we will receive more help. This year, we got a lot of help already – 50 billion Rupiah [ca. USD 3,470,000] for Polder Banger.”

The lurah’s speech reflects the importance of the large-scale water management project for the sub-district. He also echoes an official discourse which encourages communities to be “united” and “interested in improving the environment.” Although several other sub-districts would benefit from the anti-flooding project, he makes it sound as if they, in particular, had been rewarded with public investment in the area for changing their ‘old habits.’ The content and jubilance, I suggest, show that residents felt they had become the rightful targets – the ethical substance – of governance projects, such as the polder.

On the day of the mayoral visit, however, Arief had a stroke. At some point, his face was weirdly disfigured; one side of his mouth had dropped beyond redress. Strokes being rather common among middle-aged adults in Indonesia, Arief was immediately aware of his affliction, but continued the inspection along with other public figures of his neighborhood. People commented that he looked and talked funny. Weeks after the incident, I accompanied him to a weekly check-up at the hospital. He had been diagnosed with a stroke due to exhaustion (kecapaian) and was put on strong medication. Despite admitting his extreme tiredness, he explained that he would continue to “serve the community so that his life would not be useless” (mengabdi supaya hidup saya tidak sia-sia). In the waiting room of the hospital, he told me that he remained hopeful that by forming a co-operative pumping community and working hard they would be able to “combat poverty” (melawan kemiskinan). After the check-up, we had nasi pecel
(a cheap rice-based dish served with water spinach and peanut sauce) in the hospital canteen before he got into the long line for his medication at the pharmacy.

While Arief stressed the possibility of improving existing infrastructure by putting responsibility and resources in the hands of residents, the infrastructures supporting this arrangement also constantly verged on breakdown. When the limits of Arief’s bodily capabilities and endurance eventually show bluntly, the lurah announces that investments would soon flow into their neighbourhood. While his personal efforts of improving the neighbourhood are lauded by the kelurahan, his physical suffering remains unnoticed. The government seems unaware of how much, given crumbling kampung infrastructure, the immediate needs of residents and the exigencies of living in a toxic environment, it is demanding of Arief.

Act III: Worlds of repair / Bric-a-brac II

On my way home from city hall, I stop at Buang’s house to chat but he isn’t at home. Buang served as neighbourhood head for about twenty years; an impressive length, and a political career that seems possible only under the authoritarian conditions of Indonesia’s New Order. Holding the office and cooperating with the central government greatly helped him in financial terms. People know and often pointed out to me that he abused his authority multiple times, taking cuts from development funds and extorting money from newcomers. Today, he is one of Kemijen’s few car owners and sublets parts of his house to students. I notice that his street is getting a facelift: workers have heightened the edges of the alley. Soon they will stack earth (uruk) on the foundation and level the whole street up in between the edges. This will add about 20cm of height to the alley. These days, I often see road workers sweating in the scorching sun while ripping bricks out of the street only to put them back after the dirt has been evenly spread. Buang is old now. What kind of world will his children inherit – one in which uruk plays an equally crucial role?
Having decided to return home, an acquaintance sitting outside a friend’s home invites me to have a chat. We have a half-serious conversation about work and correct attire. I’m mocked for saying that I just returned home from *kerja* (work), because I’m visibly not sweating (*tidak keringatan*) – his hands gesturing a burst of water streaming down head and face. He corrects me: “you’re coming home from *kantoran,*” which could mean the office but also the office world. I’m mocked for wearing sandals at work, even nice leather ones made by Birkenstock, which was *sombong* (arrogant) in his opinion. I’m embarrassed. While feeling awfully out of place, I begin to wonder what connects these worlds today: the air-conditioned world of the bureaucrat and the sweaty world of the coastal kampung resident. In the age of rob, they both inhabit an aftermath. They both belabour the obvious; the infrastructures built in colonial times and inherited by an independent Indonesia are obsolete and mired in a process of breakdown. Both are therefore concerned with maintenance, but the effects of their efforts never last long enough – another round of breakdown will obfuscate their partial successes at sustaining stability. There are no victors in the world of repair, as Jackson argues: this world “tends to disappear altogether, or at best is relegated to the mostly neglected story of people working to fit such artifacts to the sticky realities of field-level practices” (Jackson 2014:227). In a sense, kampung residents and government planners “inhabit a time that never arrives and the half project that never resolves, never completes, that changes into a frozen breakdown, yet secretes crime and half-solutions in the meantime” (Povinelli et al. 2014: n.p.). When we look “past the Romantic tradition of inspired cataclysmic becoming and inside of its ruin” (id.), argue the editors of a special issue that explores Povinelli’s work on time, effort, and endurance in late liberalism, we see a “tsunami of quasi-events” where “potentiality is the refuge not of the hopeful but of the concretely ordinary and pragmatically banal.”

When I get ready to leave, Arief walks by. Actually, he is sauntering. Wearing his work outfit,
he looks clean and composed, his white shirt tucked in his long, ironed pants. He says he just got home from the baseball factory and had to check on the water gate (*pintu air*). “Rob has already started. I need to close it so that the water doesn’t enter later.” I go with him to the water gate where the small conduit (*saluran*) emerges from underneath the embankment. The water gate has been broken for a long time, but residents fixed it with a little help from the government. Now, they open and close the water gate by stuffing a submerged hole with a fitting piece of pipe. Arief grabs the pipe and pushes one end into the dark liquid. He finds the hole easily. The gate is closed.

At night, I return to the dewan and, of course, end up hanging out with Arief and his clients or friends. There is no shame in charging close friends for snacks and beverages. It would shameful to forget asking for the bill. Before leaving, all clients ask politely for the price and pay up immediately. Arief makes some *mie rebus* (boiled noodles) for me after it starts raining. People keep flocking to the dewan; there is no better time for mingling with neighbours than during rainfall – when the air is cool and clean. An acquaintance, a young man called Imam, who used to work at the Chinese-owned laundromat by the main street, walks in. I had been wondering what he was up to, since I hadn’t seen him working there whenever I dropped off my laundry. I had started to slightly worry about him, especially when I heard that his daughter badly hurt her foot in a motorcycle accident. How could he care for her without a job? Eating my dinner, I notice that people don’t treat Imam with much respect. They seem to ignore him, they even cracked jokes when he showed up. But Imam is a good sport and massages the shoulders of the old man I’m having a chat with.

The old man talks about his new business ideas. He runs a chicken farm and cuts (*jagal*) throats all day; up to a hundred times. Now, the government is planning to evict him and other vendors. The whole market will be relocated and his business will have to adapt, he says. His fellow vendors support each other despite being competitors. He adds that it is a moral obligation
to have one another’s backs. Arief’s warung is also a tenuous business model: Arief is waiting for the government to order him to leave. All along the embankment, structures, some of which are shacks inhabited by whole families, have been erected. According to the plans of the government, they will have to disappear one day. He assures me that he wouldn’t protest if the government eventually ordered the demolition of his food stand. About five years ago, the government announced that it would wipe the banks clean of built structures in the context of normalization works. According to the plan, the river was indeed widened and embanked, but the spatial regime installed with success on Banger’s southern banks never quite thrived in Kemijen. North of the bridge that separates Arief’s territory from the South, “illegally” built structures remain untouched. I ask into the round of nighthawks how this was possible and they answer that the government is afraid of preman (gangsters). What could preman do against evictions, I ask. “The government is afraid they would steal construction material,” one man answers. Thus, normalization both destroyed and created. In the case of the warung, it created a transitional space where people can meet to make plans when faced with motions that they can’t control alone, such as the chicken vendor. Here, people can find a way to use a plan as instrument of action (Baxstrom 2012).

In Semarang, as elsewhere, an eviction often means the establishment of a new order, both in terms of time and space. In Kemijen, however, evictions didn’t establish a new order on top of the old one, but allowed residents to inhabit both. Construction produces new claims and attracts new actors, but plans are haunted by gangsters and undermined by residential projects. When the government dares to make good their eviction plans, Arief won’t stand in the way of this future, as it could become an instrument of further action. But for now, he still uses the river bank as a source of income and caters for locals and his anthropologist friend.
In Margorejo, a northern neighbourhood of Kemijen, I once sat down to talk with another neighbourhood chief: a young and friendly man wearing a modern button shirt. We sat down in front of the neighbourhood hall (balai RW) that adjoins a sports field. We were both waiting on a public engineer to show up and give a presentation on correct drainage. The chief proudly tells me that the field had been a filthy water hole and teeming with mosquitos, when he took office. He ordered to fill the land with soil (tanah) and had it paved over. In a sense, he acted in the interest of his community: he hoped to sanitize his neighbourhood and created additional public space. Does it matter that he reduced catchment area in turn, thereby increasing the likelihood of flooding?

Interviews like the one in front of the balai seem to be a welcome opportunity to kill time in Kemijen. The stretched present always seems to separate people from a different kind of future, and sometimes this present contained an awful lot of time. On another day, I visited Edo who had asked repeatedly when I would eventually interview him. When I arrived at his home, I noticed that his house was a shockingly accurate example for how accelerated environmental decline translates into economic stagnation and vice versa. Edo moved out here four years ago, in search of a job. Today, he works at a hotel across town. His whole family, including his two teenage sons, have to work to make ends meet. Still, they don’t have enough money to afford a “real” renovation of the house. Therefore, the house of his dying father-in-law, who was spitting mucus and perhaps blood into a bucket in the damp back of the room while I recorded his son’s answers to my questions, stays above street level by a nose. Its doors and walls are cut off, like amputated limbs. The rods and roof tiles hang low over your head, and ducking is constantly necessary in order to prevent a painful encounter with a door frame. The house was teeming with mosquitoes and Edo complained about getting bitten all the time, showing me his scarred underarms. I offered
him some of my *minyak sereh* (lemongrass oil), which helps deterring these beasts for about twenty minutes, and he tried applying it to his legs. Then he took another shot and applied it to the same spot, over and over. He didn’t stop, he even put some under his t-shirt, where it obviously didn’t have a preventive effect. He smiled and said that it felt hot (*panas*) on his skin. I felt as if the interview was worthwhile for him, like a welcome distraction. Upon leaving, he asked me to return soon.

Outside the house, I glimpsed another window to Edo’s relation with time. The slits above the low doorframe were filled with empty cigarette boxes. While they once contained Edo’s time – the breaks during demeaning room service shifts at a local hotel, the evenings playing chess with neighbours, the long nights of scratching mosquito bites – they were now empty decorations of a house outrun by time.

Act V: (No) Escape

Imam disappeared one sudden day. He stopped coming to the dewan to massage a customer’s shoulders. Arief, who didn’t only screen the water surface but also kept track of the comings and goings of residents, informed me that Imam was in hiding. Nobody knew where he went, but Arief heard through the grapevine that he took refuge with relatives living outside of town. Imam had apparently amassed gambling debts. From our only recorded conversation, I learned about Imam’s hard situation. After finishing elementary school, he lived mostly on the street, making money as a busker. Today, his low-paying informal employment in a factory doesn’t produce enough income to feed his daughter and himself, his wife having left him a few years ago. As a result, Imam was often hustling for extra money.

“I’m alright! Can’t change how it is. If I’m hungry, I’m hungry… What can we do to get food? It’s just as it is. When you’re sad, things are difficult. When you’re happy, it’s fine. People can’t tell. That’s how I was raised […]. Perhaps my dad taught me. Whether he liked his meal or not, people couldn’t tell. It’s really sad, if your life means being burdened by debt, but you stay strong. You carry this load on your own [*dipikul sendiri*]. Holding out and being patient is a skill. That’s key in life.
Sure, today I really don’t have anything to eat, but I resist, I have to fight. I’m often hungry. Really often! But I have something you could call a talent: I’m good at massaging. So, I go up to people and say ‘please, Sir, I don’t have any money.’ ‘Alright, alright.’ I’m already used to giving massages to friends. Then we go to the friend’s place and eat together. One year, my kid rarely ate, because I couldn’t always give her school money. Because I wasn’t working at that point. I was only relying on giving massages. At first, I just did it sometimes, but people actually felt better afterwards, you know.

It was as if Imam didn’t want to burden anybody with his problems. In the above excerpted interview that I conducted in his room, his voice constantly vacillated between sadness and acceptance. You wanted him to see a brighter future, but, really, was there one? Imam inherited problems that he seemed unable to handle. Since his parents had passed away, he lived with relatives and a few orphaned children in an unfinished house. He shared a room with his daughter. The rough floor was covered by a stained and worn mattress, the only furniture. When the house became uninhabitable due to land subsidence, his father had to renovate, “whether he wanted or not,” because the roof tiles were already low. Imam’s father took out a loan, because he wanted his family to be safe. Imam remembered, “The roof part was increased. The roof first. The walls were raised a little. At that point all the family members were gathered here. Like that. Back then. My older brother already had a child, but he passed away. So, we had to make the house bigger, whether we wanted or not. So, my older brother died and the children he left behind all moved here.” More and more family members were parked in an incomplete house built on debt.

Interestingly, exposure to flooding used to provide a kind of social membership through which Imam’s family could relate to other inhabitants. Water, Imam said, doesn’t differentiate between the haves and the have-nots. The shared inability to escape across social difference often created a common denominator of social belonging. In fact, I observed that monsoon floods to this day are cheerfully celebrated. Rob does not become a bonding experience in the same way. Rather, it occasions differential investments in flood protection. Imam’s abandonment is thus marked by the arrival of rob, as it introduced privatized flood management.

Whether you want or not, all citizens are protecting themselves [talud-talud sendiri] … Every citizen
owns a pump now. They pump the water out on their own. It wasn’t like that back then. If it happened, it happened to all [kalau kena, kena semua]. They were hit by water every day, rob happened every day. [...] The government made the walls, and then citizens began using pumps. That became an asset, you just needed to hook it up. I still remember! It was difficult before we had the riverbanks. Because, the river was as high as the street, back then. You couldn’t pump the water out! It entered and exited, when it pleased. Then, it was widened, the river was walled. So, the citizens took initiative to build and buy a pump. All of them have one, all of them bought their own pump. So, it’s pretty nice now, much better than in the past.

“It’s pretty nice now,” Imam said a few weeks before he disappeared, because he owed someone money. His observation of privatized flood protection in the wake of normalization shows that the kampung, as a world of repair, can squeeze people out. Existence built on borrowed time has an expiry date. As there seems to be no escape from the present, Imam longs for a past when “there was always floods. We walked in floodwater, we slept in water [tidur sama air]. We were used to it. It was like that for years.”

Act VI: Some strategies

When people start buying pumps, you should buy a pump. When the river rises, you and your house, your shelves, your sinks, and your beds should also rise. But strategizing is not a straight forward process, it involves guesswork and speculation as well as patience, as the following example shows: I asked the salon and kiosk manager, Agus, why he and his wife, Dina, chose to live in this area. He previously worked at a bengkel (machine shop) and as house constructor (kontraktor). Now, he sits mostly all day on a bench in the couple’s salon, while Dina cuts the hair of patrons. When he is not handling customers, who are looking to buy lottery tickets, cigarettes, or phone credit, he entertains his youngest child. Currently, they hold a one-year lease for the salon, but they are looking to purchase their own business space, in fear of unstable rents. Despite rob and the area’s stained reputation, they are willing to stay here. If they bought property, it would have to be located in the vicinity. Agus explained that “it’s more strategic. I can go anywhere, and it’s close to the [bus] terminal. It’s a strategic location, I can ride the motorbike...
anywhere. […] Family members live close by; my brother-in-law lives on the other side of the river. We often see each other.”

Agus and Dina are also compelled to live in Kemijen because they see opportunities for investment. Dina’s family has lived in the neighbourhood for a long time and she has created a certain client base. They have made up their mind, coupling economic strategizing and endurance. Notably, the income generated by the salon was funneled directly into renovations. I recorded the following conversation at their hair salon.

Agus: We only renovated once, because we built the house in 2006. It was raised in 2011. The reason was flooding. In the past, it was flooded every day, before the renovations [Dina cannot suppress an embarrassed chuckle]. Whether it rains or there’s rob, those floors absorb (peresapan) the water, right? We spent around 16 juta [approx. $1200] for all renovations: the restroom, the kitchen, and the floors.

Dina: Including drying the house (jemuran).

Agus: Thank God, we’re flood-free now. For another five years… [he laughs].

Dina: Perhaps up to fifteen years!

Agus: The rear part of their house is about 70 centimetres higher than the house front. The porch of my house is as high as the guest room [ruang tamu], but the second room is 30 centimetres higher. The kitchen is higher by about…

Dina: One meter.

Agus: Well, more like 70 centimetres. So, the back is higher than the front.

Lukas: It’s 70 centimetres higher than sea level?

Agus: No! It’s 70 centimetres higher than the front.

Lukas: And if you had to compare it with the level of the river?

Agus: My house still wins, of course!

The quoted conversation turned into a debate between the spouses about the height of their house in relation to the street. While they don’t share the same feelings about the level and duration of safety that height provides, they agreed that they had to adjust to the street level. The river is not the culprit but the street: its height determines whether their abode is at risk. The house floors could soak up ground water. The couple demonstrates an endurance that is different from all other forms of endurance that I have discussed thus far. They cloak this endurance in economic survival. This becomes particularly evident when they frame themselves as obeying local regulations. For example, Dina previously ran her salon by the river, but had to vacate the spot
when the government ordered residents to clear the river banks in the context of normalization. She didn’t complain when others, in turn, began to build houses and kiosks on the vacant land: “In the end, new buildings were erected on the street that I had to clear. That space has in fact evolved. People considered moving there because the [planned] constructions were delayed. So, in the end they just set up shop there themselves. We can’t blame them either. Like… when people are starving, we can’t do much. It’s because of the delay [of normalization].” She then called this form of endurance “urusan perut,” which translates into “living from hand to mouth” and separated these primary needs out as requiring more urgent arrangements. She contrasts urusan perut with their own endurance, a practice of strategy responding to local economic shifts and competition.

Photo-Ethnography: ‘Baroque’ Architectures of Time

The following photo-ethnographic tour of a residential street of Kemijen pays attention to the architectural aspect of floating as a response to flooding. Houses, as primary infrastructure of the household, maintain an intimate relationship with the time spans of infrastructure, seasons, and budgetary cycles. They are the vessels that allow residents to survive in the region. They represent strategic plans, that is hopeful adjustments to infrastructural changes whose projected outcome – flood-safety – exists only as a “formal gesture to the linear ideal of ‘the plan’ itself” (Baxstrom 2011:138). As rob continues, infrastructural development plans shape and create the “material conditions of the more individualized and singular modes of planning exercised by individual city residents” (id.). As such, I call these architectures of time ‘baroque,’ as they demonstrate a “disposition,” in Baxstrom’s words, that urbanites develop in the face of a seemingly incongruous present. Instead of orienting themselves to one futurity at a time, set out by a linear plan, their strategies represent a flexible mode of living in the present. In the following, eight photos of house
entrances and facades show the (mostly serial) adjustments of residents to changing environmental norms that often result from overlapping plans that coexist in the present. These adjustments are not coordinated. Rather, they follow a wide variety of factors, such as financial ability, access to building materials, and level of community integration, which underlie the unequal socioeconomic context of tidal flooding. The photographs also quite simply serve the purpose of familiarizing the reader with the esthetics of a coastal and mainly poor neighbourhood.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{28} Urban ethnographers have recognized the heuristic value of walking through the city. As Venkatesh noted recently (2015), urban ethnographers often promise to bring the reader into the “invisible or closed-off social worlds” of their research subjects. The kampung is not a closed-off social world, but its inhabitants often don’t like to speak about their financial strategies. Exploring the city alongside locals can be a suitable technique for revealing the differential abilities of neighbours to deal with hardship. Adin lives on the street portrayed in these photographs and we often strolled through the neighbourhood. I consider walking an everyday practice in Kemijen through which urban space is made (DeCerteau 1984). By taking photographs from the same angle in the same, fairly level, street, I tried to bring some formality to this descriptive method. At the same time, Adin and I would speak about the houses, assessing their viability in the face of rob. Alternatively, contemplating a particular house could elicit comments from other locals. Degen and Rose (2012: 3281) contend that so-called ‘walk-alongs’ can “produce richly evocative sensory impressions.” Further, when applied in ethnographic research, “a walk-along plays out more as a dialogue than an inquiry” as Holgersson (223) argued. The ethnographer and the research participant can engage in a speculative dialogue that reveals diverse contextual knowledges of spaces and their functionality. Walk-alongs allow the ethnographer to experience the material and imaginary making of the city first hand.
The houses in this gang (street) use an open sewer system which means that in the event of flooding (either tidal or seasonal), river water combines with sewage – a toxic brew that people want to keep outside at high costs. This elevated and thus flood-safe house entrance is richly decorated with papaya, chili and other plants, which provide shade and a pleasant hang-out and work space. The slightly elevated plants are kept out of the reach of small floods.

This recently finished construction was uninhabited during the period of my fieldwork. The house’s remarkable height suggests that the owner considered the house a long-term investment, as it will outlast many years, perhaps decades, of land subsidence. In contrast to the previous house, the stairs are ornamented with differently colored and shaped tiles, which further suggests a relatively wealthy owner. The owner had in fact built this house for a close relative. However, the relative never materialized and the house remained uninhabited throughout my fieldwork. The owner couldn’t find a suitable tenant for such a palace-like building.
This house was finished during my fieldwork. A young family moved in. Its design – both coloring and level of completion – was extraordinary given the mostly fragmentary and evolving nature of most houses of the gang. When I passed by this house accompanied by my research participant Sumarmo, he joked that the owner of this house clearly didn’t trust the government (tidak percaya pemerintah). Despite politicians’ promises to stop flooding in the area, the house was built with the current flooding trend and exorbitant land subsidence rates in mind. Another aspect is noteworthy. The residents weren’t well connected socially in the region. Unable to rely on networks of protection, they decided to equip their house with special security measures: the gate and grid.

Motorcycles are kept at a safe distance from flood water. When the inside fills up, bikes can also be parked outside on a raised plateau. The wooden door shows traces of past flooding, as the lower end shows a lighter shade of brown. The door predates the current iteration of this house. After the house was raised, the owner fit it back into the house structure.
The strategy of this resident consisted of building up. Often, whole families slept on the second floor, as this space was never flooded. The lower part of the house is highly exposed to flood water. However, the household benefited from being located closer to the main street, from where the rest of the gang slanted down.

The ramp in front of this house entrance allows residents to shelter their motorbike(s) from rain, floods, and thieves. The brick wall is unfinished. The members of the household probably decided to raise the roof recently. The next step will consist of adjusting the floor height.
Without stairs, this ramped house entrance allows its seated owner to easily access the inside. The concrete ramp itself shows the different adjustments that have been made over time: its layered segments show successive periods of construction. Each time the gang is lifted, the ramp must be slightly adjusted as to remain straight.

The fresh concrete used for this ramp stands in contrast to the mouldy street-facing walls. The house floors had to be raised several times which decreased the roof. Today, the tiled roof is hanging low over the heads of the members of this household and adults must duck their heads to enter. The subsiding ground has further destabilized the foundations of this house, which explains the slanted roof which is propped on additional rods.

Postlude

This chapter proceeded from descriptions of downstream residents’ struggles with the consequences of rob to an appreciation of infrastructural projects that play a role in preserving, yet ‘hardening’ the littoral of Semarang. It interrogated the local experience of this hardness, developing the claim that residents inherited a landscape that was not of their choosing, but in which they have to endure. I let the meaning of hardness derive from a dialogue between personal
observations and representations of residents. I thus followed Jackson and Piette (2015) who have argued in favor of an “existential anthropology” whose focus on the microsocial restores to our worldview “a sense of the small and tangible things that make life viable and negotiable despite the forces that elude our comprehension and control.” I shifted my gaze from the macrocosm to the microcosm to capture the small things and events that allow residents to inhabit the hardness of life in Semarang’s delta: Imam’s massaging of Arief’s clients when he is hungry speak to the limits of local resources and self-help, but is also testimony to his will to endure. However, he is exhausted and frustrated by his daily struggle. Eventually, gambling debts force him to disappear from the neighbourhood, leaving his daughter behind; Deni sits every night on the roadside with a meagre turnout of customers. His constant head-shaking and sighing betray a lack of avenues – he can’t run his warung by the river, a preferred business location, because the government enforces inspection regulations. He bemoans a present without many perspectives. A few hundred meters north, police enforcement of spatial regulations is spottier which allows Arief’s family to generate extra income and sit out the regular floods of his house. He maintains the space as if it was his official duty. His volunteer labour is requited in kind by the community and in lenience and acclaim by the sub-district government. The consequences of his work are bodily: he falls asleep during the day and even suffers from a stroke; in the same neighbourhood, the entrance of a sunken house is adorned with empty cigarette boxes whose contents once brought welcome distraction from a deteriorating environment teeming with mosquitoes; elsewhere, providing relief from these bloodsuckers requires filling in the swampy hole with concrete to eradicate breeding grounds, while also reducing crucial water retention space.

The hardness exposed in this chapter can be further explored via the concept of “infrastructural violence.” I conceive of this violence as stresses on individuals that are built into infrastructural systems. Gupta (2012:20) has argued that “structural violence is constant rather
than episodic, and far from disrupting actors’ understandings of their social words, it provides them with a particular kind of situated knowledge with its own epistemic certainties.” Flood infrastructure, a composite biotechnical assemblage of technology, cement, and residential interferences, makes it impossible to identify a single person or organization that caused flooding, that is, committed the violent act. Rather, the living environment itself exposes people to risks and violence. As a result, people consider themselves as victims of arbitrary processes. But, as Gupta (id.:24) contends, “such arbitrariness is not itself arbitrary; rather, it is systematically produced by the very mechanisms that are meant to ameliorate social suffering,” such as regular street raising or house renovations. In the face of such structural violence, a distinct structure of feeling arises which brings me back to Djawahir’s poem: he is mourning the absence of water flow as a metaphor for social transformation. Rob itself has replaced this potential of social transformation by becoming the pulsating vein of everyday economic life. A ‘normal’ river floods periodically; a sign of benevolent circulation and change. A stagnant river can only swell and seep, with corrosive effects on the material structures of everyday existence. Water seeps through the cracks of floors, abrades water banks, and remains trapped in kampung streets and peoples’ houses. People have organized politically and socially around this phenomenon: they have acquired pumps and formed pumping associations to restore water flow, often by taking on crucial governmental tasks. Yet, this structure of feeling disavows the potential of full breakdown. Rather, rob is perceived as opening up possibilities of linking with larger structures and plans articulated through community empowerment and programs for economic progress.

I showed further how residents’ endurance is textured by prescriptive state programs that encourage participation and self-management. Rob attracts new infrastructure and community development projects that allow residents to generate the resources to continue to endure in the present. But these programs never fix the ruined riverbanks; they just patch them up. The result
of the coming and going of projects is that floods and ensuing suffering are framed as quasi-events that do not disrupt the order of things.

To close this chapter, I return to the Dutch mangrove expert’s comment regarding Semarang’s coastal infrastructure. On the face of it, her assessment of a solidified urban environment captures well the ‘hard’ reality of riverbank dwellers. But as I showed, it is more complex than that. The hardness of infrastructure – as in concrete, built, developed – does not translate into certainties and safety from flooding. Riverbanks are alternatively seeping or breaking. My interlocutors represented infrastructure as fragile and unreliable, while the subsiding ground drowns and swallows houses in ever-shortening intervals. In this catch-22, they have two equally unsatisfying options: waiting for government improvement projects, like the polder, and doing nothing in the meantime, which puts them at risk of gradually losing their homes to the rising tide. Or, they actively inhabit an environment that is at the mercy of tenuous and fragmentary interventions. This chronic engagement with risk consists of preventing hardship by repairing infrastructure. At the same time, ruptures produced by breaking infrastructures are folded into the experience of riverside life. I showed that the baroque disposition, as elaborated by Baxstrom, applies to Kemijen, strengthening his argument of an everlasting present produced by urban development schemes in Southeast-Asian cities. Yet, existences built on borrowed time have an expiry date and repair can only stretch the present so long. This chapter also accounted for the invisible forms of suffering – exhaustion and sickness – that are a product of enduring in the everlasting present.
4) FIGURING

Environmental Governance and the Affordances of Infrastructure

“So, what are your powers [kekuatan] that allowed you to become mayor, then governor, and now president? (When he hears the question, Jokowi laughs and bounces back the question) – Well, how? I would like to ask in return. In my opinion, we should perhaps read the change at the grassroots level. That is never looked at. Man’s desires [wong kehendaknya] have changed, but he continues to be given the same. Right now, society wants to be involved, to be given a role, not just to be serviced. At the moment, they are not serviced, let alone playing a role and being involved.”


In 2016, the local art collective Hysteria organized an art exhibit in Kemijen to showcase this coastal kampung. Projects looking at the history of the neighbourhood embellished public space. In particular, they underlined the importance of water infrastructure. The depicted piece combines graffiti and installation art to create a riverside hang-out area on top of a public pump and framed by plastic pipes. It says: “Keep strategizing until the polder becomes reality.”

Photo by Lauren Yapp (2016).
Residents of Kemijen like to joke, “we own our houses, but we pay a rent to nature” (*sewa pada alam*). I heard this joke multiple times: in casual conversation with a *batik* vendor, in city hall small-talk, as well as repeatedly from close informants. The joke expresses an awareness that ownership and infrastructural investments have a negligible effect on the delta inhabitants’ precarious co-habitation with water. Although the municipality mobilizes important funds each year to elevate streets in Kemijen, all residents still have to raise their houses regularly at their own cost. It is a mad “competition” (*lomba-lomba*), as people say. The higher the streets on either side of the river, which also function as embankment, the more difficult it becomes to drain the neighbourhood of rain, waste, and tidal water. If houses don’t stretch themselves upward, then gravity and water combine to become an ever-more dangerous duo. If the material used to raise the grounds inch by inch was not hard concrete layered on tons of gravel, one could imagine the neighbourhood as being a supple membrane, bulging here and there.

While the joke of paying rent to nature is a humorous take on an uncertainty-ridden cycle, it also exhibits a certain pride. After all, downstream people invest in houses that they own and where they have endured floods, disease, and economic crises for decades. Paying rent to nature is not the same as paying a rent to a landlord. It is an investment in a valued relationship with land. Incidents of inhabitants moving away to escape the tenacious grip of toxic water are few. As many say, “be it *banjir* or rob, people feel comfortable here.” Remember also Marsudi’s relaxed attitude towards regular flooding. Exposure to flood hazards is an acceptable trade-off, an acceptable bond, in view of the area’s proximity to major employers (mostly foreign-owned factories) and services (education, public transportation, and municipal administration). Notably, despite the area’s peripheral location, property prices have not increased by much over the past years. Taking pride in enduring floods, however, masks a strong dependence on public
infrastructure investments: riverbanks, streets, and flood gates need constant maintenance. These irregular gestures of repair and construction reproduce the kampung; they landscape it.

Regarding kampung infrastructure, and for the sake of this chapter’s analysis, it is important to differentiate between public and private efforts to protect property from floods. On the one hand, the government is responsible for raising streets and public facilities. It also spends public money on certain parts of drainage infrastructure, such as pumps, pipes, and gutters. On the other hand, residents need to top up the foundations and roofs of their houses and mobilize funds for repair around the house. Public investments translate into tangible consequences for residents, as repaired water infrastructure reduces risks to individual property and assets. As such, public and private infrastructural investments are in a delicate balance, often conditioning but also undermining and offsetting each other. For example, drainage (especially gutters) might be kept functional in certain parts of a neighbourhood, but not in others. Another possibility is that the government does not enforce drainage laws indexing the minimum distance between houses and gutters, which can lead to obstructions. Materials, responsibilities, and levels of functionality bleed into one another and create a sense of sheer complexity occasioning despair and hopeful strategies described in the previous chapter. Meluap (overflow) does not mean banjir (flooded) for all, as only houses that lie beneath street level are affected by overflow. In other words, even when the river spills water into the neighbourhood, the levels of some houses exceed the level of the water (perhaps only by a nose). But that might not be the case in the following year. Each year, residents hope that the government will fix broken riverbanks and provide new funds for road works. This raises squarely the issue of time. Because public and private investments become entangled in the preservation of the neighbourhood, rob itself needs to be viewed as resulting from a deeply uneven landscape of time.

While I focussed on the individual experience of flooding in the previous chapter, here I
will describe collective forms of responding to this temporality in this chapter. From uneven levels of flood safety flow tactical water-control practices that involve neighbourhood groups in a competition for government support as well as non-governmental programs, offered up by private companies and universities. Here the success of generating funds has come to depend on how one positions oneself to infrastructure and kampung development. The chapter is entitled ‘figuring,’ simply because now that the area figures more prominently in government plans, residents have started to figure out what roles they can play in the governance of flooding. I will portray residents who have begun to seek out a more active role in coordinating infrastructure provision to promote kampung development. They argue that the missing link in flood protection – besides timely river bank and road repairs – is participatory planning and non-physical development. Here, figuring out what causes rob is an important challenge. In the absence of alternative platforms, they have come to use infrastructural programs as a site for this bottom-up local ‘figuring.’ I’m interested both in how new government programs that encourage civil participation transform local conduct and how acts of coordinating bottom-up responses to rob in turn affects social order in Kemijen. I argue that the fickleness of infrastructure, when it interacts with water, plays a role in residents’ attempts at navigating existing governance structures and development imaginaries in that both water and infrastructure have political affordances.

Swyngedouw and Kaika (2000:124) have argued that modern infrastructure turned water into a self-evident object, creating an aesthetics that belies crucial metabolisms of the city. This aesthetics then dictates constant infrastructural development: “connection to the network implies acquiring the use value of the utility and realizes the promise of participating in the phantasmagoric new world of technological advancement and ‘progress’; a world in which human freedom and emancipation resides in connecting to the technological networks.” Infrastructure (roads, river banks, and water pumps) is often fetishized in Kemijen in the way that Swyngedouw
and Kaika have described – as beacon of economic development and progress. Normalization, as I have shown, is considered a token of modernity. But some residents also express serious doubts about infrastructure. They blame flooding on the government’s exclusive focus on infrastructure as a means of promoting development. On one hand, residents do desire infrastructure provision and timely repair. On the other hand, there is a sense that infrastructure will never master water entirely. Some people view flood prevention mechanisms as obsolete in the face of unstoppable land subsidence and rising sea levels. Specifically, raising streets is often portrayed as a cul-de-sac, a dated infrastructural strategy. Many have started to express the opinion that flood prevention must be integrated with other urban services and circuits, decision-making processes, spatial zoning, and the “natural” conditions of the delta, but lack confidence in a future where such a high level of integration would be achieved.

At a theoretical level, this chapter speaks to the affordances of river infrastructure, in the light of political transition, by showing how individuals develop sensibilities to water governance as a result of shifting environmental and ideological circumstances. It compares development projects of neighbourhood groups (identifying as activist as well as non-activist) and how they lobby for increased governmental support by posing as subjects concerned with the environment and local wellbeing. Based on these findings, I query the role that water and infrastructure play, in concert, in the governance of tidal flooding. Rob opens up spaces for the development of grassroots politics in the North of Semarang. By thinking through the relationships between grassroots politics, models of democratic governance, and materiality, the chapter also investigates the influence of state ideology on ecological governance. Though democratic in design, development projects often subsidize more than just infrastructural adaptation to flooding but also reproduce power structures. Decentralization and the effects of a neoliberal government agenda (promoting competition for funds) have the result that residents constantly hustle for
project money at the municipal and provincial level that underwrites and deepens the uneven landscape of the coastal kampung.

Interpreting busy local organizing around projects, funds, and government policies as the result of Indonesian ‘grassroots’ politics, I show how specific resident-activists develop sensibilities to water circuits and infrastructure and how they learn to frame these in politically potent ways. Strange new assemblages emerge, in this process, for example between grassroots activists and the kelurahan, the sub-district administration. While the latter used to be a governmental instrument of social control, neighbourhood organizers and the kelurahan now tightly collaborate to qualify for injections of funds through state development grants (like PLPBK\textsuperscript{29}) and the municipal participatory development scheme called “Musrenbang.”

Government funds or development grants are mostly used to level up streets and kampung infrastructure (peninggian), while little money is provided for community development, education, and internal economic growth. In building on activists’ critique of peninggian, I juxtapose the concept of pembangunan, a powerful nationalist scheme that frames development as a process of awakening, building, and construction (Barker 2005), to peninggian. The practice of the latter demonstrates that the provision of infrastructure has undergone a change in meaning: stacking layer and layer of pavement does not afford a glimpse of a glorious future. This type of building is also not identified with nation building. Rather, it suggests an endless corridor to progress, where Northern residents can be parked.

\textsuperscript{29}The program called PLPBK (Penataan Lingkungan Permukiman Berbasis Masyarakat, which translates into Community-based Environmental Regulation of Settlement Space) works through the BKM in providing infrastructural development. In cooperation with an assigned PNPM facilitator (the so-called faskel or fasilitator kelurahan), the BKM has to fulfill specific criteria during the period of funding, such as being audited once a year by a public accountant and publishing an annual economic report. Further, the BKM must host an annual citizen’s conference. I spoke with the faskel about Kemijen’s performance in the program since the creation of the BKM in 2000. He generally lauded their participation, but noticed that they struggled to reach the official quorum at their last organizational meeting.
This section elaborates on how the experience of everyday rob is expressed and configured by political kampung institutions and their water sensibilities. How do interpretations of water infrastructure work themselves out in local governance? As I will show, this process is not straightforward. Rather, it is characterized by relating specific sensations of flooding and economic abandonment into infrastructure. For residents, the challenge is to navigate a complex urban ecology and make critical connections between infrastructural failure and biophysical rhythms. At the level of analysis, the question I pose is how these connections are inflected by kampung narratives.

In the case of rob, defining causes and effects is a difficult task. I heard many explanations for recurrent tidal floods. One taxi driver was convinced that sea level rise was caused by divine hand to punish human indulgence in homosexual flagrancies, while one of my neighbours thought that ships anchoring in ever greater numbers in the bay of Semarang pushed water onto the shore. Melting ice caps on the North Pole were also invoked as possible cause. A less spectacular explanation for rob levels is temperature: once, residents I spoke to speculated that rob was weak, because it had been especially hot and dry for two weeks, causing it to evaporate. Most popular, however, is blaming the government.

The government itself was quite busy deflecting and incorporating such criticism during my fieldwork. The salience of tidal flooding in public discourse forced the government to produce and control knowledge about rob. For example, rob was often spatialized, that is, government reports and surveys tried to map incidents of rob and trace its impacts in regional terms. Furthermore, in reports and newspaper articles, experts invoked several reasons for tidal flooding, highlighting illegal groundwater extraction, lack of infrastructure, and littering. Given the vague contours of rob, the government often promised in roundabout ways to measure up to the
challenge of building “resilience” to flooding. For instance, Semarang’s mayor said he wanted to improve the city’s “physical” and “non-physical” urban infrastructure (Semarang Tangguh 2016:7) in hopes of building a “modern” and “developing” city. Dominating the spatial outline and discourse of rob seemed, however, a daunting task, as alleged triggers rarely translated straightforwardly into effects.

At the kampung level, flooding in one neighbourhood unit (RT) could be caused by the next downstream neighbourhood which just happened to level up streets earlier this year. Whatever regional trend in infrastructural development was discernible to the government could be proven insufficiently nuanced by the infrastructural improvement works of certain neighbourhoods that were able to secure a grant for an infrastructural top-up (either the neighbourhood head was successful in mobilizing social capital within the government or in motivating constituents to work towards becoming a model neighbourhood qualifying for a corporate grant, as outlined above). These fragmentary and heterogeneous investments in infrastructure – raising alleys and thereby changing water flow’s direction – constantly distorted official representations of rob.

For residents, what, then, counted as knowledge or data when governing rob? Reliable numbers were difficult to find. For instance, there was no consensus on the speed or height of rob. The multiple triggers of local land subsidence (Marfai & King 2008) and its geographic variability make it tricky to identify vulnerable neighbourhoods, in geological terms. Paired with economic inequality and unequally distributed preparedness, predicting rob becomes more than just complicated. The difficulty of knowing the destructive potential of rob is reflected in the ridiculous height of new houses with steep entrance ways that owners literally have to hike up to enter their homes. Residents who trust official numbers are hard to find in Kemijen. Although they read the urgency of improvement into swells of rob, which always seems to be catching up with their thresholds, their reading of water levels is oriented by public infrastructure which is
enrolled as testimony to rob: while houses and streets may try to keep up with the tide, most public infrastructure does not make the cut. This discursive differentiation between public and private assets was probably introduced by normalization efforts, such as widening and embanking the Banger, described in the first chapter, as the state aimed to formalize space. It is an important yet fabricated differentiation because residents and communities often do interfere with this “public” infrastructure – repairing, reinforcing, and obstructing it. But measuring the urgency of repair from the impact that rob has on public infrastructure gives residents not only some clarity as to the speed of sinking, but also political leverage on the district’s administration. For instance, journalists often reported on a specific bridge connecting West and East Kemijen which was often inundated throughout the summer months. Bridges built a long time ago as well as dated river banks serve as (slowly disappearing) elevation points against which the changing water levels can be measured. As part of the “public” urban landscape, these elements of water infrastructure often become sites of political debates. These debates are inflected by specific political sensibilities that shape collective responses to rob, as I show in the following.

Figure 11: Photo in a Facebook post by a riverside resident: “11 Mei 2015 ... Ketinggian air Rob sudah menyentuh batas bawah ketebalan jembatan.” – On the 11th of May 2015, the height of incoming tidewater already touches the lower extent of the bridge.
The talut (embankment) represents a late artifact of (public) water governance which, as I described in the first chapter, was introduced to Kemijen in the late 1980s. Today, concrete walls of varying height enclose the Banger River all the way from its lowland artificial spring to the littoral. River walls are supposed to prevent flooding by fixing water in place. Conversely, the river walls in Kemijen are seen as a major cause of flooding and variously called out for bocor (seeping) or ambrol (collapsing). Instead of fixing water in place, the banks allow for speculation and are vehicles for political and monetary claims. Tellingly, the walls of the talut must have holes. Otherwise, the kampung could not be drained of domestic waste water and run-off. Every few meters, the talut is interrupted by a water-gate that can be manually opened and shut by residents. These mechanical gates operated by residents themselves are, them too, often broken: they have become obsolete, since high tide has the effect that waste water cannot exit the neighbourhood. In the afternoon, the incoming tide always lurks outside the gate. At night, opening the gate would immediately flood the kampung. Known to be of little use, this older drainage mechanism has already partially been displaced: many neighbourhoods in Kemijen run small pompanisasi (local pumping communities). They close the gates with makeshift mechanisms at dusk and open them in the morning, when the tide is low. As soon as the gutter fills up and threatens to spill water, residents resort to diesel pumps to dispose of drainage water into the canal. These communities are an example of a type of local governance regime. They comprise mostly poor residents who succeeded in soliciting external funds in order to buy pumps. Costs for diesel and maintenance are covered by iuran (communal tax) administrated by the neighbourhood head. Those who are unable to pay can contribute in the form of labor (see Kinanti 2014).

A space of organizing self-help was Arief’s food stand (warung), where I spent many of my nights, either listening and responding to conversations or chatting with Arief or his wife, Ariel.
In the heated period leading up to the parliamentary elections in 2014, the warung regularly became a site for debates among riverside residents. As I noted earlier, the warung was referred to as “dewan,” short for Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat (People’s Representative Council) – Indonesia’s main legislative assembly. In the confines of the warung, customers could have discussions with political content, speak openly, and share thoughts about the neighborhood’s development. Arief owns and runs the warung with Ariel. He is also in charge of their pompanisasi pump. He smiled shyly when I asked him how his business had become such an important local hangout spot. In his usual humble way, he said simply that a lot of neighbourhood chiefs (RT) and local figures (tokoh masyarakat) had started to congregate here at night to chat. In fact, whenever I spent time at his shop by the river, people holding some kind of office within the community stopped by; secretaries, treasurers, and chiefs. They would not always speak about politics and maintenance, but also show off new gemstones (batu akik) or inquire about property prices. While disagreement was encouraged and promised good business for Arief, as customers would dispute and drink tea until the wee hours, this time brought people together and strengthened their sense of belonging. They felt comfortable expressing critiques of the government and felt like they could handle themselves very well. At times, customers noticed Arief disappearing into the dark of the alley only to reappear to the gentle rattle of the diesel pump. The dewan had the advantage of being located at the southern end of Kemijen and forming an important gateway to the neighbourhood. It was a lively space that Arief and his constituents kept clean, orderly and well-maintained. They policed the area. This informal sovereignty mimicking official authority gave them some authority over rob assessments and prevention. Their socially and ethnically diverse community practiced an officially sanctioned politics of informal kampung labour that not only made them eligible but also strategically well-positioned in the competition for infrastructural improvement funds. The pump itself represents tangible
proof – it was bought with a grant from Indonesia’s ‘National Program for Community
Empowerment’ (Program Nasional Pemberdayaan Masyarakat or PMPN) that I will explain in
more detail below.

The co-evolution of macro-hydrological systems like the Banger River and street-scale
drainage shows that drainage in Semarang is itself a shifting thing. Infrastructures and
communities co-evolve in emerging idiosyncratic relations with the environment. While
infrastructures and the environment have been shown to be co-constitutive, less attention has been
paid to the role of politics in this process. For example, Rademacher (2011:16) refers to urban
ecologies as the result of “biophysical constraints and social imaginings that converge on a given
landscape.” She further conceptualizes ecology as a set of experience and action. Björkmann
complicates Rademacher’s vision of ecology in that she adds that infrastructures that make up an
urban ecology are constantly explored by inhabitants, as the urban landscape changes – being
destroyed and rebuilt. The regular experience of rob through seepage and collapse as described in
the case of the talut and the emergence of pumping communities demonstrate a water
infrastructure falling apart as well as in the making. Together with state projects, such as
normalization and embankment construction, local engagement with these structures produce a
complex and fragmented urban ecology in which rob needs to be constantly figured. This practice
of figuring affords local sovereignty and carves out spaces of (political) autonomy.

I further find Williams’ notion of structures of feeling (1977) useful to understand residents’
engagement with rob and its effects. According to Williams, a structure of feeling corresponds to
the collective experience of material transformations. Enduring these leads to embodiments of
change, where the actual processes remain unsaid. The slippery contours of rob and the solvent
character of infrastructures, I suggest, allows certain residents to create communal spaces that
afford local sovereignty. This sovereignty is, however, limited by the specific kinds of grants that
they can attract. Sometimes, Arief may run the communal pump in the event of rob, but the water level in the Banger puts limits on its effectiveness.

These local attempts of abating rob represent not the only thinkable avenue of increasing self-determination and gaining some political leverage in the governance of tidal flooding. The civil organization Komayu, to which I turn now, has strategically positioned itself to be able to speak credibly to the experience of rob. Instead of limiting the experience of rob to specific localities, Komayu maintains a regional respective. In contrast to the dewan’s role of reproducing locality and neighborliness, Komayu strives to form a coalition across neighbourhoods and operates with local and national NGOs. The resident-activist Wahyu represented Komayu in the Civil Alliance Against Flooding (Aliansi Masyarakat Terhadap Rob dan Banjir) during my fieldwork, a Semarang-based initiative presided by the local branch of a national advocacy NGO. Shifting the focus of this chapter a little, I describe below the Alliance’s work to underline the importance of localized knowledge for its more universal claims. Figuring rob, here, allows residents to become legitimate actors in bottom-up programs that work at the scale of the sub-district (kelurahan).

The Kampung in Fragments

Like most residents of Kemijen, Wahyu grew up in the area and many of his local relations are kinship ties. His parents live on the other side of the river, close to Pengapon. His older brother often helps him organize community events. Wahyu, a calm and unassuming man in his thirties, joined the ranks of Kemijen’s community organizers in 1990. Back then, they succeeded in “bringing in” many organizations to improve the “dark and violent area” (daerah hitam dan keras), he said. Prior to these social transformations, “there were deadly knife fights” in his street. For many local activists, early involvement with Karang Taruna, the state-backed Association of
Active Youth, was formative. The national association focusses on improving the welfare of the poor (Wicitra 2014). In the New Order, local organizations had been widely replaced by state-sponsored groups out of the regime’s fear of insurgent movements: by concentrating on community development, “these organisations were able to convince the New Order government that they would not engage in grassroots political activities as the banned left-wing organisations had done in the early 1960s” (Hadiwinata 2003:91). Karang Taruna and other associations were installed with the purpose of absorbing the unruly, criminal energies of local youth and traditionally operated at the sub-district level, the kelurahan. After being recruited by Karang Taruna in the 1990s, Wahyu got involved in organizing a sub-district-sponsored program against domestic violence. Wahyu remembers being initially considered “dangerous” and flaky by the local government, because he dared to question the decisions of senior community members. Police officers were sometimes posted right behind him at kelurahan meetings. He thought that people didn’t like his criticism because they preferred not to “look for problems” (cari masalah). In Javanese, he told me, there is a metaphor for this kind of thinking: “legan golek momongan” (which translates into “look after your own children”). He thought that this mentality still guided residents in his neighbourhood which is precisely why, in his view, rob continued unabatingly in Kemijen. Wahyu sees the kampung as shattered into fragments. It is this fragmentary landscape that makes the governance of rob so difficult, according to him.

Today, Wahyu is regularly received by the authorities and organizes community meetings. He is a trusted project coordinator. Instead of colliding with the community or police, he is on good terms with the authorities. He is trusted by them to represent the local ‘grassroots,’ not

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30 While the head of Karang Taruna Semarang has recently argued that the organization should overcome its image of local government bellboy (pelayan kantor kelurahan), its missions still often correspond to state interests, as recently seen in the state-backed “war on drugs” (pemberantasan narkoba) which is one of Karang Taruna’s latest projects.
radicalize them. But for Wahyu the bigger problem was the lingering ‘mind your own business’ mentality. In his opinion, the instruments of participatory governance that made communities like Arief’s and individual households eligible for subsidies, had helped produce a highly uneven urban landscape in which each resident acted solely out of self-interest. Wahyu hoped to close the ranks so that responses to rob could become more uniform and inclusive. In view of this splintered network of neighbourhoods, Wahyu tried to bypass the conventional participatory budgeting and development programs and looked actively for alternatives.

Wahyu lauded the government’s legislative efforts to fight flooding, some of which are outlined in the city’s master plan (*RTRW*) and drainage regulation (*Peraturan Daerah Drainase*). While he thinks that they had the potential to succeed in curbing flooding, he criticized the government for not enforcing the uniform application of such ambitious laws. In particular, the allocation system Musrenbang was in Wahyu’s eyes a “good initiative,” but it reinforced a disjunctive landscape and society. The national program *Musrenbang* (short for *Musyawaran Perencanaan Pembangunan*) represents Indonesia’s commitment to ‘decentralized’ governance since 1999. USAID called Musrenbang a “deliberative multi-stakeholder forum that identifies and prioritizes community development policies.” By “negotiating, reconciling, and harmonizing” differences between government and nongovernmental stakeholders as well as forging collective consensus on development priorities and distribution of funds, Musrenbang is supposed to respond to bottom-up impulses for local governance and increase local participation. In line with recommendations from foreign agencies, such as USAID (a major source of funding for many Indonesian NGOs), projects like Musrenbang pioneered “Indonesia’s transformation into an open-market economy,” according to Aspinall (2013:42).

In Kemijen, a sub-district with more than 13,000 inhabitants, whose income levels can vary to great extent, identifying collective development targets is, to say the least, a considerable
challenge. Each kampung can once a year submit a recommendation for necessary “activities” (kegiatan). Records of allocations of Musrenbang funds suggest coherence: in 2015, funds were granted for the raising and paving of roughly 2 km of road infrastructure. Most community proposals concerned roadworks. Paving (pavingisasi) and street raising (peninggian jalan) accounted for about 60% of the approved total sum (Rp 277,000,000) of funding. But the yearbooks that I consulted concealed a staccato rhythm of infrastructural adaptation. A closer look and conversations with administrative staff revealed that some of the applications had either been pending for at least one year or allocation of funds was denied. In fact, competition between communities translated into tactical placement of proposals. Here, connections to individuals within the bureaucratic apparatus came in handy for certain neighbourhood committees (kelompok), as placing proposals into the right hands increased chances of funding. Lack of communication between the committees further created disjointed allocative decisions. Had the plans been better coordinated – a rather unlikely scenario – delayed action by the government would still have undermined collective reaction to rising water levels.

Wahyu thus with good reason thought that if everybody paid a “rent to nature,” that is, lifted their streets when money was made available through Musrenbang, they stood no chance at stopping flooding. He argued therefore to abolish this form of piecemeal adaptation or make the ‘rent’ the same for everybody. Specifically, subsidizing private construction, or outsourcing government tasks to individual households, created uneven rates of exposure and vulnerability, he stated. Wahyu added that the sub-district was further divided by political, class, and religious differences. Wahyu often blamed these discrepancies on the politics of decentralization. It had underscored the selfishness of residents. Further, it was only focused on top-ups (peninggian) of

existing infrastructure. His organizing strove to undo the spatial fragmentation of flood prevention by modifying the role that the grassroots played. In short, he tried to achieve a uniform and timelier adaptation to flooding trends that would give all residents the same chances at maintaining their homes while also reducing rob more generally. To achieve this, he had to navigate a specific grassroots structure, a political assemblage that I will explain in the following.

The Grassroots Structure, Political Transition, and Developmentalism

In contemporary Indonesia, the grassroots often function as an anchor for development projects. In the framework of projects, residents not only take on the roles of beneficiaries, but also those of organizers, contractors, workforce, or facilitators, that is, “active forces supporting development” (Hadiz 2004:700). As Li has shown, a successful project is, foremost, one that “generates a flow of revenue, and more projects” (2015). In line with her observation that policy is not the only tool of governance in Indonesia, and a weak one at that, the project has become a privileged mode of governing conduct and the use of space in Semarang’s North. Actors that the Indonesian president has called the grassroots (akar rumput, see beginning of the chapter) play an important role in the formation and implementation of projects. Providing historical context to my discussion of rob governance will allow me to describe how the project itself is a form of governing water and more. The purpose of this section is to show the new relationships between the kampung and the state in Indonesia and put Kemijen’s own ‘rob activism’ in context. It asks whether local activists are able to promote their own visions of time.

In Indonesia, the urban grassroots are generally considered as developing and emanating from kampungs, that is, the living spaces of the lower classes. Following Murti (2015:48), I see the concept of the kampung operating on at least two levels in grassroots politics: it functions as a space of identity formation and forms the basis on which activists can negotiate and advocate
the needs of communities. The grassroots are thus coupled with the kampung and its administrative structures. To unearth the Indonesian grassroots – a rather slippery concept often used to refer to “ordinary people” as the main body of civil society\(^\text{32}\) – a few more words on Indonesia’s political transition since 1998 seem in order.

During the New Order the kelurahan or sub-district administration was an important governmental tool of power and suppression. At that time, “the kampung was a unit of control” (Murti 2015:45) under tight surveillance by the local administration that was installed by the central government. The kelurahan exercised a hegemonic force that promoted a uniform view of time tending to “focus on the logic of developmentalism, integrating competing sources of knowledge and ways of narrating the past into a single national narrative of the Indonesian nation and its people” (Murti 2015:45). The mid-1990s, however, sparked optimism among government critics (Tsing 2005:22); pushed by foreign foundations, the regime was suddenly inclined to allow community-based resource management, as long as such projects aligned with the interests of the “nation.” But it was the end of the New Order, in 1998, which inaugurated Indonesia’s transition to democracy, and made community projects politically legitimate. Today, the kelurahan is officially conceptualized as a space of cooperation: an interlocutor and development partner for residents to which the latter can express their concerns and desires. The kelurahan, for example, carries out sosialisasi events on a regular basis to inform residents about development plans, regulations, and programs. The Suharto regime employed sosialisasi in a more authoritarian way, which explains why critique voiced by residents at sosialisasi events was undesired. Today, sosialisasi is conceptualized as a forum for exchange and mutual support between residents and

\(^{32}\) “Civil society” is a concept that plays a central role in neoliberal thought: “‘decentralization’ has become, along with ‘civil society’, ‘social capital’ and ‘good governance’, an integral part of the contemporary neo-institutionalist lexicon, especially of those aspects which are intended to draw greater attention to ‘social’ development” (Hadiz 2004: 700).
the government. Despite being designed to represent citizens’ critiques and recommendations, Gibbings (forthcoming) has shown that sosialisasi still largely follows the logic of educating residents and generating buy-in instead of constituting a veritable space of participatory planning.

In his analysis of contemporary Indonesian politics, Aspinall (2013) finds a lack of “powerful and permanent poles of attraction” which dominated the political landscape of post-Independence (1945-1966) and New Order (1966-1998) Indonesia. He argues that the politico-ideological groups (aliran) that crystallized under Dutch rule and formed the basis of the New Order’s clientelistic regime lost their social magnetism in Indonesia’s current ‘liberal’ era. Political and ideological fragmentation weakened large-scale social movements which were replaced by a ‘silent majority.’

When, in 2015, the newly inaugurated Jokowi government discontinued public subsidies on oil, causing gas prices to skyrocket, a few protesters took to the streets of major cities, including Semarang, but those groups did not consolidate to form a mass movement. In contrast, in 1998, President Suharto’s decision to implement IMF demands for fuel price increases was a significant factor contributing to the civil protests that forced him to step down. In 2003, the daughter of Indonesia’s first president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, shied away from plans to cut the oil subsidy after “large-scale demonstrations” (Roberts 2005).

The new, piecemeal way of protest is arguably symptomatic of a more general lack of common ideals and imagined futures around which society might congregate. Decentralization – a set of policies concerning regional governance (Bunnell et al. 2013) – played a major role in this fragmentation of society: the weakening of a centralized state apparatus and devolution of power and financial autonomy to municipal governments and their districts undid former political

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33 According to Aspinall (2013), the authoritarian regime of Suharto had aspired to base its rule on the silent consent of the masses, but was unable to cultivate such a public. However, it succeeded in silencing specific Others, among which Chinese-Indonesian minorities living in Java and other regions as well as government critics with more socialist agendas. Such Others have been under more or less violent attack since the 1960s.

34 I counted more people in line at the gas station – to get a last ‘sip’ of cheap fuel before the president’s decree came into force – than in front of city hall.
Decentralization coincided with cultural shifts: the introduction of neoliberal values arguably furthered the subsumption of everyday life under capitalism, with social life becoming tilted towards consumption, competition, and entrepreneurship. But more importantly, fragmentation has altered ways of being political, with observers arguing that the dispersal of political authority has furthered democratic consolidation. What this means in concrete terms for Indonesians is still largely unclear. Therefore, critical scholarship has been cautious to assess the result of Indonesia’s political transition. Rather, it looks at how issues become politicized and actuate social formations. Aspinall (2013:49) draws a pessimistic picture: while nepotistic networks of officials, politicians, and local bodies of authority came under pressure, which opened up spaces for a democratic politics, clientelistic ways of divvying up wealth and opportunities survived into the present. This had everything to do with decentralization and other structural reforms adopted in the wake of the “Asia Crisis.” Taking the wind out of political movements’ sails, decentralization undermined coalition building by introducing development programs based on competition (Li 2007). Today, building coalitions between mass-based organizations therefore fails “in the face of splintering at the grassroots” (Aspinall 2013: 35). Instead, grassroots movements at the level of neighbourhoods find themselves atomized and forced to partner with the local administration.36

With the end of the New Order came hope and prospects. Who would be a part of the new social order forming on the horizon? After protests that led to the end of the regime, something

35 “Legislation focused on decentralization to the third tier of government, namely regencies (kabupaten) and cities (kota), with the result that the role of provincial governments in managing the coordination of inter-local affairs has been severely attenuated in the era of decentralization” (Bunnell et al. 2013:859).

36 Usefully, Siegel (1993) has noted for Java that people sensed the political weakness of the social hierarchy during Suharto’s reign. He observed, for instance, that residents of a poor neighbourhood as a result of crumbling social hierarchy established neighbourhood watches (ronda) whose task was to police the boundaries of the local community. The use of violence towards outsiders (thieves and/or Chinese-Indonesians) aimed at suppressing anxieties of fragmentation and dissolution. Siegel concluded that fear was localized and “made into hierarchy” (Siegel id:38, my emphasis).
did fill the power vacuum: in line with structural adjustment schemes of the World Bank, the
country’s ‘communities’ (formed within sub-districts if the program addressed urban populations
and formed within villages if the program addressed rural populations) became instrumental in
implementing development plans as direct recipients of state subsidies and donor money from
international organizations. As Aspinall and others (Li 2015; Tsing 2005) have argued, the
development project as a specific site of value production became the new glue of social ties; the
proyek (project) was formative of assemblages of global and ‘local’ actors, experts, recipients,
and spaces: “enrolling government officials, politicians, transnational donors, NGOs, scientists,
and villagers; they form them as subjects, and engage them in a particular set of practices” (Li
2015:2). In the context of development projects, foreign NGOs encouraged the activation of the
grassroots, arguing in a classically neoliberal vein that budgets and planning should be devolved
(in part) to people on the ground.

Importantly, as a motor of national development, the proyek became a screen behind which
the capitalistic elite, patrons, and former members of the New Order “powerhouse” could
transform themselves into actors allied in specific ways and to variable extent with the
‘grassroots.’ In fact, what counted as a proyek addressing the grassroots often required creating
recipients with specific customs and needs, which resulted in awkward political associations
between actors that neither shared common political goals nor class background. NGOs proved
just as flexible and inventive in connecting with the grassroots: they often wholly invented or
adapted programs to fit the requirements of international granting agencies. Li (2015:6) points out
that in the liberal economy of Indonesia, national NGOs, like state officials, “cannot maintain
themselves, or have an effect in the world, without the funds and legitimation that projects
supply.” She further considers the project as a device shaping and aligning the conduct of diverse
actors by mediating social and economic processes. While the project produces assemblages, the
role that infrastructures and ecology play in this assemblage should also be considered. How does infrastructure influence the form and logics of projects? And how is conduct shaped in this process?

Though based on separate data sets and approaching their research objects from different theoretical angles, Li (2005; 2007) and Tsing (2005) have written in often similar ways about the social dynamics of projects that shaped Indonesia during the New Order and after the fall of General Suharto. Both are interested in the social effects of projects carried forward by heterogeneous assemblages of actors. Both look at projects critically and prefer an analysis of their dynamics over disputing whether they led to an increased subsumption of human lives under transnational governmentality as opposed to increased freedom. Rather, they point to the identities and spaces that are refigured by the trajectories of social movements and development projects. In contrast to state-centered analyses of power, Li (2005:383) argues that in decentralized Indonesia governmental “schemes work on and through the practices and desires of their target populations.” Power is less visible and gains traction by operating at the lowest level of administration, in the lifeworlds of kampung dwellers. Development schemes are championed not only by state agencies but also an array of other authorities, including NGOs and state-backed organizations. While I agree with these insights (curated from extended ethnographic research in rural Indonesia), I noticed an understandable lack of engagement with urban milieus in Li’s and Tsing’s propositions. How are “charismatic packages” (Tsing 2005:228), models for social change that float around the globe, unpacked and put to work in urban settings? And how are infrastructure and ecology folded into these “packages?” The New Order era was full of nationalist “dreams of social change” (Tsing 2005:216) – wholesome urban development that embraced the kampung. But Wahyu sees the kampung as split into fragments. In the context of decentralization, just how do the unlikely partners – kelurahan and activists – envision futures?
Rob and the Grassroots Structure

After presenting the activist Wahyu’s wish to suture the fragmented kampung landscape in the face of rob through the resident organization Komayu’s work, this section describes the ‘grassroots structure’ based on local activism that emerged in Kemijen. By asking what institutional assemblages are possible in the age of rob, I build toward a grounded understanding of relationships of cooperation and privilege that certain residents have cultivated with the local administration and municipality. I often looked in awe at this conjunction, as the relationship between residents of the North and the municipal government used to be tense, mostly top-down, and paternalistic. Nyman (2005:207) has pointed out that the Indonesian government “has had a tendency to co-opt civil society forces from the very beginning, resulting in severe repression during Suharto’s New Order through the use of legal, cultural, and ideological frameworks.” While Komayu was founded in the wake of Indonesia’s democratic turn, the power of these cultural and ideological frameworks still exposes government critics to manipulation by political parties and the state. In these circumstances, the critique that Komayu mobilizes and which allows Wahyu to meet privately with the lurah is focused on specific aspects of local development. I will focus on the activists’ end of this collaboration by relating their efforts, failures, and more recent successes at becoming privileged ‘grassroots’ coalition partners in promoting development. Here, the role that water and infrastructure play will be gradually foregrounded.

In Kemijen, word on the street was that the Indonesian Railway Company (PT KAI), the Municipal Police (Satpol PP) and Semarang’s Water Agency (PSDA) had a meeting last Wednesday. Rumor had it that the government would soon begin evicting residents by the fishpond slated to become a water retention basin. Wahyu was unhappy with the whole process. His neighbourhood would stay unaffected by the evictions and potentially benefit from reduced

37 The following chapter discusses the rumours of eviction in more detail.
flooding, should the basin be implemented, but he took issue with these government agencies’ “non-transparent” procedure. At the same time, he also criticized the way in which residents decided to contest the infrastructural project: they hired a private lawyer (pengacara) to negotiate for a fair compensation. As a result, the lawyer was dealing with the government on their behalf – as intermediary. In Wahyu’s opinion, they ought to go about this conflict differently: they should represent themselves. As a united group of residents, they could develop a stronger voice and insist on transparent and fair procedure. Involving a lawyer was dangerous, since he could make deals with the government behind closed doors. Who knew? If the “guy” accepted legal fees from residents, he might be persuaded to accept payment from the municipal (pemerintah) or local government (kelurahan), as well. The guy was not even one of them! How could they trust him? Wahyu did not believe in such messy negotiations – it was the “old way” of doing things, where every person involved in the deal wanted dips on the project money. There were too many unknowns and temptations to cheat in this process. Wahyu stood for a different approach. He didn’t trust the authorities but only certain individuals within their ranks and worked hard to develop projects and policy recommendations from the bottom up. Yet, in his spree of activities he was often forced to deal with existing structures of local governance and be on good terms with the authorities, as I will show in the following.

I knew Wahyu as a terribly busy man. Specifically, if a program was about infrastructure, economic development, or flooding, he played some part in it. He was often directly responsible for the dissemination (sosialisasi) of information concerning a new kampung-scale program to residents, but always helped organize and coordinate. His voracious organizing could at times give way to visible fatigue and silent resignation. Having to constantly probe and push the boundaries of what was feasible in the arena of kampung development, his moods could shift on a whim. Wahyu focused on local projects: I rarely saw him working on projects whose scope
surpassed the sub-district level. In a tangible sense, the grassroots structure explained above both enabled and constrained his everyday work. One day, he could be full of hope and vibrant about new local development opportunities. The next day, he could shake his head in despair, rub his sleepy eyes, and complain to me about the “endless struggle” and the “uselessness of it all.” To get involved in local infrastructure projects, tactful and respectful maneuvering was of the essence. The tactic of staying on good terms with the local authorities and in synch with attitudes forming in the kampung is the focus of the following story that situates Wahyu’s ‘struggle’ in the political and historical context of Indonesia’s ongoing democratic transition:

One day, I visited the kelurahan office to follow up on a data request. Kemijen’s kelurahan office, built in 1980, is a modest version of a typical Indonesian local governance post: it consists of a large walk-in space, where residents can talk with employees, pick up documents, and enquire about various administrative issues; the lurah’s office; a closet for storing documents; and an adjacent meeting room.\(^\text{38}\) The furniture looks worn and visitors are expected to sit on blue plastic chairs, as are the lower-ranking officials in the lurah’s employ. The reason for my visit was my interest in the annual allocation of funds for infrastructural maintenance of Kemijen’s neighbourhoods. The treasurer promised to grant insight into the hand-written records of infrastructural expenses. At the kelurahan, I was greeted by the lurah’s wife, who often accompanied her husband to public events and other duty activities. She was as chatty as usual and adamant that I soon live up to my promises to accompany a group of local housewives on their weekly sanitary inspections, when Wahyu walked through the building entrance. When he saw me, he came over to shake hands. He also casually informed me that he had come to discuss some issues with the lurah. Apparently in a rush, he promptly excused himself and walked in the direction of the lurah’s office. The lurah’s wife also excused herself and followed Wahyu into the

\(^\text{38}\) The meeting described at the beginning of the previous chapter took also place here.
adjacent room. For the next ten minutes the three discussed something in what seemed a relaxed fashion while the door was kept demonstratively open. I learned later that Wahyu’s visit had to do with his involvement in an anti-flooding policy development program that the local NGO “Pattiro” (described below) was currently concocting. He thought it necessary to inform the lurah that the kelurahan had neglected to invite certain residents to the organization’s next residential consultation. Excluding these residents from their meeting would prove problematic, because it created the impression that the kelurahan cherry-picked its partners. When residents felt left out, they might boycott or block programs. But that is not what Wahyu told the lurah. Instead, he reminded him respectfully: “time is moving on, and people continue to have needs” (waktu berjalan terus, dan kebutuhan rakyat berjalan terus).

The timeframe in which Wahyu located the situation of the “people” was intentionally ambivalent: it applied to the lurah’s window of opportunity while holding office as well as the ongoing problems with regular flooding. If they wanted to make progress on achieving flood safety while he was in office, they had to work together. Wahyu’s audience with the lurah reveals that good relations between community organizers and the local administration are mutually beneficial. The encounter reveals at least two important aspects of their relationship, which are: as organizer, Wahyu is received by the authorities and can ask for the lurah’s support. As his message to the lurah shows, Wahyu claims to be speaking on behalf of the rakyat, or people. Whether the lurah agrees with Wahyu’s view of the situation or not, he too has an interest in cooperating. In fact, the sub-district head’s success at governing would in part be measured by how many projects (to reduce poverty, improve wellbeing, maintain local peace, upgrade infrastructure etc.) he was able to oversee. Lastly, this cooperation takes place at the sub-district office – a formal space. Their conversation is audible to the whole staff, including visitors, which reveals a certain adherence to ideologies of transparency and democracy – the cornerstones of
Indonesia’s decentralization policy.

After meeting with the lurah, Wahyu had to return home as quickly as possible to oversee construction work being done in his house. He had hired workers to raise the floors of the bathroom and kitchen. In other words, when he referred to peoples’ urgent and lasting needs, he was implicitly speaking of his own situation. Yet, this ‘ordinary’ resident was granted exclusive chat time with the lurah and his wife. How come?

(Closed) Activists

In 2000, the activist group Komayu was formed to address two major issues of local concern, flooding and economic development. Today, the active group has a chief coordinator and consists of a variable number of informally nominated members who can be elected to special offices. Since its formal foundation, Komayu has cooperated with several national and international non-governmental organizations. Komayu’s operating budget mainly derives from project budgets of donor-based organizations, whose grants are often made dependent on cooperation with the urban “grassroots.” Komayu has managed to attract funds from several sources, gaining influence for its members to participate in decisions of the sub-district government about how and where infrastructural programs get implemented. Wahyu was recently elected chief coordinator of Komayu.

Their group was not previously regarded as a legitimate partner in local development. It had to craft this image. As an experienced and full-time local activist with Komayu and labour union member, Adin (introduced in the second and portrayed in more detail in the last chapter) helped to organize a “folkloric” festival each year from 2006–2009. These events aimed at putting the organization “on the radar” of society and the government, to boost its ability to partner with government agencies. Its members wanted the government to see that the communities along Banger River were able to represent themselves and become partners in bottom-up urban
development projects. Wahyu said that the municipal government took notice, “Oh, look at that, even the stinky Banger river can do it” (*bahkan Banger yang bau bisa*). According to Adin, attracting development programs was the fruit of their continued efforts to make Kemijen an attractive development target.

According to Wahyu, the reason for creating Komayu was a shared desire to change Kemijen. They began by celebrating a *ruwatan* (a traditional Javanese cleansing ritual) by the river to bring about positive change. Adin pointed out that the event was primarily aimed at attracting attention to communicate the community’s “readiness” for improvement to the wider public (*see* second chapter). The ceremonial aspect merely represented a cultural “package” (*digemas budaya*), according to him. In fact, the group learned to put extreme care into how their message to the public was “packaged.” Their critique always had to be subtle, which required an early involvement of the government in their activities instead of other more openly ‘political’ means, like protesting or demonstrating. Instead of raising the specter of disturbance or violence, they had to choose a different path. They feared that the government would blame them for troublemaking, which would result in curtailed or withdrawn support. Instead of civil affront, they decided to carefully involve the municipality, which had in the past legitimated the absence of development projects by pointing to political “elements” (*elemen*) in Kemijen that allegedly planned to interfere with public works in pursuit of their own benefits. Involving the government was thus a pre-emptive act that eliminated or reduced suspicion. Group members recalled that a few years ago they became the object of a police investigation for organizing ‘dark meetings’ (*rapat gelap*). When the group sensed the specter of criminalization, Komayu started operating through more dispersed networks. For example, Komayu now cooperates with a local advocacy organization whose activities are financed with international donor money. Wahyu told me that “you need a lot of friends if you want to take on the government. Your arguments need a
foundation.” By demonstrating visibility and staying connected across the political spectrum, the group seems to avoid being criminalized for voicing critique. Grassroots groups need to be loosely connected with political camps to avoid suspicions of corruption and being categorized as too militant. It also has to signal adherence to traditional local hierarchies. In fact, Komayu has managed to insert its members into numerous legitimate sites of local budget dispersion. At a routine Komayu meeting that I attended, Wahyu was surrounded by his many allies. He looked confidently into the round of assembled members: “Mas Toto is head of PMPN (a government initiated poverty alleviation program), Pak Tanto is head of KSB (disaster-preparedness group) and RW (neighbourhood association).” The list continued. After Wahyu’s remarks, Adin smiled and added that their work resembled a constant “gnawing” on the government: “like mice!”

The global discourse of climate change, for example, served Komayu as vehicle for pressing for residential involvement in urban planning. In 2010, Komayu organized a climate change festival as part of an “awareness raising” campaign. Adin directed workshops at which he explained the concept of climate change and its potential impacts on livelihoods to civil groups, like the BKM, and residents. He knew that the area’s vulnerability to climate change had been established by government-backed vulnerability assessments carried out by the international NGO Mercy Corps. Its study predicts that about 185 ha of Kemijen’s territory will be permanently flooded due to sea level rise (ISET 2011). Adin recalled that the festival produced tangible results, including annual renovation works of tanggul (river walls) by the government. However, explanations of rob based on climatic trends did not stand the test of time in Semarang. As further examples of Komayu’s work will show, it was precisely the impossibility of pinpointing the precise origin of rob that made engaging the government possible. Climate change, as a

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39 Repeated conversations with planners have revealed that climate is considered a minor factor in the production of rob.
universal claim, thus served to promote specific local strategies (see Choy 2011), such as punctual infrastructural repair.

Treading Carefully: From Festivals to Development Plans

As I pointed out, organizing festivals helped maneuver the group into a strategic position to communicate with sections of the government. From here, Komayu has been able to exploit peoples’ uncertainty about the causes of flooding to increase its political legitimacy. This in turn allowed the group to become an accepted voice of the area’s people in municipal participation programs. Wahyu was hopeful that partnering with national NGOs would help marshal a number of bottom-up initiatives and gradually make their voice heard at higher levels of the government. With the support of an umbrella organization Pattiro, a jaringan (network) was formed that consists of members of Semarang’s Lembaga Bantuan Hukum (Centre for Legal Assistance) branch, journalists, academics, and residents of Kemijen. Under the name of Civil Alliance Against Flooding, this network has called for a series of discussions with municipal stakeholders, to which I briefly turn to present an example of how Komayu and other activists stage Kemijen as an endangered area with well-intended grassroots actors and economic development potential.

In 2014, the Alliance invited municipal stakeholders and civil groups to discuss the newest drainage regulation named Peraturan Daerah Drainase and ongoing anti-flooding measures carried out by three municipal government bodies in a “social audit.” Semarang’s water agency (PSDA), environmental agency (BLH) and planning agency (Bappeda) attended the roundtable discussion. Impressively, the network had managed to assemble rob victims, activists and decision-makers in the same room. At the meeting, budgeting and transparency in infrastructure provision were salient topics. The chairperson stated that the “conversation” at the beginning was going to be strictly about empirical “facts” (fakta) and not feelings. The aim was to give the
government a kind of reality-check. Yet, actual facts were difficult to produce, as it turned out. In one instance, a participant complained about unfinished roadworks in his neighbourhood: the contractor (pemborong) had done a poor job. The participant said that he contacted the council member who had ordered the execution, but the man only offered him to meet in his office. “I wanted to show him [the council member] the facts on-site (di lapangan) – how else could I prove the facts (fakta),” the resident asked, barely concealing his discontent. Only at points did the activists manage to present evidence of minor miscalculations and fraud: why had renovations of this stretch of road not been completed, as described in the publicly accessible construction contract; what was this ominous insurance in another contract that had never been purchased? However, these pushes for rectification of fraud were not accompanied by outrage and no offence was taken on the government’s part. For example, a young man spoke about a riverbank that PSDA had recently put in place. Apparently, a stingy operator had used way too much sand in the concrete mixture. In fact, the complainant had brought the evidence with him. Spectacularly, he dropped the entire content of a plastic bag on the meeting table. Small pieces of concrete burst into even smaller pieces. The man went on to demonstrate the extreme porosity of the material by pulverizing it between his fingers and throwing the remainder in a dramatic gesture on the table. The gesture seemed to scream: how is this riverbank supposed to protect against flooding? But instead of eliciting feelings of anger due to a sloppy construction job, everybody broke out in laughter. In fact, the officials had no choice but to indulge the well-staged comedy of state incompetence, probably suppressing defensive reactions. After three hours of “auditing,” which contrasted government plans with actual outcomes, Adin said in a reconciliatory gesture to the representative of PSDA: “Please don’t think that we residents are against the government. We want to work together.” At the meeting, both sides were keen on keeping their collaboration alive at all cost.
A representative of the chairing NGO Pattiro told me that the Alliance was supposed to become a “critical partner” of the government. To do so, the NGO had to collaborate with local residents in order to identify and relay their “actual needs.” As critical partner, they would be able to bring society’s needs (membawa kepentingan masyarakat) to the attention of the government. The government should “get the facts from civil society” (fakta dari masyarakat), the representative added. What became prevalent in their mediation of facts was the specific role that kampung residents had to play. Achieving “maximum effect,” that is, influencing the discourse around rob, would not come from a conversation between the government and the NGO. The Alliance’s legal expert reminded them at a meeting that “flooding” (rob dan banjir) was in any case already a “reality issue” (sudah isu realitas). Though ‘real,’ that is uncontested, in his view, they rarely had a say in plans that addressed this issue. Further, from an interview with the member Adithia, a local journalist, it became clear that how one spoke about facts was more important than simply producing them. Rob was a “fact that could not be hidden” (tidak bisa disembunyikan). The Alliance had therefore to present a specific story of rob. Kemijen was a “strategic” space from which this story could be launched into wider political discourse, as all members agreed. Presenting the area as undergoing substantial cultural and environmental change reflected in spatial and infrastructural improvements was successfully attracting ever more governmental and media attention (note the art collective Hysteria’s project mentioned at the beginning). There was disagreement about the content of that story, however. The fact sheet that Pattiro ended up presenting to the government based on their audits was strongly criticized and rejected by responsible municipal staff. Particularly, the language used by the NGO was judged inappropriate and unacceptable. Wahyu told me that this had happened before: the young NGO often didn’t know the ropes in dealing with the government.

Having an influence on water and infrastructural governance in Kemijen is a delicate
process in and of itself. Claims have to be packaged and dressed in the cloak of grassroots culture, as I have shown. Pemberton (1994; 1997: 250) has argued that colonial subjects conjured the origins of a Javanese culture “as a world of difference ideally at odds with Dutch rule.” Similarly, Komayu’s members have been able to speak to delicate social issues, such as equal accessibility to reliable drainage infrastructure and political representation, by turning their precarious surroundings into a culturally unique “endangered environment” in contradistinction to dominant visions of the neighbourhood and area (see chapter two). While climate change festivals aimed at raising awareness of environmental issues draw the image of the uninformed downstream kampung inhabitant, these events coincide with desires of democratic self-determination expressed in numerous infrastructure and development projects. Collaborating with the NGO Pattiro provided a way out of social and political isolation. Yet, the ‘grassroots structure’ can also put the government and overly ambitious NGOs at loggerheads. Representative of Komayu’s larger efforts, Wahyu had to tread carefully so as to not reanimate the specter of civil affront.

Pembangunan vs. Peninggian

Wahyu always tried hard to stay in the loop of phone calls, project cycles, and meetings. I could sympathize with his occasional overwhelmed-ness, because I was struggling to remain cognizant of the multiple projects underway at that time, as well. In addition to participating in the series of audits with the municipality organized by Pattiro, he was the local coordinator of a kampung development program. He also coordinated infrastructural assistance claims made by his neighbourhood association (RT), helped promote a bottom-up drainage maintenance program, and organized public events to improve Kemijen’s image. The following observations of his involvement in the community-based infrastructure project speak to Wahyu’s newly gained position as local representative of the neighbourhood. When I was conducting fieldwork, he was
particularly invested in one infrastructure program, because it seemed to afford a different kind of adaptation to rob.

In 2014, Wahyu was elected coordinator of a community-based infrastructure project which was financed by PMPN – “the mainstay of Indonesia’s poverty reduction program” and ground-zero of participatory planning that aims at reaching the UN’s global Millennium Development Goals (Li 2015). Wahyu was charged with overseeing and advancing the design of an infrastructural intervention that would “regulate” (tata) several neighbourhoods. According to a newspaper article covering the program, the sub-district was so “filthy” (kumuh) that it “really needed to be regulated” (Suara Merdeka 2015).

A small urban park was supposed to replace an eyesore of the local landscape: an unregulated garbage dump in between two RWs located east of the Banger River. Wahyu’s team hired a planning professor from UNDIP (who delegated the urban design job to one of his senior undergraduate assistants.) Upon seeing the design, I found the plan strangely anonymous and stiff, as if uninformed by a deeper reflection on use patterns and the meaning of river space. I asked him why he preferred square concrete blocks as planter boxes that mimicked the riverbank’s (talut) streamlined structure? He answered that they foremost needed a cleaner (lebih bersih) and more orderly neighbourhood. Improvement of the neighborhood’s overall looks was a condition for further development. The unrulier a neighbourhood looked, the less public investment it could expect, he said. I felt bad for being such an urban design snob. In fact, the grant timeline didn’t allow for much creativity and fancy design: the program would be audited soon and they had to spend the funds by a certain deadline. After a few months of planning, Wahyu came under considerable time pressure to deliver a feasible ‘bottom-up’ design, that is, backed by locals, that would please municipal planners and the organization providing the funds: the latter wanted to be sure that the program was implemented in a truly participatory way. As a result, after work Wahyu
often drove around on his motorbike to distribute formal invitations to neighbourhood heads. Only, the meetings had increasingly poor turnouts, despite his team showcasing well-crafted PowerPoint presentations from the consultant at each meeting. Since turnout stayed minimal, Wahyu’s team used every opportunity to generate interest and public approval for the project. For Wahyu, it wasn’t just fulfilling the program’s conditions for minimum participation that drove him to reach out to his neighbours. Wahyu was hoping to generate real shared interest in the project, one that could represent a common vision for their fight against rob.

Wahyu hoped that a festival rakyat (People’s Festival) would ultimately put peoples’ support behind the project. It was common practice to organize festivals because they attracted many kampung inhabitants. On the day of the festival, in between deafening dangdut (a popular melodious type of music) performances, lotteries, and speeches, organizers announced the project and informed the population of its location. In fact, the festival took place directly in the project zone: two contiguous kampungs (RW) on the east side of the Banger. Somehow Wahyu found time to commission a giant banner that showcased images of the planned infrastructural changes that decorated the back of the podium. The plan, which bore little or no resemblance with the present condition of the area, foresaw the construction of a badminton field and garden (taman) as well as a riverside promenade with sleek sitting benches. Providing these infrastructural elements of an ‘urban park’ was, foremost, supposed to improve sanitation in the chosen area which, according to a pre-construction survey, consisted mostly of “semi-permanent” and “inappropriate” (tidak layak huni) housing (Dokumen Rencana PLPBK 2015).

Even the foreign anthropologist climbed the stage erected on an empty plot at noon and sang a Western ballad accompanied by his accordion-playing friend. The enjoyment was great when the transgender dangdut artist asked me out on a date in front of about 100 festival attendants. Then, the lurah held a speech and his wife partook in a partly improvised performance of wayang
beling (a stage play that involves the typical characters of Javanese folklore but where actors speak in low Javanese and are allowed if not expected to swear). The new camat, the head of East Semarang district (Kecamatan Semarang Timur), swung by but successfully avoided a speech. He admitted in a brief conversation that he had shown up without knowing what the festival tried to achieve. Like most other attendants, he just celebrated the bestowal of an infrastructure grant upon the area. Events like these were well-rehearsed encounters between residents and the higher echelons of the local administration. They meant free entertainment for children and adults and produced welcome income for local performers and sound engineers. However, the masses’ amusement was neither understood as a sign of standing together or creating a sense of community, nor improved residents’ knowledge of the project, but rather sought to make the decisions made by the leadership more official. Wahyu was disappointed by the meagre turnout. How were they to form a common vision, if residents showed no interest in planning?

In particular, the prior meeting dedicated to the planning of the festival revealed that he had bigger fish to fry. From the beginning, Wahyu wanted to set a different tone for this event (that I briefly touched on in a previous chapter). As a tentative title, he proposed “Festival Kepedulian Kali Banger” to the event committee. He explained that they had to add a human touch to the festival. The previous, simpler title “Festival Kali Banger” didn’t capture the new spirit of Kemijen: the festival had to signal an awakening of the local population who was ready to care together for the environment. However, the meeting boiled down to deciding on who would appear in the comic theater performance. To the lurah, it didn’t matter how they called the festival, as long as it attracted people. He promised that if people knew the program well, they would probably support it (kalau masyarakat sudah tahu persis pasti dukung). As I showed above, “knowing” the program didn’t refer to a detailed technical understanding of the infrastructural additions to the sub-district. Rather, the event aimed for an ‘acknowledgement’ of the project.

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Conversely, Wahyu looked to imbue infrastructure with a new meaning – an object that people cared for communally. I suggest that Wahyu was mobilizing an ideology that was key in Indonesian developmental nationalism, whose idea of technological progress “was located within the project of nation building” (Barker 2005:710). As Barker (2005) has pointed out, the term “development” can be translated into either perkembangan or pembangunan in Indonesian. “While perkembangan implies a development associated with flowering and expansion, pembangunan suggests that development is a process of awakening, building, and construction.” Wahyu’s festival title conveyed this vision of an awakened community. Wahyu implicitly contrasts a development through ‘construction’ that stems from public awareness with an obsession with material infrastructure. Heryanto (1988:22) has shown that pembangunan not only “works at renovating the life of society, but also opposes, rejects, and eradicates anything which is considered “traditional” or “anti-modernization.” To do so, pembangunan entails a recruitment process through which members of the society are rallied behind a future-oriented project. Wahyu is nostalgic for development that elicits change at the societal level; gets rid of the ‘old way of doing things.’ This construction is diametrically opposed to the current way of leveling up kampung roads, suggested by the term peninggian.

Epilogue: A Sensible Politics of Water Management – and its outcomes

The local joke—“paying rent to nature” —is a poetic way of describing and normalizing years of living in a precarious relationship with a rapidly changing environment. This relationship is framed in monetary terms by residents, which gives it the exclusive contours of a contract. Moreover, it signals a relation of trust between inhabitants and nature; inhabitants want to actively protect and nurture this relation. But this form of ecological membership (being itself a product of ecological struggle) is increasingly made exclusive through disparities in the local distribution
of water and access to water infrastructure. Not all residents can take an active part in defining their relationships with water. Advancing democratization and decentralization in Semarang have given birth to new approaches to local development – civil organizations, public-private partnerships, and advisory boards are today concerned with planning. While they encourage civil participation, they have not undone local dynamics of uneven development; rather, they have played into them (Li 2007).

Both the cases of Arief and Ariel as well as of Wahyu are worth revisiting here. Ariel grew up in Kemijen and she and her husband recently inherited land from her parents. The vacant plot lies less than 10 meters north of their own home, which is regularly flooded due to its low elevation. They envision building a house on the higher plot, which would give them a crucial advantage over neighbours. Perhaps they will give up their current home as lost to an accelerating ecological trend. Persevering in the present, made possible by attracting grants as responsible kampung members, allows them to envision a different future. While they are also building on borrowed time, I argue, this kind of borrowing works through appropriation. They appropriate the time afforded by state programs to carve out opportunities. Time, a resource in demand in Kemijen, is not created from scratch, but inheres in the different programs and project structures made available to residents by a political hierarchy.

However, through the tenancy relation described by residents a new affective attachment to space and nature can be signaled. This chapter has shown that certain communal water management projects are intimately tied to longstanding ideals of democratic reform and can prove successful in undergirding residential rights to urban infrastructure (see Bunnell et al. 2013). A local structure of feeling is linked to growing attention to infrastructure, a symbol of both promise and failure through which ambitions of communal governance are enacted. The case of Kemijen demonstrates that local political and ecological practices reflect an engagement with the
environment that puts Semarang’s northern kampungs in a new light: water infrastructure is provided if it is managed by culturally oriented and responsible citizens. In line with Whitington’s (2013) ‘careful materialism’ – a commitment to speculative epistemology – I hold that it is crucial to take seriously the specificities of infrastructure, institutions and power through which tidal flooding unfolds. This includes the emergence of a local water politics that illustrates the political contours of ecological disaster in an empirically specific way that is glossed over by the oft-invoked concepts of resilience and adaptation. We need to consider responses to environmental challenges also as fixes of political disorder inherited from the past and as solution to unsolved problems of social membership. While projects mostly shore up the precarious existence of residents, they can generate beneficial collaborations between unlikely partners.

In the case of Wahyu, seeking out unlikely partners is a result of the grassroots structure that find new articulations through rob. Wahyu, backed by Komayu and its city-wide network, envisions an alternative to recursive peninggian works. While his and Komayu’s organizing does help certain residents find a new, overall more prominent, position with regards to local development, it is questionable whether they will have a real, democratic impact on the kind of development that flows into Kemijen. Within the grassroots structure, there are more powerful actors, such as members of the municipal administration, and major development agencies, such as the World Bank, who hold on to development schemes, such as Musrenbang, that reproduce ‘project time.’

The radical potential of grassroots politics doesn’t seem to be exhausted, however. And I will take the freedom to briefly present a promising avenue of activism below.
Intermezzo: ‘Ide gila’ – Othering Rob

In Indonesia, as Anna Tsing (2005:249-50) has noted, “environmentalists interested in democratic process have imagined the grassroots alliance as a structure that links policy-savvy activists and the rural or urban communities that know the most about their own environmental problems.” However, political oppression during the New Order strongly limited the possibility of addressing contentious issues critically through this structure. Further, in the frame of New Order activism, the rural village was the main locus of state management: villagers epitomized the environmental problems that affected the nation’s agro-centered development, which is why their environmentalist allies could more easily turn such concerns into policy debates and transformations.

Urban activists outside of Jakarta gradually developed fluency in the grassroots vernacular. In the wake of political reformation, they learned to speak to problems that affected their cities. As lowest echelon of the government, sub-districts were not only encouraged to act more autonomously in terms of local governing and budgeting, but also became a platform for building participatory narratives of local issues. In Semarang, claiming basic rights of infrastructural support and well-being became linked to environmental problems caused by flooding.

As I have demonstrated, establishing facts about rob is difficult. Yet, this brief intermezzo offers an outlook on a politics of rob that uses the kampung as a launch pad for alternatives. Especially, the urban activists portrayed above turned to the kampung for creating alternative narratives of rob. As Crosby (2015) observed in Salatiga, a small city located about 50km south of Semarang, the kampung is drenched in national ideology. However, he argues that this meaning is not static but requires perpetual locating – in space, language, and local practice: “in a similar way to the interplay between national and regional languages, the space of the kampung, how it is created and how it creates itself, defines what is local in a national context” (Crosby 2015:71).
Crosby thinks of the kampung as dynamic space that emerges in the interplay of top-down imposed definitions and instances of local dissent. She points to moments in history where the kampung became the place of anti-government sentiments, suggesting that “expressions of kampung operated in two directions, from the state about citizens and from citizens about the state” (Crosby 2015:72). As noted above, Komayu is operating most effectively as part of a dispersed network that converges upon and looks back at the kampung. While their festivals along the Banger River do draw on feelings of kampung community, their members also move in and out of this space. The kampung is not only a site of transformative social projects, but by transcending its geographical boundaries becomes a socially active imaginary that operates outside of its officially imposed confines.

Activists have learned to use this imaginary in contemporary Indonesia. When we were sitting in the roofed veranda of Indomaret, a 24/7 supermarket in the style of 7-Eleven that is a popular hang-out spot among young professionals and students, the journalist Adhitia said that what the Alliance needed was a “crazy idea” (ide gila). They had to “widen the perspective” of Pattiro, which was focusing too much on policy-making. He was generally discontented with the work of the Aliansi, since it had not produced tangible results until now. He particularly complained about the lack of imagination at meetings that he and I had attended. As an artist, he saw the kampung not only as a trope through which democratic politics should seek legitimacy, but also as place of intervention. They should target the kampung directly through art projects. He was encouraging the creation of an actual relationship with the nature of the kampung by intervening into its appearance. Some time ago, he was involved in an unprecedented exhibit on rob. In October 2013, the Semarang-based daily newspaper Suara Merdeka, that Adithia worked for, organized a national art exhibition on the phenomenon. The art show curated by Djuli Djiatiprambudi and Kussindarto premiered in Jakarta and made subsequent stops in three coastal
cities: Semarang, Purwokerto, and Pekalongan. The chic and privately run “Semarang Contemporary Art Gallery” hosted the all-Indonesian collection of artistic engagements with tidal flooding. I saw a smaller version of the original display in Pekalongan – a minor coastal city also acutely affected by rob. By the time of the exhibition’s launch, tidal flooding had already been rendered a technical problem and demystified by government-commissioned scientific reports on land subsidence, ground water extraction, and riverbed sedimentation. While the exhibit complicated official explanations by lending the phenomenon a popular voice, it also entrenched its general intrigue – disassociating the phenomenon from directly local concerns. The multi-sited character of the exhibit unrooted art that was on display from the sociopolitical context of its making, replacing the local context with a national one. Rob had in fact become ubiquitous, showing up in cartoons, YouTube videos, as well as municipal regulations and the city’s master plan’s regulations.

Figure 12: Opening night at the Semarang Gallery. Image source: Prigel Gallery; http://prigelgallery-blog.blogspot.ca/2013/10/opening-semarang-art-rob-video-recap.html.
By disentangling the representation of rob from national development, some members of the *Alliance* hoped to harvest a wider range of feelings – not just “facts.” Smith (2005:148) has pointed to feelings “that might be produced in the dialectic between natural things and ourselves, such as care, fear, wonder, love, loss and hope.” According to Smith, such feelings can stir up conventional value systems. By using the term nature, I do not mean to restrict my analysis to living organisms or biological processes. I consider Smith’s notion of nature too narrow and rooted in a problematic binary of society and nature (*see* Morton 2005; Taylor 2012). It is precisely as an ordinary feature of social life and constituted by it that nature can produce emotional responses from social actors. I follow Smith’s notion of nature only to the extent that I recognize that feelings about nature are often “debarred from principled arguments about ethical evaluation” (*id.*:149). The journalist Adhitia explicitly wanted to produce such feelings and tie them to knowledge of rob. In fact, Komayu has often shown the ability to generate “crazy ideas,” such as wild canoe races on the Banger River. Hysteria, a Semarang-based art collective, has launched similar projects foregrounding the histories and struggles of specific neighbourhoods as seen from the perspective of their residents (*see* their art project “Bok Cinta” on one of Semarang’s most densely inhabited kampungs, “Kampung Bustaman”). In their latest project entitled “Penta K Labs,” the group invited artists, researchers, and residents to co-produce a story (*narasi*) of Kemijen. Over the period of one week in July 2016, Hysteria convened workshops, staged concerts, and curated art exhibitions in different neighbourhoods of Kemijen. Importantly, they honored the local tradition of hosting a boat race (*balap perahu*) on the Banger River.
The canoe race, in particular, is prone to elicit feelings about the nature of the kampung from residents. It stages the river as dangerous and uninviting, which is why competitors appear even more daring and intriguing. Although not all emotions are excluded from debates around environmental issues, certain types clearly are – anger, frustration, anxieties, and disobedience were absent from all policy debates that I attended. As a privileged observer before and after meetings, I often became aware of the emotional censorship reigning meetings. These casual and fact-based meetings stood in contrast with Wahyu’s regular complaints about feeling sick and deprived of sleep – an indirect result of flooding. He could leave meetings dizzy and feeling nauseous. Fact-collecting during meetings did not invite an expression of these emotions. It often only admitted humorist stagings of impersonal facts.

Attempts to sidetrack this management of affect inherent in environmentalist politics had to come from a different interlocutor: the grassroots. In dialogue with “ordinary people,” crazy ideas were legitimate harvesting methods of affect. An idea that was ‘crazy’ could emerge from a space that was distinctively other. In other words, the government would have to listen to unconventional ideas, because they ultimately confirmed it as the only serious and legitimate governing entity. Framing their efforts through the existing structure of grassroots politics at the
behest of kampung residents does not defy a rationalist stance on rob, but opens the political stage to the “possible ravages” of emotional relativism. This is not simply a critique of science’s one-dimensionality expressed in truth claims, as Wynne (2007) argued, but a way of reopening a dialogue about what is ethical. What is happening in Semarang is that the locus from where ethics used to derive suddenly shifts to the local. In view of existing research on public space as stage for alternative politics, it isn’t all that surprising that Adhitia sees this shift of perspective happening in the act of aestheticizing kampung space. Lee (2013:305) showed that street art in Indonesia was not the corollary of spatial or urban conflicts, but a reflection of the political deregulation and bureaucratic decentralization since the fall of Suharto (id. 306). The new legitimacy of non-expert interventions upon the urban landscape produced ideological confusion about what is appropriate in the post-Reformasi context. Lee argues that citizens “engaging in the politics of self-expression and national identification” reflect the need for new narratives in a neoliberal economy (id. 307). In this context, art can create new publics that use a “spatial logic to constitute a screen, a stage, an audience, and an ongoing public sphere.” Importantly, “the public (publik) of street art’s imaginary is not the same as the People (rakyat), society (masyarakat) or even the nation (bangsa)” (id. 308).

If this public is neither constituted by specific political factions nor by society per se, I argue that it is resolutely urban – diverse, connected, and mobile: it is a dispersed mass that can draw support from a wide range of actors. Activists recognize that the kampung can be an effective stage for their projects. Speaking from the space of the kampung allows to unsettle the rational formalism underlying development programs. It counters existing procedures through which the potentially disruptive influence of Others is diffused, “effectively separating its theoretical representation from any structure of feeling associated with it” (Smith 2005:158). Forming a new narrative around tidal flooding can preserve rob as such an Other – as an urban-ecological process
that transcends the “relatively emotionless structure of the bureaucratic order” (id.). As integral part of a local experience of ecological decline, rob can be taken up by ethical relations that require an understanding, “a feeling for one’s place within and in relation to others” (id.: 159). Ultimately, this is the work that Wahyu and his consociates (Hysteria and Komayu) constantly have to do: they link and unlink rob with specific structures of feeling.
In this final chapter, I focus on a Dutch-Indonesian flood prevention project that attempted to reconfigure water governance in Kemijen. The actors involved in this project came from very different institutional backgrounds and had varying levels and areas of expertise. Yet, they seemed to agree that the city’s drainage system was undergoing a crisis in view of increasing tidal flooding. Furthermore, these actors agreed that the central government had failed at providing functional drainage infrastructure for the neighbourhoods along the Banger River. In 2005, the decision was made to build a Dutch-designed polder in the Banger River floodplain. The polder was supposed to intervene in flood governance by using adversity-tested Dutch water management. Taking stock of the project in 2014 and 2015, I argue that the idea of a flood crisis helped draw attention to the area and altered the government’s mid-term plans, while preventing a critical re-examination of both the past and future of the floodplain.

This chapter fits into the larger framework of this thesis in four ways. First, the polder project affected communities, whose struggles with water and marginalization I described in the previous chapters, in that it promised the end of tidal flooding by putting in place a new, modern water system to prevent rob. The polder was expected to make house repairs and infrastructural
interventions by residents and the local administration virtually unnecessary. Second, the project’s
design attempted to erase the multiple temporalities of flood management (riverbank construction,
repairs, and state-sponsored peninggian) by homogenizing responses to tidal flooding. Third, the
polder project was generally greeted enthusiastically by floodplain residents as well as resident
organizations like Komayu, as it promised flood prevention based on community involvement.
Lastly, the polder, as an expert technology, has to be seen as a state attempt to reconfigure social
relations in the context of advanced neoliberalism. Aspinall (2013:28) defines neoliberalism in
Indonesia as a “set of practices” for which economic calculation is a universal standard. As
neoliberalism informs the organization, management, and government of human life, it is “as
much a cultural phenomenon as it is a political or economic one.” In the context of the polder
project, it is the organization, management and government of kampung-water relations that is
remodeled according to neoliberal standards.

This chapter follows Abram’s call (2015:144-5) for making room in anthropological
investigations of time to “see the layering and folding of presents and futures that persist from
modern into neoliberalizing states.” The polder was understood as a feat of modern water
infrastructure and promised to bring economic progress, and it devolved greater managerial and
budgetary responsibility to residents. As Ferguson (1999:145) has argued, the forms of political
and economic organization captured in the term development are often laid on top of “already-
existing geopolitical hierarchies” – development neither created inequalities nor undid them, but
helped to manage them. This explains why, according to Ferguson, “dead ends of the past keep
coming back, just as the “main lines” that are supposed to lead to the future continually seem to
disappoint.” The polder turned out such a ‘dead end,’ I show, despite its intentions to introduce a
new horizon of economic progress. I thus reflect on the polder’s early ‘ruination.’ Although a
sense of urgency was initially shared by residents and project partners, incredulity and frustration
came to supplant prospects of transformative change. The project’s delay eventually led to attempts of one project partner, Semarang’s water agency PSDA, to co-opt the polder infrastructure and question the participatory approach. The project’s dismantlement demonstrates the power of the chronic: river normalization schemes incorporate preventative polder governance. In keeping with normalization as its dominant framework of urban development, the government aims today at managing tidal flooding through the language of localized, participatory development.

A polder is an expert technology. A polder is a hydrologically closed system consisting of dikes, dams, and water pumps. Many Indonesian cities have already implemented polder systems, which are operated by state agencies and most often have been financed – including design and construction – with loans from foreign investors or aid agencies. Regulating water flow, a polder can stop the tidal intrusion by damming a river or canal where it stretches into the sea. In the first chapter, I described plans for the gradual remaking of Semarang’s floodplain through such hydrologically closed systems. As such, they are an integral part of the Indonesian government’s river normalization agenda. Yet, the Banger Polder was framed as a special pilot project that would experiment with and make it possible to envision a different style of flood prevention that included the local population in planning and stewarding. As such, it differed strongly from other polders implemented in Indonesia, as it aimed at devolving substantial authority over operation and maintenance to a local body with civil representation. The various institutions behind Banger Polder wished to stop rob not by using fancy technology, but by involving local residents in planning and running the polder. As part of their participation, residents of contiguous sub-districts were expected to pay a water tax after implementation, modeled on the Dutch water levy,\textsuperscript{40} to allow for a financially autonomous “polder board.” As a legitimate governing entity with

\textsuperscript{40} In the Netherlands, citizens pay annual taxes for the management of regional water systems, such as
spatially limited powers, this polder board was supposed to become a trustee responsible for levying the water tax and overseeing operation and maintenance.

While I was conducting research, the polder board called “SIMA”[^41] worked in an office located in Semarang’s city hall. As a potentially unique and, for Indonesia, historically unprecedented body of governance, the board attracted both national and international media and certain scholarly attention during my fieldwork. My aim in this chapter is to show how the polder board embodied a critique of the local government for offering untimely responses to the flood crisis. The polder came to represent an urgent and alternative response to flooding that strove to eliminate the contradictions of coastal development by using Dutch planning and hydrological technology. Specifically, by creating new spaces in which residents were supposed to inform themselves about the polder and their responsibilities as its future inhabitants, the new polder board strove to insert itself as trustee into existing state-society relations. It aimed at developing “awareness” of causes of flooding, while promoting the polder as a techno-institutional system that would prevent future disaster. The board’s vision, however, after repeated corrections of the project’s deadline, was difficult to sustain. Project defenders came to realize that, as an unelected organization that was not directly involved in providing the polder infrastructure, the board possessed no actual power. It could not sustain its vision of the future. Throughout the project’s long implementation phase, other temporalities eventually perturbed and undermined the board’s vision of an alternative, participatory flood prevention. While the formation of the provisional, later officially decreed, polder board played an important role in articulating the idea of flood governance through community involvement, its claim to flood governance was eventually

[^41]: SIMA is a compound word of Schieland – the name of the partnering water authority’s home region – and the second syllable of Semarang.

[^41]: maintenance of dykes and control of water levels. This water tax does not account for drinking water usage which is monitored and charged separately by water suppliers. See http://www.iamsterdam.com/en/local/official-matters/finance/taxes.
superseded by other “temporalities of planning” (Abram 2014:145). Over time, even the spatial changes brought about by the polder project turned out to be mere fixes, not that different from previous government attempts at controlling floods. In a recent article, Abram showed that “multiple temporalities are performed in ongoing projects of democratic planning.” Semarang’s government, for instance, used the polder project’s momentum to advance its normalization agenda, whilst residents of Kemijen saw an opportune moment to leverage compensation claims for being evicted in the context of the polder infrastructure’s development. Lastly, the polder project built political momentum that ultimately helped Kemijen’s resident organizations’ voice to be heard in the government.

I suggest that a reflective anthropology of crisis allows us to explain the emergence and multiple effects of assemblages, such as the polder initiative, that set out to manage ecological disaster. An analysis of the polder project reveals the discursive struggles preceding the choice of a particular solution to a perceived problematic. Crisis imaginaries serve to unsettle normalized structures and recondition expectations of the future. As Masco (2012:1107) reminds us, “the concept of the extreme is relational, assuming a counterpoint to everyday experience marked regular, unexceptional, banal.” The polder project, as I will show, hinges on blaming catastrophe on the “regular” way of doing things; the waxing and waning of projects that fail to take seriously residents’ imbrication in flood prevention as well as the stiffness of bureaucratic structures. The polder proponents claimed to know residents’ efforts to deal with floods and that they were eager to be more strongly involved in government schemes. While the polder project’s ideas were certainly virtuous in the sense that they demonstrated interest in and empathy for riverside communities, its conceptual design did not allow for questioning the chronic tendencies of urban governance.

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In the iconic horror comedy “Ghostbusters,” a showdown occurs between the heroic crew and the New York City administration. The introductory quote partly illustrates this confrontation. In a pivotal scene of Ghostbusters, the fictional Environmental Protection Agency forces the Ghostbusters’ ingenuous containment system to be shut down. As a result, the released ghosts go on a rampage through the city. In view of the uncontrollable situation, the city government admits that it made a grave mistake. It calls the Ghostbusters to the mayor’s office. Here, Dr. Peter Venkman, played by Bill Murray, urges the mayor to face the unthinkable – the city is moving toward “a disaster of biblical proportions.” The dialogue is hilarious because in order to be put in charge of the life-threatening situation, the heroes have recourse to standard apocalyptic imagery. In a quite tacky way, they gloss the impending catastrophe in biblical quotes. Of course, the anti-ghost crew ultimately prevails, the apocalypse is prevented, and peace and order are restored to the people of New York.42

I first watched Ghostbusters with my ex-partner and her cousin, a Bill Murray fan, after moving to Toronto in 2012 to pursue a doctoral degree. At that point, I was drafting a proposal for my research project. It occurred to me that the movie scene related above was still relevant more than thirty years after its conception and, like many horror movies, good to think with. In fact, the scene seemed to speak to a new spectre with global dimensions: climate change. The world over, climate change, often lumped together with global warming and sea level rise in media and activist language, is thought to produce planetary ecological imbalances that will change the very way in which humans live and think (Klein 2014).43 While the knowledge of a changing global climate

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42 It is interesting that the Ghostbusters franchise has celebrated repeated comebacks on big screen. The second film self-ironically hints at the banality of apocalypse as of today, as the ghostbusters are now “ordinary” New Yorkers – underemployed and stressed workers living from paycheck to paycheck.

43 Before the world climate summit in Paris, in 2015, the pope warned that it would be “sad and even catastrophic were particular interests to prevail over the common good and lead to manipulating information in order to protect their own plans and projects” (my emphasis).
has not radically changed the ways in which societies reproduce themselves (Swyngedouw 2010; Prudham 2009), visions of extreme ecological situations have already set in motion institutional processes and shaped subjectivities (Masco 2010). In Ghostbusters, picturing the catastrophe helped put a motley crew of scientists in charge of New York City’s survival. In Semarang, a team of experts was effectively put in charge of a drainage project that aimed to protect all neighbourhoods along the Banger River from rob. These experts set out to design a polder system to secure a future with “dry feet for all” – the polder project’s official motto. They interpreted rob as a sign that, unless treated, the drainage system would soon endanger life in Semarang’s North.

Sections

The first section of this chapter is a detailed description of the ongoing polder project, based on extensive participant observation, document analysis, and interviews with members of its board. I show that the Dutch project conjures up an image of historic failure; a rupture in history that requires both technological and institutional fixing. The narrative goes: once banned from the country, Dutch experts are summoned to prevent a collapse of a drainage system they designed but which has been undermined by (state-indulged) urbanization. I reconstruct the crisis narrative of the Dutch actors, with special attention to the project leader’s representations of poor coastal dwellers and their relationship with the swamp.

Based on interviews with local members of the polder board – both residents of polder territory – I describe the translation of Dutch planning technology into a scheme suitable for the Indonesian context. Here, members of the polder board are shown to cooperate with an obscure government bureaucracy as well as intransparent law enforcement, while describing themselves as the proxy of the “people.” Their privileged insight into bureaucratic and governing practices reveal what they call the “dark forces” involved in carrying out government projects.
I then describe the polder design, piecing together the technological and ideological dimensions of the polder’s futurological scheme. The last section documents the re-signification of the polder as “A Sad Monument.” Intrigued by the quick “ruination” of the unfinished and pending polder infrastructure, I investigate social recuperation processes of the pilot project. I show that the implementation process has reached an important crossroads where two options seem to be available: revitalizing the project (essentially bringing it back from the “dead”) at the expense of imposing undemocratic decisions on the local population or allowing the existing system (that the polder tried to bypass) to appropriate it.

This chapter also pays attention to the specific practices through which urban hegemony is achieved through water management (Eckers and Loftus 2008:713). Speaking about crisis is a practice that has power-conservative and exclusionary effects: the polder realization necessitates the eviction of hundreds of residents inhabiting project land. Their presence on project land becomes an issue in view of the polder’s hydraulic scheme. While contestations of the project exist, most forms of protest are managed in a way that never questions the project per se. As I showed in the previous chapter, tidal flooding provokes a new critique of the state and public infrastructure projects. In this chapter, I go on to show how local resistance to evictions, however, is weak, as politically marginalized dwellers are silenced by the crisis narrative.

With this last chapter I hope to come full circle: rob has effectively reconfigured water governance (the modernization of the swamp is now “participatory” and “community-based”) by raising questions as to the fallibility of modern state infrastructure, while also keeping inequalities constant. Although the opaque structures disadvantaging poor riverside dwellers have not been challenged, the polder project shows the malleability of floodplain kampungs as spaces that oscillate between being inside and outside the social order.
After drawing a parallel between America’s Ghostbusters and Semarang’s polder crew, I would like to ground this thought in theory. Crisis narratives are critical assessments of events, according to Roitman (2013:3). She argues that, in modern times, crisis is constituted as an object of knowledge. Speaking about crisis signals a specific knowledge of the world and the will to act on it. The very claim that we can act on history in fact depends on the concept of crisis. She doesn’t propose that crisis is a mere invention, an illusion. Rather, she offers an analysis of the social perception of crisis. What does a departure from “normal time” entail for individuals and how do crisis narratives demarcate a given situation qualitatively and quantitatively from normality? I’m further intrigued by the idea that crisis denotes a struggle of history – that is, over temporality. Let me concretize this by drawing a possibly outrageous parallel: between flood infrastructure and the subprime market, which serves Roitman as an empirical example of the discursive effects of crisis. She points out that subprime mortgages had been a standard business for a long time, before they came to stand for all that was wrong with the financial system. If, by analogy, tidal flooding is qualified as all that is wrong with Semarang’s floodplain, how to explain that it happened over more than a decade as a largely undisputed and even profitable thing? As I described in a previous chapter, tidal flooding has brought multiple aid projects to the North and a whole economy of survival formed around it. These projects weren’t always addressing tidal flooding, but also “social” issues, such as poverty, delinquency, and sanitation. The polder project therefore suggests a departure from the governmental approach, in view of the latter’s proven inability to control rob. As I will show, the polder project’s narrative juxtaposes the ‘messy’ time of flood adaptation to a new temporality, according to which interventions into water will be controlled, streamlined, and coordinated – by a new monitoring institution. The discursive framing of pilot projects often suggests undoing the relationship that societies entertain with the
present. The polder too is supposed to solve the flooding problem experimentally. The polder’s key planning technology – resident participation – was supposed to open up a whole new future: economic betterment, democratic governance, and higher living standards.

The polder project saw tidal floods as a warning: the delta had reached a critical tipping point. Following Roitman, I consider crisis assessments as propelling potentially transformative action in that they relate to an unknown future. In that future, acting norms and categories (concepts) for reality no longer apply. Crisis assessments are thus coupled with future imaginaries. But crisis discourse, while arguing for a change of course, rarely has profoundly transformative effects, as Roitman argues. For instance, the 2008 financial crisis raised important questions as to the state of global capitalism. Yet, the bailout of defaulted banks suggested that while capitalism should be put in check, it was too profitable to let it go entirely. This raises important questions as to the ability of contemporary crisis assessments to imagine a radically different future, at all.

Walter Benjamin understood that capitalism had something to do with the (gradual) disappearance of radically different futures. Aware of the progressive disenchantment of the world by capitalist reproduction, Benjamin wanted to restore the possibility of the apocalypse to the oppressed, not necessarily in the form of a biblical deluge or nuclear annihilation, but as the overthrowing of the capitalist elites. One needed to reenchant the world to see beyond the goal of universal equality pictured by capitalism (and never achieved). “The state of emergency, in which we live, is not the exception but the rule,” according to Benjamin (1968:257) whose last writings grappled with the horrendous outcome of German fascism. Here, horror had become a daily feature in the lives of Jewish citizens, the non-normative, and regime critics. Benjamin could not accept the notion of a present which is not a transition. He, therefore, saw the necessity for a “real state of emergency.” In view of spreading social disintegration and destitution the world over, the political theorist and activist Evan Calder Williams (2009) has argued in similar vein that the
apocalypse has become the daily experience of the poor and excluded. According to Williams, the apocalypse is already here, but in uneven form: it is mainly the experience of the destitute and oppressed. “Yes, the apocalypse is already here, but do not despair, let us fully endorse the emancipatory possibilities of apocalyptic life,” quips Swyngedouw (2013:17) in response to the fearmongering visions of global warming which are supposed to moralize and mobilize us in often profoundly conservative ways. Instead of being paralyzed by the end of ends and bracing for the impact, blindsided by new rounds of “green” capitalist expansion (Prudham 2009), we should realize “that it is only within the realization of the apocalyptic reality of the now that a new politics might emerge” (Swyngedouw 2013:15). Whereas crisis used to denote a delimited period of time (an outside of history) during which a system transits from one form into another, producing an experience of disorientation and confusion, it has become a permanent state, Vigh argued (2007). Similarly, De Boeck (2005) has pointed to the everyday use of apocalyptic imagery in Kinshasa to come to terms with the bleak reality of urban life. But how do we see the apocalyptic, the end of ends, in a system that normalizes crisis? And how is crisis treated by such a system?

While Roitman doesn’t completely disagree with Vigh’s view of crisis, she warns that positing a permanent crisis implodes its very concept. Whether we are experiencing a crisis or just talking about it are two different things analytically. While people may experience crisis, what is shifting is how they and their social reference points – states, media, churches – talk about it. Crisis, Cazdyn (2012:3) argues, “used to be defined by its short-termness – requiring a decision on the spot, with no possibility of deferral, evasion, or repression. A crisis means we can, perhaps, suspend our usual rules and ethical standards because we must ‘act now!’” But something has happened on the way to the shelter. The bombs have been launched, but they are suspended overhead, allowing us to continue our lives under the shadow of destruction.” What happened, then? Cazdyn has pointed to the ubiquity with which disaster and crisis have been invoked in the
post-Cold War era, while talk of revolution has become risqué – “not only rendered unspeakable but, more important […], unthinkable.” Talk of revolution has certainly become dangerous terrain in Indonesia ever since the obliteration of the country’s Left in a state-orchestrated genocide, in 1965, and the abolishment of Indonesia’s once strong Communist Party KIP. Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary “The Look of Silence” (2013) and Eka Kurniawan’s novel “Beauty is a Wound” (2015; see also Mrázek’s (2016) review of the book) speak to this vacuum in Indonesia’s history where there should be a critique of perpetrators and state abuses of power.

As Masco (2012:1108) argues, a crisis narrative that uses the catastrophic to justify institutional changes triggers a cultural formation devoted to the “normalization of violence (as war, as boom and bust capitalism, as environmental ruin) as the basis for everyday life.” I find this point crucial in light of Indonesia’s current political situation. Crisis discourse (the Communist ‘threat,’ the recent specter of narcotics) can have profoundly non-progressive consequences. Therefore, while it symbolizes a desire for the end of suffering, it operates to normalize the use of violence. In the second chapter, I asked what living in a world that is hard means; how do riverside dwellers view and rationalize inhabiting a stagnant, crumbling world, that normalization projects left in ruin, while everything else in Semarang is changing for the better? I will argue in this chapter that the polder outlines an end to crisis by normalizing specific measures or forms of violence, such as evictions and the continuation of river normalization.

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Let me return to the Ghostbusters scene for a last time. The dramatization of crisis in Ghostbusters – ghosts wreaking havoc in the modern city – comes with a critique and a conceit: we are ill-advised to think that the (US-American) state can solve everything – especially not the apocalypse. “Imperfect” Americans are the real heroes at the end of the day. A technological edge is pivotal – the Ghostbusters had astounding technological feats: laser-shooting vacuum cleaners
and a ghost containment silo – but their power resided in their human intuition and entrepreneurial attitude. At the same time, the movie is a persiflage of the type of American citizen that will save the world and take Visa for it. Like the rampaging ghosts in Ghostbusters, rob is roaming the streets of Indonesian coastal metropoles, having become a central feature of urban life, as I demonstrated in previous chapters. And it clearly escapes the powers of the state: its infrastructures, regulations, and predictions. The water management project I describe equally relies on depicting the Indonesian state as incapable of controlling rob. In the eyes of my Dutch interlocutors and the polder board, the state has incapacitated itself through bureaucracy and nepotistic schemes and become inactive in the face of severe ecological problems.

Water Management the “Dutch Way”

In 2003, a technical agreement was signed between the city of Semarang and the Dutch Ministry of Transport, Public Works, and Water Management. The agreement concerned the “Institutional Strengthening of Water Management in an Urban Polder System as a Sustainable Solution for Flooding Problems.” As is typical for such agreements, it had a rather vague objective: improving Semarang’s “existing water resources management.” The agreement, however, did outline the creation of a financially autonomous polder authority modeled on Dutch examples to solve chronic flooding problems in Indonesia. Unlike Indonesia, where the state and its local organs chiefly manage water and infrastructure, Dutch regional water authorities share powers. The technical agreement suggested to embed such a polder authority within the existing administrative apparatus to promote ‘democratic’ water management. The project aimed at furthering Indonesia’s decentralization and supporting the country’s programs of community empowerment. A first feasibility study conducted between 2003-2004 led to the selection of East

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44 For a discussion of Ghostbusters I, see Bertocci (2012).
Semarang and the Banger River floodplain as a test site. According to Peters (2012:24), “the waterfront city of Semarang, capital of central Java with 1.5 million inhabitants was put forward by the Indonesian government for the development of the polder concept […] for four reasons; (1) the political landscape was considered to be less complex than the Jakarta region; (2) the city was considered to be representative for other Indonesian cities, such as Jakarta; (3) Semarang is known to be severely affected by floods on a daily base; and (4) the geographical location was convenient for most of the stakeholders.” Semarang’s North stood out as a suitable project site by virtue of its extreme flood problems, but also because it seemed less controversial politically speaking. The repeated reference to Jakarta made it clear that, if successful, the pilot could be replicated in other Indonesian cities but especially the flood-plagued capital. Peters (id.) notes that following the “feasibility study, in the period of 2004-2006, not many activities were going on. It took the Dutch some time to find funds for [the] continuation of the project.” This, he observed, had to do with the existence of a rival project supported by the mayor. Only “when the competing project did not provide the intended results,” the municipality again showed interest in a polder project for the Banger. In 2007, another agreement was therefore signed between HHSK (acronym for the Dutch water authority Hoogheemraadschap van Schieland en de Krimpenerwaard), the municipal government of Semarang, and the Indonesian Ministry of Public Works to kick off the next “phase” of cooperation – the foundation of a provisional polder authority. From here on, the Rotterdam-based water engineer, Johan, took charge of the project on the Dutch end. Johan, on whom I will focus in this section, since he stayed involved in the project for a considerable time, was a strong proponent of the polder project. His Rotterdam-based team enjoyed the confidence and financial support from a range of Dutch institutions. A Witteveen & Bos (Dutch consulting firm specializing in water management) memo from April 2007 shows an impressive number of national institutions united behind the project. Notably, the polder project wasn’t construed as
typical “development aid.” It was conceptualized as both a timely response to extreme flooding and strategic investment. Following decades of unilateral development assistance, Indonesia is increasingly considered a potential client or paying “patient” that qualifies for a treatment through Dutch world-renowned water management therapy. In a new political climate of postcolonial emancipation, characterized by increasing economic cooperation in the private sector, the Dutch government was test-driving a new cooperative development agenda coined “From Aid to Trade” (Van Marwijk 2014). Help from the former colonial master in the form of democratic water governance rhymed well with the logics of neoliberal global capitalism. Salvation had just been given a price tag, the justification being that the Dutch government wanted to stop patronizing Indonesia. The considerable initial efforts of Dutch institutions to co-finance the project thus suggests an investment opportunity; seizing it, however, meant finding common ground with the Indonesian partner on what exactly the problem was as well as generating interest in Dutch water expertise. Although economic considerations played a role in the formation of the polder, an even more important factor was convincing local politicians of the right timing and long-term benefits of the project. This took some time.

Framing the crisis

Johan once told me about a meeting that he had with Semarang’s mayor and the head of Bappeda’s infrastructure unit. In the meeting, he asked the mayor: “Do you want change?” That is, Johan wanted him to know that he was not “here for fun.” The situation demanded “urgent decision-making.” He expected them to have “sleepless nights” in view of Semarang’s situation. Flooding was the fault of bureaucrats who remained indifferent to tidal flooding, a foreboding sign of the catastrophe that was awaiting the city. Johan feared that politicians were unable to see the crisis for what it was: that Indonesian coastal cities were nearing a critical threshold, expressed
in increasingly regular tidal floods.\textsuperscript{45} He knew from experience that sinking land poses a serious threat to population and the economy.

Johan was not the only one asking for change. Both Dutch and Indonesian defenders of the polder project portrayed themselves as a team that would save the city from sinking. All of the Dutch actors involved in the polder project hoped to help the poor and Indonesia. Johan, for instance, dedicated his pre-retirement years to this project during which he visited Semarang countless times, kept a diary, and lobbied the Dutch government repeatedly for support. Herman Mondeel, a young Dutch water engineer (whose work years in Semarang I describe more in detail in the following section), said he wanted to share his knowledge with the Indonesian people. He expressed to me that there was a “real need” for the polder to be implemented. For Mondeel, who often visited the project area, the crisis was visible: “you see some houses, they are wet all day. A lot of people left the first floor and live on the second floor.”

Assessing the crisis by conducting a feasibility study, including a topographic and economic survey, was important to generate initial financial support from the Indonesian and Dutch governments. But the studies didn’t immediately produce support, as Mondeel remembered. Although he could “see” the problem and showcase the scientific proof of the imminent danger of land subsidence compounded by sea level rise, the project didn’t make it smoothly into the next planning phase. He complained that a lot of Indonesian politicians didn’t want to commit publicly to the project. As he said, “they want to stay below the radar, more or less. So, nobody really stands up and makes the project... [nobody] fight[s] for us. That’s what you need to have a new prospect. That’s difficult.”

The Dutch government, too, suddenly threatened to withdraw support in 2010. After years of

\textsuperscript{45}While I interviewed Johan multiple times both in Rotterdam and Semarang, I learned much about his views from informal conversations during meetings or trips.
trying to get the project off the ground, the Dutch government passed a law that prevents water boards, such as the one that Johan was working for, from financing international projects. Johan told me that “some Dutch tax payers” were apparently upset that their water authorities were investing part of their resources abroad in times of domestic economic decline (and serious doubts as to the durability of the Netherlands’ dikes in view of sea level rise). Their dream of a unique polder authority saving Semarang from tidal flooding was suddenly in peril. But Johan was adamant on continuing the project. After all, they had already “lost money” – funding from the Dutch government – and the Dutch public would be their judge at the end of the day. His own board back in Rotterdam had already contributed considerable staff resources to the project. For him, the Dutch government had clearly committed itself to this project and couldn’t back out of it. He said, “I went to foreign affairs and requested the continuation of the project. We have a memorandum of understanding. Do you really want to stop it?” In his opinion, his perseverance convinced the government to honour agreements made and consider the project as an investment in the Netherland’s future role in providing expertise to sinking cities worldwide. The project had Indonesian defenders, as well. Semarang’s newly formed polder board “SIMA” (discussed in more detail below) petitioned the Dutch foreign department for a continuation. It wrote a letter to the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation in which the board acclaims the Dutch approach to flood control. It further argued that the project should not be interrupted “at this point,” as the Indonesian government had taken note of this “new kind of organization” which, so it went, was “supported by inhabitants and [the] business community in [the] Banger area.”\footnote{“Continuation of Banger Pilot Polder,” letter to Prof. Dr. H.P.M. Knapen, Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation.} The Indonesian partners thus played their role in framing the project as indispensable for Semarang’s population.

Semarang’s municipality itself cast the polder project either as an urgent response to tidal
flooding that affected Northern parts of the city or as proof of its commitment to river normalization that “involved” local communities. The governor of Central Java, Ganjar Pranowo, stated at a 2014 meeting that solving the “rob problem” (permasalahan rob) was a top priority of Semarang’s administration. The city had to get this problem under control (harus dapat diatasi). He compared the Banger polder to a “pumping system” (pola pompa) that could “at least” work as a short-term solution (solusi jangka pendek) to flooding. The vice-president of Semarang’s water agency PSDA considered the polder as a “part of their drainage master plan” for central Semarang. In an interview with me, he said that he was convinced that the polder system in question could help them get acute flooding under control (saya yakin dengan sistem ini bisa). Importantly, he underlined that the polder was supposed to handle the present situation, while it could not respond to potential changes in the future: “in terms of a future without flooding, that’s very difficult for us [to achieve], because we [the city] are located on the shore. In the future, situations related to global warming (dikaitkan dengan global warming) that we can’t predict will happen more often.”

While Semarang’s administration thus concurred with the Dutch team in the importance of urgent measures to solve flooding, it also cast the polder as an intermediate solution. The polder was supposed to handle the area’s present problems with tidal flooding. But there was no clear limit for where the polder’s mandate would end. While treating the situation as an emergency, the vice-president of PSDA suggested that the city would stick to its drainage master plan after the polder had been implemented. In fact, the polder would become an element of this long-term plan.

Crisis Witnesses

Over years of cooperation and after repeated visits to Indonesia, Johan developed a strong

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mistrust in Indonesian political leaders, administrations and bureaucracy. How come their words were not followed by actions? His mistrust was often expressed in deeply sarcastic statements, which earned him the reputation of being an impolite but honest rowdy. He allegedly said to Sukawi Sutarip, mayor of Semarang for ten years until ousted in 2010 over corruption charges, that he selected his staff based on their karaoke and golfing skills. His mistrust was the result of what he perceived as wilful political and bureaucratic obstacles to the project. Often unable to generate critical political commitment to the project, he placed hope in the polder authority SIMA to help build political legitimacy. Johan expected that creating awareness of the project on the ground would mount political pressure on the government. The capacity and will to act on the crisis required a different perspective rooted in the actuality of flooding. The capacity to see and feel the crisis could only develop from the ground, the kampung milieu. The popular kampung, then, not only provided the most genuine victim of the crisis but it also stood out as the key to change. Johan sympathized strongly with kampung residents. As I stated earlier, the bilateral agreements already implied a critique of existing governance structures as well as Dutch interest in an untapped potential of participatory development. With governmental (infra)structures perceived as failing and unclear lines of planning, poor citizens were naturally bound to appear as the only carriers of hope and change. Scripted as the missing link between government decision-making and polder technology, the project represented residents’ desires for change as virtuous and authentic. In this quote from an interview conducted in Rotterdam, Johan describes the roots of the ongoing ecological catastrophe.

“[The settlement] is built on clay, coming from the River Semarang in all those years. And it was above sea level and not too much flooded in those days. So, it urbanized. One of the major problems nowadays is getting clean drinking water to the people. What they do is they make holes in the ground, put a pump in it, and get deep ground water. Because they get the water out of the ground, the soil goes down. In the Netherlands, we have soil movement of about one centimetre a year. [It’s called] land subsidence. In

48 The River Semarang is the main natural water outlet in the Semarang Delta. Most Dutch businesses and the Chinese community of Semarang settled on its banks. Recently, the river has been turned into a polder with a loan from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency.
Indonesia, in Jakarta, [land subsides] by 15 centimetres per year. In Semarang, it’s 5-10 centimetres per year. [...] The people living in the area where we work can’t afford [drinking water]. Why not? Because the area is flooded and the economic standard is very, very low. We think that if we dry up this territory, the prosperity will come. Slowly, the economic [wealth] will go up, the business will come. Something had to be done.”

‘Something had to be done’ for these people who currently witnessed increased land subsidence and economic stagnation as a result of past planning decisions. While land subsidence was a natural consequence of unregulated urbanization, according to Johan, residents’ misinformed acts that exacerbated land caving had to do with structural poverty. If the situation was handled correctly, the economy would improve, as residents will be free from recurrent flooding, which in turn encouraged more ecologically sound practices. When, in 2014, the water agency repaired a riverbank that should have been turned into a water outlet for the polder, Johan called the agency ignorant and wasteful. Why would they intervene in the polder construction and possibly delay it? The intervention, from his point of view, unsettled the temporal logic of the polder. Most likely, however, repairing the riverbank was the outcome of a costly back and forth between residents and the government, as previous chapters explained. While riverbank repairs were a seldom and almost miraculous achievement, with damages staying unfixed for extended periods in certain neighbourhoods, Johan did not see this improvement as a complex local arrangement aiming to achieve temporary flood safety. Instead, he considered the intervention as a nuisance, as it was not in line with their own plan.

Johan, however, readily accepted residential resistance to their project, which in fact didn’t seem as palatable to inhabitants of surrounding sub-districts as proponents of the project hoped. But a healthy democracy, in his view, thrived on dispute. These people needed convincing. The coastal settlement known as Tambak Lorok, harbouring thousands of Semarang’s poorest, lies just west of Banger River’s estuary. The polder undertaking triggered particularly strong public

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49 It is said to be the last neighbourhood whose inhabitants still largely identify as full-time fishermen (Setioko 2013). Here, tidal floods are daily events. Yet, they have not discouraged residents from living in the bay. I sometimes hung out with teenagers from Tambak Lorok who were all factory employees at the time. They all
protest in this neighbourhood, as residents considered the dam construction disruptive of the bay’s marine ecology. As specified in the design (see sketch below), the Northern polder dam was going to close the channel just southeast of the settlement. Some residents argued that blocking bay water from entering the drainage tract would intensify tidal waves and result in ever higher inundation levels. Given that numerous expansions of the harbour and other infrastructural interventions (e.g. the Marina Bay construction) have left lasting ecological damage in the bay, destroying fishing grounds and causing erosion, their apprehensions were warranted. Johan deemed the public outcry understandable because poor coastal communities, to his knowledge, have had to deal with tidal flooding largely on their own, which is why they used whatever political leverage they could get. Johan explained that they raised their voices at a strategic moment. In view of the delta’s crisis and the polder development, they wanted their own prospects taken into consideration by the government. To Johan, poor coastal communities had been betrayed and abandoned by self-serving governments, which is why they saw an opportunity for a tug of war with the municipality. While both the government and Dutch project partners considered the public protest as “unscientific,” Johan empathized with the fishermen. At a public hearing, he told me, a member of one community warned them that his group would reject the polder construction if they did not stand to benefit from it. While rob had stopped or would be brought under control in other areas, there was still no change in their settlement. 50 Residents threatened to sabotage the polder infrastructure and take to the streets, if their demands for appropriate flood protection were going to stay unheard. They feared that they would be left out and their voices drowned out in the gradual transformation of the coastal area. 51

50 See: http://www.radarsemarang.com/2014/05/31/warga-tolak-polder-banger.html, last accessed November 2, 2015.

51 See Pugh’s (2013) analysis of fishing folks’ voice in participatory planning processes in Barbados.
residents, in fact, proved successful, as the municipality saw itself forced to commission a conceptual design for flood protection in Tambak Lorok.\(^5^2\) The design, however, paid a lip service to the coastal communities of Tambak Lorok, given that the plan quickly disappeared into a drawer.\(^5^3\) My point is that these protests, instead of unsettling Johan’s view of the polder, rather underscored its importance for the area. This interpretation of conflict is typical for development projects. In contrast to the participative approach to planning in Western countries, Abram (2014:137) argues, where “an impersonal, disembodied public” is the audience for planning processes, in development contexts, the “community affected by development is self-evidently the local residents in the development site.” This view of development allowed the polder project to screen out the multiple temporalities of urban development. Abram further suggests that infrastructure projects can seem to offer radical change, as “the construction of major infrastructure can appear to be decisive for the envisageable future: effectively for all time” (id.:138). Johan can accept the residential protests, as they prove that Semarang’s government hasn’t paid much attention to the development of this area. Tackling the coast’s infrastructure problems seems to promise effective and lasting change.

As this section demonstrated, the Dutch engagement in Indonesia and, more specifically, Semarang helped produce an assessment of the flooding situation as heading for a point of no return. “Something had to be done,” to again use Johan’s words. Roitman considers crisis as a second-order evaluation, an assessment of a perceived situation specific to actors’ positions in time and space. The rob crisis served multiple actors as a diagnostic of the present, a “questioning of the epistemological or ethical grounds of certain domains of life and thought” (Roitman 2013:4). Yet, the crisis narrative also served the purpose of setting up new economic relations

\(^5^3\) The concept had a comeback five years later, after the president of Indonesia paid a visit to the drowning fishing community.
between the Netherlands and Indonesia. Semarang’s water agency further considered the polder as a transitional solution. Both sides favored the installation of a local water authority to which I turn now to zoom in on one of the effects of the crisis discourse.

The polder board – a “tiger’s leap”?

“There was a ceremony in April 2010 at which the Mayor of Semarang, the Governor of the Central Java province, and the Secretary General of the Ministry of Public Works signed treaties for transferring powers to the water [polder] board – some of which are far-reaching by Indonesian standards. The water board will devise, write, and introduce all rules, procedures, and protocols necessary to ensure the proper working of the polder” (Van der Pal 2012:24).

The Dutch involvement in flood control made possible a specific critique of Semarang’s water governance that came to be embodied by a new institution. In this sense, the polder project had the intended consequences: Johan said he hoped that their idea of a community-run polder would “catch on” in all of Indonesia. At a meeting, he even compared the building of their polder with the landing of a spaceship on a moving meteor, a technological feat that was achieved in 2015 for the first time in human history. As the above quote describes, Semarang’s government decided to create a polder board and imbue it with unusual “powers” to “ensure the proper working” of the polder’s flood control infrastructure. As a legitimate, democratic, and financially autonomous institution, SIMA was to become an essential link between the local population and the government. Decreeing the polder board resembled a “tiger’s leap,” I argue – an attempt to radically transform the governance of water.

Drawing on Marx, Benjamin referred to fashion (couture) as a tiger’s leap into the past, a “stirring in the thickets of long ago.” Originally, the leap symbolized the dialectical deliverance of the working class from its dominion by the bourgeoisie.54 In Benjamin’s theses on the

54 The idea of the leap further owes to Engel’s critique of evolutionary history and is echoed in the famous phrase: “all that is solid melts into the air.”
philosophy of history, however, the leap of fashion “takes place in an arena where the ruling class gives the commands.” According to Benjamin, the jump into the “open air of history” of fashion is appropriated by capitalism to produce qualitative social change (Lehman 2000). Benjamin therefore expanded Marx’ concept of revolution to a system of meaning and practice that continued to exist within the confines of the social order (that is, defined by capitalist reproduction).

I’m using the metaphor of leaping to describe the coming into existence of the polder board. Like fashion that is stirring up bourgeois conventions, the polder board enthused and thrilled many, especially elite advocates of participatory planning and bottom-up development within the Indonesian government. A report heralded the project as purely built on civil participation (murni partisipasi masyarakat) and not requiring much governmental funding (tidak membebani anggaran). Both the previous and the current director of Bappeda’s infrastructural unit lauded the project, while the latter considered it particularly important. A member of Indonesia’s Association of Hydraulic Engineers (Himpunan Ahli Teknik Hidraulik Indonesia) hoped that the polder board would become a “vessel” (wadah) of civil participation in the fight against flooding and called the system the “most appropriate” (paling cocok) of solutions (Darsono & Mestika 2011:313). Semarang’s government also saw the significance of the project, as it promised to attract international attention and financial assistance from the central government for infrastructural maintenance. In an environment that promoted “entrepreneurial urbanism” (Harvey 1989; Peck 2014:396) – the result of the competitive conditions of existence of neoliberalism “within which […] entrepreneurial urban strategies have been formulated” – the municipality stood to benefit from a project that attracted the attention of the central government and forged ties between multiple urban stakeholders.

While the search for participatory solutions to development problems is not so new to
Indonesian bureaucrats and engineers, the polder board was considered most radical by its Dutch proponents. In describing the creation of the “water board,” a term that was used by the Dutch to refer to the polder board, Van der Pal (cited above) emphasizes a rupture with common Indonesian law. Van der Pal’s view speaks to the attempt of divesting water governance of its top-down tendency – the new board will “devise, write, and introduce all rules, procedures, and protocols necessary to ensure the proper working of the polder.” The creation of the polder board is further depicted as a revolutionary step towards better water management by working with longstanding kampung traditions. Ensuring the proper working of the polder, notably, required levying a local tax traditionally called *iuran* (as explained in the case of pumping communities in Kemijen). The legislative rationale for the polder board thus made usage of a specific language of innovation that combined discourses of participative planning and Javanese tradition. In mobilizing longstanding values of self-determination and leadership, the board dabbled, in particular, in the political discourse of *Pancasila* – a quasi-socialist set of governing ideals instrumental in shaping independent Indonesia. In the following, I describe how the board employed these notions to justify making decisions on behalf of the local population. By attaching its mandate to new as well as past ideas of governing, the board sought to establish political legitimacy. While its coming into force was made possible by depicting it as a bottom-up, virtuous undertaking, other priorities, notably of Semarang’s bureaucracy and modernist urban development agenda, curtailed the board’s autonomy.

The Polder Board

Shortly after the polder design release mentioned above, an official polder board was created based on a memorandum of understanding and a mayoral decree (*Perwal*) that made the Dutch water authority HHSK and the municipal government of Semarang primary partners in the
SIMA is a compound word constituted of the first syllable of the involved Dutch board’s geographical base and the second syllable of Semarang. The creation of a polder board with civic representation followed the recommendations of an international working group that consisted of Indonesian state agencies and Dutch water experts. The working group proposed to form a multi-stakeholder platform that involved residents of the project area. One such resident stakeholder, vice-chairman Sumarmo, liked to point out that their name was also reminiscent of Shima, the female monarch of Kalingga, an ancient kingdom on the northern coast of Central Java. The queen is celebrated for her unmerciful sincerity reflected in a strictly enforced law against thievery that she introduced during her reign. This underlining of the polder board’s deeply Indonesian identity and integrity kept surfacing in the board’s self-representation. The double entendre flanked the imaginary according to which the polder authority would emulate “democratic” Dutch water governance by involving the community in both operation and maintenance of polders. Its special powers thus also derived from imagining a sort of apprenticeship with a nation that, according to this imaginary, had withstood the vagaries of the ocean for centuries (and exported its water knowledge to numerous other places, such as New York City).

The idea of an independent board quickly found supporters within the Indonesian state apparatus. The Indonesian Ministry of Public Works (PU) stated in a report that the “function and position” of the polder authority was of utmost importance in supporting the operation of the polder system, because this unit would play “the role of managing the daily operation and maintenance of the system.” Further, it was key in “involving the local communities in the management of the polder servicing” (Badan Penelitian dan Pengembangan, 2011).

As of 2016, the Dutch Embassy in Jakarta still covered the bulk of SIMA’s administrative costs, while it has not committed to any expenses for physical components of the polder. Please note also that the group of Indonesian and Dutch actors involved in the project has undergone several mutations that I do not account for. Since 2006, HHSK has been the most important institutional partner on Dutch side and the Dutch water authority continues to be deeply involved in the project.

Original text: “Fungsi dan posisinya itu sendiri sangat penting di dalam mendukung berfungsinya sistem polder
some form of public participation is integrated into most Indonesian development projects, whether at the conception or implementation stage, the polder was portrayed as an institution with an unprecedented level and quality of civil participation. Such a level of civil participation was in fact barely thinkable for many government workers that I interviewed. Employees of the local water agency, PSDA, admitted that they had virtually ‘no clue’ what SIMA would be doing once the dams, pumps, and riverbanks were constructed. Would ordinary residents run and maintain the pumps? While SIMA was often heralded as a promising, virtuous institution capable of saving Semarang (and why not Indonesia?) from flooding, the project thus also elicited confusion and doubt. While financial independence seemed to be a shared desirable goal in view of budgetary constraints, legal experts within the government voiced concern about the board’s legal compatibility with municipal regulations. Does it have the necessary sovereignty to levy taxes; can ordinary residents work in the service of the state? Although staffed with water and legal experts, the polder board saw itself often unable to attenuate these reservations and doubts. In this sense, the project was a leap: it was intriguing and seductive for many involved parties, whose fantasies of participatory planning it tickled, but its transformative force was put in check by dominant structures. I will shed more light on this dynamic in the following section, and reveal the strategies that the polder board came up with to make the imagined link between state infrastructure and community involvement more thinkable.

Let me briefly introduce SIMA’s members. The board’s chairman, Pak Suseno, is professor of water resources planning and management at the Department of Civil Engineering, Diponegoro University – a water engineer who received his PhD degree from Colorado University and has

\[ \text{tersebut, karena unit ini berperan sebagain pelaksana sehari-hari pemanfaatan dan pemeliharan sistem polder tersebut. Sementara itu, pengelolaan sistem polder tersebut tidak dapat lepas dari masyarakat yang tinggal di dalam kawasan pelayanan sistem polder” See Penyempurnaan Manual Kelembagaan Pengelola Polder Berbasis Masyarakat Studi Kasus Kota Semarang (Kali Banger).} \]
extensive international consulting experience in the areas of water resources planning and flood control. The first vice-chairman, Pak Benny, is a local professor of law with a PhD degree from Radboud University in Nijmegen, Netherlands. While he was involved in the project preparation phase in 2003, Pak Benny was a passive member at the time of my research. The board’s Technical, Operation and Management Division is coordinated by another water expert, Pak Imam Wahyudi, who lectures Civil Engineering at Semarang’s Sultan Agung Islamic University. A legal expert working for the municipality oversees the board’s Legal, Organization and Social Economic Division. The board further consists of two representatives of Semarang’s business owners, two secretaries, and two people working in administrative support. Lastly, SIMA has two ordinary board members, one of which, Adin, a resident of Kemijen, I have introduced in the previous chapter. Sumarmo is the second residential member.

After its formation, SIMA moved into a spacious office on the second floor of the prestigious city hall building. The office contained five desks, a roundtable, clipboard and projector. The board was elated that it was provided with electronic equipment and space for meetings and events. The polder board was established long before the polder could be operated, which is why board members were mostly concerned with advertising, conceptualizing, and announcing the polder project. It, for instance, started publishing monthly leaflets about the polder project and established a publicly accessible library consisting of informational brochures and books on water management. It also welcomed delegations of employees working at different levels of the Indonesian government, who wanted to learn about this new project. In addition to its own weekly meetings, it thus had regular open-door events where at least half of the board’s members were present. Two years after its official creation, the board members witnessed the construction of the pumping house, described below, and began a series of public hearings in the polder territory. Staff of the central government came to visit the birthplace of the pilot project, which started
making the news in the Netherlands. SIMA’s members also witnessed the regular coming and going of foreign, mostly Dutch, delegations: often, groups of undergraduate students would spend a few weeks in Semarang and do research on aspects of the cooperation as part of their final exam or research internships. I was often considered an “expert source” by these students, as I knew the locations and demographic of the area where the polder’s main organs (pumping house, retention basin, and dam) were to be implanted. Furthermore, the scholarly exchange between several Rotterdam universities and Semarang’s Islamic Sultan Agung University, where one expert member of SIMA taught civil engineering, began to blossom. I remember fondly spending mornings in SIMA’s office where I always felt welcome to talk, take notes, and sip black tea. As an “observer” of the project, I also regularly accompanied SIMA’s members to public events and site inspections. The office had a pleasantly non-hierarchical atmosphere which was sustained by the board members’ relatively free coming and going.

I will not elaborate the views of all board members but focus mainly on representations and practices of its two residential members, in order to reveal how they dealt with challenges to achieving the board’s goals in the process of the polder construction. In theory, SIMA was to represent all local “stakeholders,” which include relevant government agencies (Bappeda and PSDA), local entrepreneurs, engineering and water experts, and residents. However, the members were soon split into roughly two groups: non-governmental members who often supported an entirely new role of the local population in the polder project and governmental members who remained skeptical of such a fabrication. I decided to focus on the “non-governmental” members, because they functioned as important local brokers. Since they spent a lot of time at the actual polder board office, they were also the most readily available interlocutors. The other

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57 Beschrijving HHSK Banger Polder Pilot Project, RTL Nieuws, December 5 2012, see also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dz3QnwLSkfK, last accessed November 6, 2015.
‘stakeholders’ – especially municipal planners – had their own busy schedules in which the polder existed merely as one of many other projects. Besides Adin, his slightly older contemporary Sumarmo represented SIMA in the designated polder territory. Their job was to be the public face of the board as well as the interface between the government and the population. Often, representing the polder board and representing the government meant walking a fine line. As I will show, they used these overlapping social memberships strategically instead of in a mutually exclusive way.

Sumarmo is currently vice-chairman of the polder board. Unlike Adin, a well-known local activist and labour advocator, Sumarmo had a short political career as a member of Semarang’s parliament (DPRD Kota Semarang) in the 1980s. He remained interested in politics and entertains ties with the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP). Semarang’s incumbent mayor, for instance, asked for Sumarmo’s endorsement before kicking off his re-election campaign in 2015. I had the honour to live with Sumarmo’s family for five months during which I found out that Sumarmo was not only a well-connected tokoh masyarakat (local figure) in his neighbourhood and skilled entrepreneur, but also a karaoke enthusiast and loving father. Similar to my friendship with Adin, I developed a strong personal connection with Sumarmo which allows to me to elaborate a more nuanced portrait of the two men. I was on good terms with all other members, but rarely or never visited their homes. Conversely, on some days, Sumarmo’s melodic humming was the first thing I would hear in the morning. He and I often discussed local as well as national politics (for instance, Indonesia’s controversial execution of nine foreigners convicted of drug trafficking in April 2015) over late-night cups of fresh coffee. From him I learned a lot about some of the darkest events in Semarang’s history: for example, when Suharto’s henchmen rounded up and executed alleged communists in the 1960s and blacklisted “gangsters” in the 1980s.58

58 Once, for example, men came to Sumarmo’s house and asked him to drive a truck convoy of vigilantes through
reformed Indonesia opened the doors to community organizers like him, as he often pointed out – Javanese men and women with a certain respectable standing but not scared to speak out against the powerful, if need be.

From time to time, Sumarmo, Adin and I would share thoughts on various issues in SIMA’s office or in the hallway outside. Their obligation to the board was to show up at regular and irregular meetings and show presence. One of their main tasks further was public relations: they were in charge of promoting the polder project in the affected neighbourhoods and “testing” their readiness to play a supportive role in its realization. According to the polder board’s view, planners and engineers lacked privileged access and insight into the lives of poor inhabitants of the polder territory and could therefore never fully comprehend or intimately know it. The “residential members” thus function as a gateway to the polder territory – as crucial anchors of social networking and translators. Sumarmo and Adin regularly organized consultation meetings (sosialisasi), spoke at conferences and workshops in Semarang and beyond. They also visited Rotterdam and other Dutch cities to learn about Dutch water management. Adin and Sumarmo are what Gibbings (forthcoming) has called “urban brokers.” Urban anthropologists have pointed to the importance of brokers for urban development in an era marked by demands for participatory governance. According to Lindquist’s (2015) definition, a broker is a human actor who gains something from the mediation of valued resources that he or she does not directly control. As mediator, the broker does not necessarily make a difference in the transaction. Lindquist argues further that brokers’ ambiguous position between social worlds reveals broader contexts and processes from a position of mediation.

The way in which Sumarmo and Adin became implicated in the polder project deserves mention, because it shows that they invested time and social capital in becoming intermediaries.
When they became board members, they were already experienced interlocutors of the government. More specifically, Sumarmo and Adin were both interested in water politics before SIMA was officially founded. They became candidates for the residential positions within the board due to their previous, mostly voluntary but occasionally paid engagements as resident auxiliaries of Semarang’s government. In 2006, the idea to involve residents in water management was making the rounds in Semarang which makes sense in view of Indonesia’s political transition since the fall of Suharto. The *Tim Khusus Subsistem*, or Special Sub-System Team, came into being in 2006, because of mayor’s Sukawi’s desire to involve residents in surveys covering a range of river maintenance indicators. I see Sukawi’s river sub-system (*subsistem*) as an ideological precursor to the polder project. Sukawi thought that flooding occurred because the existing drainage system – consisting of ten sub-systems – was not capable (*mampu*) anymore.\(^{59}\) He launched a task force comprising local academics, government staff, and representatives of the Local Empowerment Boards for Neighbourhoods (*LPMK*). Gibbings (forthcoming) has argued that such task forces were characteristic of the period in which Indonesia transformed into a democracy.

Sukawi sought involvement of neighbourhood residents in his government’s infrastructural plans, as kampung residents were holders of “meticulous knowledge” (*ilmu titen*) that they developed by virtue of their daily engagement with water. Sukawi further described residents as deeply familiar with the history of the drainage system. This allowed residents like Adin to become development partners of the government. Adin grew up in Banger’s vicinity, but admitted never having been interested the river’s scientific parameters. At that time, he was, however, involved in multiple community development programs that tried to lift the neighbourhood out of chronic poverty. He immediately saw an opportunity to use the scientific knowledge of the river

as political leverage. Possessing scientific data on the river’s visibly desolate condition could mean argumentative power in the hands of his local allies. His participation in the sub-system survey marked the beginning of his education in drainage technology. As a sub-system member, he not only collected river samples to evaluate water quality, but he also helped measure water depth and sedimentation levels. Adin still likes to collect water samples, but lacks the means to conduct the tests himself. The collaboration with Dutch water engineers allowed Adin to get samples tested outside Indonesia and for free.

Once, as we had both been invited to the same discussion event, Adin picked me up in the morning and we drove slowly on his rusty red motorbike to city hall. He had to drop off water samples at Novotel, where Johan was staying at the time. While he waited outside on his motorbike, I walked up the steep driveway of the hotel and entered the luxurious lobby with the indiscriminate plastic bag containing a few vials. I wondered silently what would become of these samples. I pictured how the samples would be probed in the in-house lab of a Dutch water board thousands of miles away, after Johan had – probably illegally – carried them outside of the country. While Adin and Johan shared an interest in the water’s condition in the context of the polder project, for Adin knowing how contaminated the water was could serve him in future negotiations with the government. Adin’s participation in the project thus had multiple, interpenetrating timelines: the polder project intersected with his development desires for his neighbourhood.

In 2006, Sumarmo joined the resident group surveying the southern end of the Banger. He liked to speak at length about the sub-system, which, he concurred, was a precursor to SIMA. He described it as a participatory government “program” in which small groups of residents were supposed to compile data of drainage channels in their respective sub-system. The data was to be communicated to local leaders (sosialisasikan) and inform improvement plans. Sumarmo, like all other resident participants, was offered a small monetary compensation for his work: a total of
All survey activities were supposed to be concluded in only one week – a laughable prospect, according to Sumarmo. He judged that the hired residential assistants were bound to do a sloppy job in view of low remuneration and lack of time. Sumarmo also criticized the program because of its inconsequentiality. The results of their survey were never disseminated. He concluded that they had been “used” (diperalat) by the administration. The creation of the sub-system teams had merely served the purpose of faking citizen participation, he thought. When the government invited him to participate in a “short course” on drainage technology offered by Dutch drainage experts, he decided to take it, being attracted by the opportunity to learn from foreign specialists. It was here that Sumarmo and Adin met the Dutch delegation behind the polder project for the first time in 2007. The involvement of external experts pleased them, because they were unsatisfied by their own government’s ways of conducting river management. The Dutch side was probably delighted by such a warm welcome from residents with a vested interest in rivers and their form of governance. Along with a handful of other sub-system participants, Adin and Sumarmo were asked whether they would be interested in helping form a “provisional” polder authority based on their previous experience with river governance.

Barker et al. (2013:166) argue that urban ethnography “is not a question of finding figures that are somehow representative of a social group or place, but rather of understanding particular figures as evocative nodes that reveal relationships and forms of mediation between individual lives and wider social processes.” In the wider social process of making water governance more participatory and transparent, Adin and Sumarmo came to embody the figure of the kampung resident. Yet, as brokers, they are also configured by these processes. The project endows them with an authority that previous government initiatives weren’t offering. The next section will address the ways in which they used this authority to also remake the kampung in ways that jibed with their political ideologies and desires for the floodplain communities’ future.
Taxed water governance

From 2010-2014, Sumarmo and Adin were responsible for informing the future polder inhabitants of the project’s payment scheme. By levying a “water tax” from the population, the polder project wanted to create a separate fund to finance the polder’s operational costs. Taxing would start two years after the physical construction was finalized (the government agency PSDA committed to covering running expenses in the meantime which allowed it to control the polder development, as I will explain below). Adin and Sumarmo’s local standing and reputation were judged important for informing inhabitants of the polder scheme. I remember Adin being introduced to me (though we had met many times before) as the “Master of Kemijen” by SIMA’s secretary. At sosialisasi events, the eloquent Sumarmo often presented SIMA’s mandate and mission before the board’s director, a professor at UNDIP and trained public engineer, spoke. Sumarmo and Adin were supposed to establish a contact between a kampung audience and the board. Adin was, however, visibly uncomfortable with standing centre stage, which might have to do with his minority status as a Catholic, but also owed to the sideline activist position he was socialized into as a member of the Workers’ Union (Serikat Pekerja) and critical inhabitant of Kemijen. Sumarmo had long experience of public speaking and singing. When Sumarmo was urging a group of women who showed up at an informational session, to help SIMA spread a “culture of clean” (budaya bersih) Adin was just sitting outside chain-smoking clove cigarettes.

So-called “budaya bersih” (clean culture) events aimed at educating riverside residents about the effects of waste on the polder scheme. Maintaining water flow through the technological arrangements of the polder depended, so the story went, on reducing waste discharge into the river. Once the pumps were up and running, Sumarmo often explained to his audiences, waste items could damage the delicate apparatus. Developing awareness of this causality was of vital

60 She actually used the English term.
importance to the polder board. Here, SIMA’s position on kampung dwellers’ unmet civil obligations, on the face of it, differed little from the government. In Indonesia, belief is widespread that riverbank dwellers are responsible for clogging rivers. Other studies have richly documented this public discourse (Texier 2009; Voorst and Hellmann 2015). SIMA thus sided with the government and actively helped it carry out informational meetings with the purpose of educating downstream dwellers. Government hopes of modernizing these areas through moral restructuring were expressed and even legitimized by SIMA. Here, SIMA spoke on behalf of the government and to the population. However, I learned from Adin and members of Komayu (see previous chapter) that he saw in cleanliness education not a mere instrumentality, a means to an end, that is, the polder’s functioning. Rather, he believed learning to appreciate nature was part of a complex process of self-empowerment. Therefore, Adin and Sumarmo always made sure to point out to their audiences that littering would only do harm to themselves, as they paid for maintenance and the proper functioning of the polder. As members of the polder board, they thus had the exceptional opportunity to promote their visions for a better floodplain.

SIMA was, however, not always on good terms with the government. Especially, after firing its secretary, the friend of a planner involved in the project, SIMA’s relationship with Bappeda became quite complicated. Differences in approach between the partners as well as within their groups seemed to become more tangible after the secretary was let go. When I began my research, the sole exchange that took place between SIMA and the planning agency was occurring between SIMA’s secretary and Bappeda’s lower ranks, who reimbursed the board for minor expenses (Bappeda covered expenses for the habitual snacks offered at meetings). The cooperation had been reduced to a simple financial partnership. The leadership of the polder project was in shambles. Although the Dutch team involved a fixer called Roy, who managed to reinitiate the
dialogue with Bappeda’s staff, the head of Bappeda’s infrastructure unit had taken his distances from the project over internal conflicts.

Some SIMA members suddenly voiced fear that the project would not bring real change. Legally speaking, the municipal government wasn’t allowed to levy a tax from its citizens for water works. If there was no legal precedent of such a water levy and no efforts of legislation to legalize it, taxing the population just smacked of corruption. Waiting for a solution of this problem at the higher levels of the government, slowly, but noticeably, the board’s busy-ness abated. This stood in stark contrast to the initially shared enthusiasm, when SIMA had been repeatedly elevated by the government to the city’s mascot. In autumn 2014, when I was spending half of my week at the municipality, I observed how the polder project started to pale beside other agendas of the city government – such as the extension of Semarang’s public transport system (BRT) and the revitalization of Semarang’s urban heritage. The Semarang River was also again undergoing normalization works, which were much discussed by the media.

Both Sumarmo and Adin expressed uneasiness about the project’s sudden halt. For Sumarmo, the project’s faltering was threatening his image as a caring and committed citizen and local representative. Previously, he had been exuberant to be called upon to organize visits to the polder construction site, because he could show off his knowledge of water and the polder’s benefits to residents. Despite having a modest education – “cuman SMA” [the equivalent to a high school diploma] – people were “impressed” by his civilized manners (heran saya budaya) at such occasions. At some point, they even asked him – a small-time kampung resident, he added – whether he thought the Dutch trustworthy, as if they considered him a diplomat in the employ of the state. Quite diplomatically, in fact, he would answer evasively that the project did not solely consists of Dutch people, but also many local academics (ilmuwan). But when we brought a few Dutch engineering undergrads to the pumping house one day, he confessed to me that he was
embarrassed by the state of the project. “This is all I can show them,” he said, meaning the empty pumping house. The project’s stagnation also meant that cynics, people Sumarmo called orang ahli mencibir (pouting experts), might be proven right. For Sumarmo, who grew up in a “dangerous” neighbourhood, rife with armed drunkards, his involvement in the polder project represented a constant source of marvel and pride.

While the polder board represented the polder as a revolutionary step in the fight against flooding (a tiger’s leap), the project turned out to be hampered by bureaucracy and political will. Both Sumarmo and Adin wanted to be part of a new kind of project that took input from residents seriously. As examples of the government’s commitment, they themselves posed as modest residents involved in a visionary water governance program. However, by carrying out informational events aiming at educating residents, they also acted indirectly on behalf of the government.

The Polder Design

In the Netherlands, where polders were invented and are a common feature of urban landscapes, they protect residents inhabiting land reclaimed from the sea from being inundated. To that end, a polder is surrounded by dikes or embankments. Undesired water can be controlled either by being run off through a sluice or by being pumped out. “A polder is a triumph of technology,” notes Brett-Crowther (1982) appreciatively. But making polders has always been a political undertaking, too, since “technical development was made possible through a parallel process of institutional development” (Van Schoubroeck 2010). Polders have been described as politically self-contained systems in which the interdependency of all constitutive elements (land use, demographics, economy, etc.) is acknowledged and regulated. Roy, a Dutch retiree with Indonesian roots, who had a respectable career in municipal politics in the Netherlands and visited
Semarang repeatedly as a diplomatic envoy of the Dutch side, often told his interlocutors that the Dutch commodity that was so in demand these days was not simply water infrastructure but the know-how required to operate and, more importantly, maintain it. After describing the coming into existence of the polder board and its role in promoting the project, I now turn to the design of the polder. As I will show, the infrastructural envisioning of the polder underscored the claim of the polder board to a new kind of water management.

Building polders required thinking holistically and comprehensively, according to the Dutch project partners. The design of the polder needed to pay heed to the interrelation of sectors, interests, and geological and climatic conditions. The polder design, carried out by a Dutch consulting company in cooperation with Indonesian state agencies, thus had to translate this conceptual interrelation into spatial terms: ending seasonal and tidal flooding by taking into consideration residential, corporate, and public interests. The dike, embankments, and pumps that would regulate the influx and discharge of water in the densely-populated flood-prone area had to inscribe the material confines of this loose community upon the landscape.

In March 2009, the design of Indonesia’s first democratically steered polder was cheerfully released at Novotel, one of the city’s most prestigious hotels located on Jalan Pemuda, the Champs-Elysées of Semarang. All feasibility studies as well as a “Detailed Engineering Plan” had been accomplished at the beginning of the year. Now, it was time to celebrate. The Dutch water engineer Herman Mondeel had spent three years in Semarang to devise a technical plan that was both feasible and affordable, as the Indonesian government would pay for it. Mondeel, who brought his wife and children, learned Indonesian, and became good friends with the members of the then provisional polder board, underlined considerable constraints that the available budget

61 Tellingly, Jarred Diamond (2005) has elevated the Dutch polder to an exemplary political tool for governing global ecological and economic processes.
put on the project development. The Dutch consultant company Witteveen & Bos, which has offices in Jakarta and is known for the titanic undertaking of reclaiming land in the bay of Jakarta, won the tender to create the technical design of the polder. The company made the Dutch water authority HHSK, which shouldered the operational costs of SIMA and expenses for design (albeit with support from numerous Dutch institutions, as mentioned earlier), an unbeatable deal, even outmaneuvering Indonesian competitors. According to the design, the polder infrastructure was to consist of a low-budget ensemble of dams and dikes, a pumping station including five pumps, and a water retention basin. On the one hand, sediment dredging and transferring excess water to the nearby flood canal was supposed to lower the water level of Banger River by approximately 1.7 metres (Witteveen & Bos 2014), restoring Banger’s historical water volume. On the other hand, a dam positioned where the stream arrives in the estuary and a dike along the northern edge of Kemijen promised to stop rob by blocking out sea water. Banger River would be reborn as Banger Polder. The technical rationale of the design was as follows: instead of allowing the delta to continue to be subject to multiple fragmentary interventions from both state and local population, Banger Polder would synergize energies, efforts, and investments. The polder would thus mark a shift from on-demand infrastructure repair to sustainable water management.
The design was predicated upon two basic understandings of the flooding problem. First, the authors of the design argued that land subsidence had rendered the existing drainage system obsolete. Second, it predicted that “climate change will further worsen the situation due to sea level rise and increased rainfall in the wet season.” In short, to solve the problem, the engineering challenge was twofold: allowing for the retention of surplus water before pumping it out while blocking tidal inflow. The design identified two main external forces impeding “normal” water flow and proposed a mainly hydraulic solution to the flooding problem. It envisioned two related interventions into the urban fabric of Kemijen. The first intervention concerned water flow. Pumps were needed to unmake the risk-laden relationship of riverside kampungs with the Banger River. Put crudely, with a fleet of five pumps operating, neither strong rainfall nor drainage water should be a concern to the floodplain communities, as the water flow would be constantly monitored and hydraulically enabled. In fact, the polder’s centrepiece, a pumping house, not only promised a levelled flow of water but would also control groundwater levels: “To keep the groundwater level
sufficiently low in the rainy season, the water level needs to be 1.25 to 1.5 m below surface level in order to maintain a groundwater level of 0.75 to 1 m below surface level. With this (low) groundwater level, the soil provides sufficient bearing capacity for roads and buildings, resulting in less damage, and flooding of buildings is avoided” (Mondeel & Budinetro 2010). Maintaining low water levels thus would provide subterranean stability, according to the design. The polder not only promised to prevent flooding, but also set out to set the right conditions for urban development – the prerequisite for progress promised by the Dutch. Interestingly, the designers admitted that lowering the groundwater level would lead to increased soil settlement, thus accelerating already problematic land subsidence. The design, however, deemed the rate of land subsidence post-installation “acceptable, considering that the present land subsidence is 9 cm/year” (id.). The way in which the pumps were envisioned to perform, then, claimed a detailed understanding of local ecological processes and painted a future in which land subsidence was still a problem, but one that could be dealt with technically.

As Johan put it to me, the polder infrastructure was, in any case, only “buying the government time.” In his opinion, the coastal communities were headed for even faster decline. A mere infrastructural fix as proposed by the design would not do the trick. The polder thus foremost aimed at changing the relationship of kampung dwellers with water governance and its infrastructures, for posterity, so it went. It hoped to undo specific rhythms, or “temporal configurations” (Tsing 2015), by offering a window for institutional changes. The Dutch engineers acknowledged that relief from flooding was going to be temporary. The delta was in rapid decline and global warming would cause a significant rise of the sea level. Therefore, the polder design was to carry onward a new form of flood governance – one that was different by virtue of its

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62 This expected result of the polder construction was never communicated in public hearings during the time of my fieldwork, suggesting that accelerated land subsidence was scientifically acceptable but did not translate smoothly into social acceptance.
participatory design. Not technology (pumps and dams) *per se* but specific planning technology – local stewardship and entrepreneurial management – would help prevent more disastrous flooding in the future. In a sense, this new governance, too, would be built on borrowed time: the precious time window afforded by Dutch experts, who defined the inherent ‘problems’ of Indonesian water management and relied on century-old experience with flood prevention.

The polder design claimed a knowledge of the polder locations’ position in time. Munn (1992:94) has pointed to the epistemological pitfalls of relating humans and their acts to time, that is, the spatially and socio-culturally informed time of our activity and our wider world. Such views ignore the fact that humans also ‘make time.’ As I will demonstrate below, after the polder design had been released, including the location of its infrastructural components, residents didn’t stop their own flood-preventative acts. They used the project as a platform for political campaigning, while others actually moved into the project area in hopes of receiving compensation when the government would most certainly evict them. Such anticipatory strategies allowed them to use the plan as a “vehicle of action” (Baxstrom 2012). The polder design and its implementation, which were themselves supposed to buy time, thus, paradoxically, resulted in further strategies of building on borrowed time.

The Polder Coming Together

The polder board, in particular its residential members, was expected to “socialize” the project design before construction would begin – to inform residents of the polder’s spatial and technical requirements. It was further key in educating the population about the construction’s objectives. At times, as I will illustrate, this meant imbuing an outwardly unspectacular water infrastructure with an entirely new meaning. In 2010, before the pumping house was constructed, a “Climate Change Festival” was organized on the parcel that would feature the pumping house.
Once operational, the pumping station was supposed to be the heart of the Banger Polder. According to the project leadership, residents had to become aware of the importance of this building, as the polder authority would be coordinating infrastructural maintenance from here. The pumping station was to house five pumps at the Northern edge of the polder while also housing the polder board. When I conducted fieldwork, the pumping house had already been constructed, fenced in and gated. Few people spoke about the extensive planning efforts involved in building the house. Reviewing planning documents revealed that the pumping house was controversial and required intensive moderation by the board’s residential members. After all, the area had been incisively altered by the development: about 100 families had to be evicted prior to construction and a neighbourhood council building (balai RW) was demolished.\footnote{See “PRA LARAP – Pekerjaan Pembangunan Rumah Pompa Polder Kali Banger Semarang.”} To facilitate a conflict-free and clean land clearance process, a private consulting firm had been hired to produce a “social survey” presenting, in neat charts and pie diagrams, demographic facts about local residents, such as their professional occupations, distance to work, and incomes levels. Further, it established the housing types to determine the correspondent level of monetary compensation. Residents received a compensation based on how much money and material they had invested in their building: concrete wall (“tembok”), partially brick (“1/2 bata”), or wood (“papan”). The last category was temporary (“temporer”), suggesting a form of non-material existence. Residents living in ‘temporary’ houses received the smallest compensations. Adin was involved in establishing initial contact between surveying agencies and residents so that the former could conduct the survey. According to him, people were readier to listen to his reasoning, which helped attenuate protests and conduct the evictions “peacefully.” He didn’t know, however, what had happened to the evictees afterwards; where they lived now and under what conditions. I couldn’t find information on their new location either.
The construction process of the pumping house, however, produced strong and lasting tensions between the Dutch and Indonesian partners. After strong rainfall, the building’s foundation suddenly appeared at risk due to missing construction elements. The construction error spiked conspiracy theories among Dutch project partners: Johan wanted an immediate inspection of the construction after strong rainfalls led the building’s foundation to collapse.\(^{64}\) He suspected fraud. Despite this turmoil during constructions, the building turned out to be a formidable metaphor for the change that the Dutch-Indonesian polder promised to bring: the coming of a \textit{new time}. But while ordinary residents often asked the polder board members (and me) when the polder project would finally be completed and flooding stop, they rarely knew details about the scheme. Generally speaking, the polder project was expected to “minimalize” rob and at least unburden riverside residents who had to cope with inundations.\(^ {65}\)

Standing on an artificial elevation, erected on land that was cleared in an orderly and premeditated fashion, according to SIMA, the office overlooked almost majestically the neighbourhood. Its monumental character was, however, enhanced by its total emptiness. When I started my fieldwork in 2014, all pumps as well as interior outfitting were still missing. Three years after construction work had been accomplished, the pumping station still had no apparent function. Nobody used it. Goats grazed undisturbed in the sun on its large fenced-in front yard. Johan noted in his travel log that, at one point, “inside the barbwire fences around the building of the pumping station, a veritable small fairground had been erected. The area is serving as a local venue, as long as the prestigious office of our water board has not risen.” Johan’s observation concerned the smaller building adjoining the station: SIMA’s future office. His qualification of

\(^{64}\) He “ordered” the mayor to suspend construction immediately so that he could inspect the building during his next visit of Semarang. However, when he arrived in Semarang, concrete had been poured over the “evidence,” according to Johan.

\(^{65}\) See: http://www.ampl.or.id/digilib/read/rob-rendam-ratusan-rumah-di-kemijen/23511.
the plot’s temporal character ("as long") contrasts the meantime with a future to come. The future resided in the polder while local arrangements with the construction process in the meantime were a mere distraction with entertaining character, a piece of amusement for his audience back in the Netherlands.

Yet, the empty building posed a real problem to Semarang’s government. In Indonesia, pending infrastructure projects attract the attention of the feared KPK, the Corruption Eradication Commission. Rumours were circulating that the suspended polder project had fallen prey to corruption. Why else would work have come to a stop? In fact, the polder project was overshadowed by the arrest of one its more influential defenders: the deputy head of Semarang’s water agency was charged with corruption after investigations of another water infrastructure project. The incumbent mayor was compelled to intervene and announced in 2014 that Semarang’s government would expedite completion of the polder by dipping into its own annual budget. Speeding up completion was thus motivated by mounting public discontent in view of the project’s massive delay. After all, what good was an empty pumping house? But rumours never fully disappeared: for instance, my landlord was convinced that the mayor had simply parked the project funds in a bank account, which was now reaping interest. The prolonged period of waiting after a project had been announced was nothing out of the ordinary for him and other local residents I spoke to. Clearly, the polder construction wouldn’t be much different. The waiting seemed torturous to the Dutch partners, however, who wanted to close the project as these rumours threatened to implicate them. When a contractor finally began preparing the station for the arrival of the pumps, Adin felt compelled to visit the pumping house to check up on the installation.


process. I should note that I had arranged an interview with the contractor. Adin saw this meeting as a strategic opportunity to meet the contractor face-to-face.

Early into the interview with the contractor, I noticed that the man supervising the pump installation welcomed the opportunity to rant about Indonesian water management, which, according to him, failed constantly at the hands of miscalculating, fraudulent dilettantes. The design for the polder was no different to him. He, for instance, used cheap American pumps, ordered with “MWI Pumps” based out of Florida, which provided fast and low-priced delivery, while the government’s choice of pumps had to take into consideration regulations and clientelistic ties. The contractor spoke about pumps as if they were car parts that he ordered, assembled and installed all over Indonesia. The Banger Polder suddenly seemed not so unique anymore and I noticed Adin’s slight defensiveness. Instead of inaugurating a new time, one that kampung residents could inhabit in a meaningful way, the pumps themselves turned out to be handmaiden to much more mundane goals: profit, speed, and convenience.

Even the design turned out to be squarely derivative, according to the contractor. From looking at the design sheets, a specialist like him could easily tell that an Indonesian bureaucrat had made the technical sketches, not a Dutch engineer. Further, the shape of the pumping house looked like expedient “copy paste” to him. He continued, “All over Indonesia they are using the same architectural style [for pumping houses].” “How funny,” he added, “that there was no actual regulation for the design of pumping houses, yet they all looked uniform (seragam).” Although this copycat version of the pumping house clearly offended Adin’s vision of Banger Polder as a unique, democratic experiment, he agreed on the fact that they had to finish construction sooner rather than later. The rainy season was just a few months away. The provision of pumps, enshrined as constitutive of a new relationship between water and local governance, was revealed to be subject to the temporalities of neoliberal governance and global supply chains.
The renewed sense of urgency in the wake of spreading rumours created the conditions for “undemocratic” measures: while being central to the polder, the pumps were themselves dependent on other components. To function properly, the prowess of the pumping station had to be balanced by adequate water storage, as mentioned by Adin above. The second major intervention thus concerned retaining water, as explained above. According to the design, successful flood protection necessitated the acquisition of inhabited land for water retention. To really control the flow of water, first, required making space for it. The dam in the estuary promised to keep tidal water out but also trapped run-off. During the wet season, not even the strongest pumps could handle the onslaught of rain water. The excess water had therefore to be retained somewhere. While the construction of the pumping station alone required evicting dozens of households, the retention basin turned out to be the bigger and costlier engineering challenge. Mondeel had told me that he tried hard to fit the polder into the “given” circumstances. But existing regulations and mixed land tenure made this task tricky. Figure 2 above is a sketch of the retention basin as nestled in the existing kampung infrastructure of northern Kemijen. According to common knowledge, the Indonesian Railways Company (PT KAI) owned the patch of land in question, which was inhabited. Semarang’s master plan indicates the parcel in question as part of the transportation sector.\textsuperscript{68} While counted as a “national asset,” the parcel had over decades become an integral part of Kemijen and a home to many residents.\textsuperscript{69} Currently, living on the land is deemed illegal which, however, didn’t prevent residents from occupying and sub-district governments from taxing it. Over the past twenty years, several hundred settlers had erected houses here. The first arrivers were arguably employees of PT KAI, who acquired building

\textsuperscript{68} \textit{See} Rencana Pola Ruang, Rencana Tata Ruang Kota Semarang Tahun 2011-2031, Pemerintah Kota Semarang, 2011.

\textsuperscript{69} It should be noted that, in 1864, the Dutch East Indies Railway Company erected Indonesia’s first railway station on the same areal. The station was later abandoned and passenger traffic moved to \textit{Stasiun Tawang}, Semarang’s largest train station to date. Long forgotten, today the flooded remnants of the train station only tickle the fancy of locomotive fans and hobby archeologists.
permits but were not allowed to purchase land titles. Initially, the company had toyed with the idea of developing a container depot on the land. This would probably have necessitated draining the land, large parts of which are flooded and used for farming fish all year round. The pond was in some ways akin to the forest ruins described by Anna Tsing (2014) in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*: a place that comes to sit uneasily between regulations, patchy law enforcement, and capitalist logics. Based on Mondeel’s council, the government checked the possibility of building a retention basin here. PT KAI eventually agreed to lease the land to the government in 2011. That the project moved on was, then, instrumental in turning this degraded land into an asset. It came to possess a new value in the context of the search for the polder’s future unfolding. Like good “salvage” capitalists, as Tsing might say, the communities around the fishpond started vying for compensation for being evicted. Thus, when more and more residents started signaling demands for compensation while more and more houses started popping up on the project plot, the whole polder construction stalled. The government saw the need to properly negotiate with the community. SIMA did not reach out to the community to socialize the polder construction plans, as it had with the pumping house. The evictions were considered a government affair, for reasons that I will discuss briefly below.

As mentioned above, the pumps, which were being installed, depended on the retention capacity of the basin. Both components of the polder were, in turn, encapsulated by a vision in which water was properly drained and channeled to allow for economic progress. From the perspective of the government, residents infringing on the suggested retention space were not only out of synch with the future the polder inaugurated, but were also the kind of residents that needed disciplining. The polder project, by carving out time for making amends to the crisis-ridden infrastructure, played into the state’s modernizing attempts.

Abram (2014: 130) has shown that planning doesn’t necessarily evacuate the future, as Guyer
(2007) and others have argued (see also introduction), through apolitical decision-making processes that obey profit margins and capital reproduction. In fact, he contends, contemporary forms of planning continue to envisage long-term futures and deal with immediate issues. The near future has rather become “a different domain, whose authority is more dependent on appeals to the demonstrable participation of a putative public.” Yet, what planning rarely or never considers is the near and medium past, as it gets evacuated from the practices of planning experts and bureaucrats, whose “relentless focus on worlds yet to be and work yet to be done quickly leaving behind this meaningful past.” The encounter with this unruly past – the places that residents, protesters, participants are trying to protect – affects the planning process, leading to “planning’s selective technologies of moving through time” (Abram 2014:130) being unsettled.

The envisioned spatiotemporal restructuring of the polder brought to the fore issues that imperiled its future-making plans. The construction process elicited many short-term adjustments and negotiations. It is notably the sense of urgency perpetuated by the Dutch partners’ pressing and mounting suspicions of corruption that helped the project convalesce after verging repeatedly on failure. The Dutch polder scheme imagined a helpless subject that was surviving, as it were, in the wet and productive milieu of places out of step with progress. That subject, in turn, justifies the continuation of modernizing efforts, whatever the price. As I tried to show, the polder project also critically rests on a culturally specific image of the “swamp.” In it, only a morally crippled version of the human can survive, waiting for its chance to modernize. The polder is neither a complete return to modernist teleology nor a post-developmentalist scheme. It holds on to visions of modernization but portrays residents as the essential link between the environment and the future.
A “Sad Monument”

As I mentioned, the construction of the polder project was delayed by years which put strong political pressure on the city government. The government risked coming across as unable to step up to the plate at a moment that it itself had helped frame as a crisis. This last section zooms in on the faltering of the polder project and its temporal re-appropriation. In particular, I show that SIMA’s residential members were facing power hierarchies that ultimately prevented them from playing an influential role in managing water, that is, from transforming flood prevention. Adin, in particular, feared that the project would ultimately fall prey to recuperation by the system it tried to transform.

Adin started having these worries in view of the government’s rash reaction to the delay of the retention basin construction. Public pressure on the government to conclude the project grew, which made a sudden implementation more and more probable. He also expressed concern about the municipal water agency PSDA which became increasingly impatient with the project. SIMA’s chairman, Pak Suseno, Adin, and Sumarmo grew anxious that the agency would try to co-opt the polder project by taking credit for bringing it to a conclusion. Their suspicion was not unwarranted: the fresh wind in the project’s sails after years of sluggish development had to do with the upcoming municipal elections. All involved state agencies seemed suddenly ready to pick up the slack – meetings were held every week which is why the pumping house eventually was equipped with pumps. Nobody had abandoned ship, this revived eagerness seemed to suggest.

Despite or because of sudden efforts to finalize the project, the heart piece of the polder – the “prestigious polder office” within the pumping house – threatened to become a “sad monument,” as one of the polder experts, who was involved in creating Semarang’s polder guidelines, put it in a private conversation. What he meant was that as an empty building without function, the pumping house ironized public infrastructure and questioned the ability of Indonesian city
planning. Thus, just when the polder seemed to come back from the dead because of the government’s financial step-in, Adin and Pak Suseno, backed up by its Dutch partner, expressed grave concerns about the original institutional design of the polder being recycled into “normal” flood governance. Instead of being paralleled by institutional restructuring, they claimed, the polder would be assimilated by a government agency, when in fact SIMA was supposed to retain many prerogatives, such as choosing its own maintenance staff. While this prospect was daunting to Adin, he wasn’t in a position to oppose expedited construction. After all, he had made promises to the residents of his sub-district.

One day, I headed North in the afternoon, biking on the recently raised embankment road along the Banger River, until I reached the Southern border of Kemijen. I had planned to spend some time at Adin’s house. As usual, Adin and I ended up talking about whatever came to our minds, while smoking too many cigarettes in the dusky guestroom of his house. Staring at the roughly plastered wall and bare floor, I was reminded that Adin had recently hired workers to raise his floors and heighten the walls. Finishing touches would have to wait. His wife Maria’s income was currently just enough to put food on the table, as his mainly voluntary activist work couldn’t cover their daily expenses.

That day, Adin shared some thoughts on nature with me. Most of them sounded familiar. But I was surprised by a different tone in his voice. He sounded sad. He spoke at length about century-old maps of Semarang that, so he believed, showed the delta as it looked when the Portuguese arrived in Semarang. The shoreline was many kilometres south of today’s ocean frontier (batasan laut). His land would still have been under the sea. When Adin was young, many fishponds as well as mangrove forests (hutan) separated his neighbourhood and the ocean. He explained how these “natural” structures protected the settlements from tidal waves. They were an integral part of a long gone “nature-equilibrium” (keseimbangan alam). When indigenous people settled
on land north to the Pengapon corridor, a process of informal urbanization was launched. In addition, the Dutch kept pushing the limits of the harbour which led to the gradual destruction of the protective mangrove belt. But nature can’t stay unbalanced forever, Adin added, his voice foreboding. Tidal flooding was the logical consequence and he considered flooding as nature’s way of taking back man-made things. For humans, concomitant with this process was suffering. The more people lived in places out of synch with nature, the more people were in harm’s way. To solve this problem, he mused with a touch of irony, humans invented technology. Since the Dutch had been living with comparable flood risks for centuries, he concluded, Indonesia’s best bet was therefore to adopt their solutions. His story seemed to suggest that they had maneuvered themselves into this boggy situation a long time ago.

At no point had infrastructural improvement been able to stop nature. In his opinion, instead of focusing on infrastructure (fisik) only, education (pendidikan) and the economy had to be considered by the government. He said, “the government thinks that welfare in kampung will increase with physical development, but they are wrong, it does not result in empowerment. It is useless.” From experience, Adin knew that infrastructural upgrading often incited poor people to sell their houses profitably, as local prices tended to go up. They would resettle in an area as deprived as their previous neighbourhood, “remaining poor and marginalized” (tetap miskin dan dipinggirkan). In view of the government’s eviction plans, Adin was reminded that the polder infrastructure would have very similar consequences. Without paying attention to other sectors of society, such as education and empowerment, the polder project would alter the neighbourhood’s fabric without providing the grounds for actual change. As a broker, he was partly responsible for this physical change, but he could not affect any actual social change.

After chatting in his house, we went for a walk through the neighbourhood and stopped to sit on the Banger River embankment for a while. From here, we contemplated the neighbourhood’s
fishponds, a stagnant body of water framed by elevated train tracks to the South, a regularly inundated road to the West and the relatively new toll road to the North. The riverbank we sat on separates the fishponds from the Banger River. Since 2009, when the city government officially released the design for Polder Banger, the fishponds were slated to become a retention basin with a catchment surface of nine hectares.\textsuperscript{70} “I have many friends in the settlement,” Adin said. I asked him who was going to compensate the evictees’ losses in terms of property (pengantian rugi). And who would carry out the eviction (bongkaran)? He answered: “This is a government affair. I don’t want this to be a conflict between the people. It ought to be a government job (seharusnya pemerintah).” He hoped to avoid a conflict between the beneficiaries of the polder project – in sum, poor but legal residents – and the opponents of the retention basin – deemed illegal squatters. This social division was mainly drawn by the location of their homes in an ‘industrial’ and ‘non-residential’ zone. But the decision was not an easy one for him. Maria’s cousin, who was also one of Adin’s collaborators in the resident organization Komayu, had filed a complaint with the government, as his house was probably going to be removed. Adin liked to express that he was speaking and acting in the name of residents like Arief and Deni, introduced in the second chapter – poor kampung dwellers whose lives are stuck somewhere between ecological, economic, and medical crisis. He wanted “dry feet” for all residents. Yet, he had to draw a line between people with and without official housing documents. The situation caused an “inner conflict” (konflik batin) in Adin. The polder project was suddenly nothing more than another top-down development project in his eyes. Further, while Adin supported a “democratic” and peaceful resolution of the land conflict, the government’s obscure course of action made him think that the project would materialize without effecting a democratization of water governance. His vision of an undifferentiated floodplain demonstrated his deep desire to break free from the oblique

\textsuperscript{70} In fact, the size of retention area has been subject to contestation and re-evaluation by public and state actors.
structures that prevented his future imaginaries from becoming reality. Adin envisioned a world in which the relationship between politics and nature was inverted. Here, decisions don’t flow from the human hierarchies that supersede nature, but solution-finding is a matter of socially unmediated interactions with nature. As Eckers and Loftus argue, the study of urban water landscapes should build on such immanent critiques at work in people’s lives and everyday practices, as “it is from within these contradictions and tensions that new societies might be envisioned and fought for” (Eckers and Loftus 2008:713). Adin felt uncomfortable about his participation in such acts. He could not stand for evictions of “illegal” dwellers.

SIMA continued to exist, but Adin and Sumarmo were visibly losing hope that the polder they had envisioned would soon become reality. One day, I asked Adin what he was doing in the meantime; did he have any other sources of income? In fact, he answered, he was not making any money currently as a member of SIMA. Then he added: “I have my wife’s income, that’s all. My wife keeps me alive.” Maria worked daily in a pharmacy. Anyway, he added, nobody would employ him now because he was already fifty years old. He was referring to wage labour in one of Semarang’s factories often owned by foreign companies, a standard livelihood strategy for many in Kemijen. He had been employed by various factories until he decided to work as a full-time activist. His activist jobs, at least, made him less dependent on the pocket money from Maria. At public hearings and meetings organized by NGOs, envelopes with generous “gas money” were given to attendees. His role as residential member meant a constant stream of invitations to such events. I constantly bumped into Adin at neighbourhood meetings. Compared with these activist duties, where Adin often spoke as a well-known and respected pro-poor activist, the hours spent at SIMA’s office appeared more like downtime. Here, Adin was likely to play card games on the computer, read the news, or scan status updates on Facebook. This kind of time – empty,

unproductive, but pleasant – stood in stark contrast with the initial urgency of the board’s formation. If SIMA had developed some political momentum in the past, routine and bureaucracy had sucked this power out. The newness of community-based water management had dissipated. More and more, SIMA lost its revolutionary aura and came to look like a mock-up, something containing a part of the solution, but only used as a banner for non-progressive government schemes. At least, it allowed Adin to steadily participate in resident consultations.

Adin was usually in attendance at official meetings held at SIMA and we often met at events at city hall that had a water component and were organized by Bappeda. Despite being increasingly jaded by the polder project, Adin performed his activist identity at these events. I sat at a table with him, an employee of the international NGO Mercy Corps, and a delegate of Semarang’s Disaster Preparedness Agency (BPBD). When the government representatives had finished their presentations on anti-flooding measures, Adin was eager to make a comment. A man walked over to our table to hand Adin the microphone. He first introduced himself as a member of the SIMA agency. Not everybody knew what this abbreviation stood for, so he appended, “The agency that will run the polder, once it will have become reality (kalau sudah jadi).” This drew a chuckle from the audience which was well aware of the project’s massive delay. Despite a moment of embarrassment, Adin was able to gather his thoughts and said, “Disaster is our companion (berkawan dengan bencana). And yet, the government has not committed to a concrete date by which flooding will be under control. It doesn’t have the courage to promise that Semarang will be free of rob.” The audience applauded moderately. After his comment, Adin leaned over to me and whispered: “for people in Europe disasters are terrible, right? For us they’re normal, we continuously face and suffer from them (terus menghadapi dan menghidap).”

As I have argued in earlier chapters, the environment of Adin’s neighbourhood harboured an invisible form of crisis that was screened out by a regime of eventfulness that structured everyday
life around repair and maintenance. From his many statements at meetings and his engagement in the project, it became apparent that for Adin the polder board was a serious attempt at changing this chronic yet unacknowledged suffering. His comment was provocative in that he, the member of a government-sanctioned board, criticized their own inability to imagine an end of this catastrophe. I remember one specific day when after visiting the unfinished pumping station with consultants, I decided to swing by Adin’s house. I felt immediately that he was in a bad mood and stopped asking research questions, hoping he would soon launch into a polyglot discussion of foreign philosophy, as he often liked to do. But he remained silent. We both yawned and sank deeper into our chairs. At some point, I dared to ask why he was so tired. Although he did not seem delighted by the topic, he answered: “because of this… because it’s not happening. It’s exhausting for the morale (melemah semangatnya), it’s hard to stay motivated.” When someone came to visit the project site, he always had to pull himself up and put on a positive face. He padded his chest: “It’s embarrassing when people come here to learn, but find nothing. My motivation is jittering (redup), like a lamp without enough current.” Naively, I asked him why he continued his work. He answered: “I’m just flowing (mengalir saja). I’ve got no choice.” While the state of “just flowing” is accompanied by disappointment and disillusionment, Adin’s critique of the government pointed to an undetermined future. The polder, as the epitome of a democratic water management, hadn’t had enough energy to undo the hierarchies established over years on the swamp, but he would stand by.

The New Chronic

As I mentioned above, the polder was conceptualized to alleviate and not remedy flooding: it wanted to carve out time for the floodplain inhabitants. According to its design, the polder would stop functioning properly in 15 years, in view of galloping land subsidence and predicted sea level
rise. Not only Johan acknowledged this but also the vice-director of Semarang’s water agency. In this sense, the polder project merely postponed a decision on the future of the floodplain. It assumed that the polder infrastructure would provide the necessary conditions for bringing economic progress to the region, thereby proposing a scenario in which other, less actionable factors would play an immensely important role. As such, it only contained the seeds for long-term safety from floods, without actually effecting structural change. By attempting to instate its conception of time, the polder attempted to reconfigure the kampung’s relation with seasonal change and governance as an investment in this future.

The polder project demonstrated the power of chronicity, or recursive time, in North Semarang, even though or precisely because the project was able to contain many aspirations: it paid attention to residents’ longstanding hopes that the government would finally pay attention to their drowning neighbourhoods and deficient infrastructure. It in fact renewed the state’s commitment to normalization, a technical fix to the problems of living in a contaminated world. The goal of normalization is a properly drained and orderly floodplain – to bring prosperity and modernity to citizens. Although the polder board, based on its equal representation twin in the Netherlands, criticized the futurology of normalization as technocratic and undemocratic, it basically played into desires of bringing to fruition a quite technical modernization project.

Cazdyn (2012) argues that the “chronic” is about a “certain relation to time, a relation to the present and the future, as well as the capacity to shape these temporal realities.” This chronic mode insists on “maintaining the system and perpetually managing its constitutive crisis, rather than confronting [...] the system’s own death.” In the chronic, the future is spelled out in advance, “granting to the meantime an impossible location that is heading somewhere and nowhere at once” (Cazdyn 2012:4). In this chapter, I showed that while the polder project tried to unsettle and inaugurate a new time, it created a meantime. Despite catchy labels, such as “pilot” or
“participative governance,” the flood prevention project that I described not only got strongly delayed, but it ended up repeating well-rehearsed government practices, such as oblique evictions processes and paternalistic planning. Participation by residents in the polder scheme merely helped give credibility to an assessment of a crisis, define its technical contours, and develop a project able to fix water flow and educate citizens. Yet after fixing this problem, the drainage project would return to its normal course.

As Cazdyn argues, although the chronic dictates management-style solutions for complex socioecological problems, encouraging tame public participation while suppressing real alternatives, it evidently produces criticisms at the same time. The polder project also shores up a specific, local critique of government projects that plays a role in the assessment of the crisis. That critique, I argued, is echoed by SIMA’s residential members. It rests on longstanding democratic aspirations as well as local imaginaries of a drowning floodplain. In the end, however, the polder project helped inaugurate a discourse that considers recurrent crisis as constitutive of everyday life and cannot accept the death of the drainage system. After all, it is the drainage system’s failure that provides lucrative business to many of the floodplain’s inhabitants. In fact, my landlord Eko once speculated that the project’s delay benefited the mayor whose parked budget (anggaran) produced interest fees that he himself reaped.

This brings me back to Masco’s analysis of the extreme in everyday life. He points out that life can be “founded on machines (and accompanying logics and affects) that are simultaneously infrastructural (and thus part of a normalized ‘everyday’) and extreme, in the sense of being unprecedentedly violent” (Masco 2012:1107). In such worlds, a “highly developed social commitment to normalizing extremes” (id.) is required to maintain the illusion of progress which modern political theory elevates to both the end of history and its means. Masco (id.:1114) considers progress as “a perpetual engine of improving the infrastructures of everyday life as well
as the morality of those living within it.” While the polder project destabilizes governmental practices, it also normalizes infrastructural adaptation to tidal flooding based on the latter’s presumed adverse effects on economic and national progress. I tried to show how the polder conjures up a dead end in order to make a case for institutional shifts. It, however, helped to install a “new set of fantasies and short circuits that prevent reflexive critique” (id:1115). That way, the Ghostbusters will never be out of their job.
Afterword – An Ethnography of Meantimes

This thesis covered a vast period of time: it started out in late colonial Semarang, describing the emergence of coastal kampungs on the Northeastern border of the city. Based on the meagre historical record of these poor kampungs located along rivers – which functioned as sewers and irrigation systems at the same time –, I reconstructed the ways in which the colonial administration pursued its ‘enlightened’ style of urban governance. More specifically, it tried to address the human decay in the rapidly urbanizing port city of Semarang, a symptom of rural dispossession and urban racial hierarchy. The post-independence state treatment of these ‘problem zones’ built on this colonial legacy by re-pathologizing Northern kampungs, that is, addressing certain (crime and lack of hygiene) while ignoring other problems (critical infrastructure, impoverishment). Then, I use a different lens to produce a finer, close-up view of these places’ infrastructural transformation under the influence of political and spatial ‘normalization.’ Naturally, the image thus produced is more complex, and a variety of temporalities enter the stage. An ethnography of the present, divided into acts, showed what looks like a never-ending looping of time in the lives of riverside dwellers: the infrastructural ruins of river modernization produce an everlasting present in which residents must constantly mobilize materials, capital, and physical efforts to repair and thus maintain a barely functional landscape of water, and of existential time. I thus juxtaposed the developmentalist time of normalization as a tool of state-making to the meantime that it produces – a nesting of temporalities – that layers quasi-events and leads nowhere. Peninggian and the baroque disposition – two forms of ‘building on borrowed time’ (I’m sure there are more) – are development *reductio ad absurdum.* Against the background of this palimpsest of efforts, I analyze the discursive making of crisis by a Dutch-Indonesian polder project that wants to introduce a change of system by constructing a discourse of crisis. Yet, the
project too loops residents into a meantime – the polder project will expire in 15 years and the government is holding on to its normalization plans.

In short, I ethnographically elucidated the concept of a meantime that escapes the diagnostics of plan-makers. This meantime does not fully evacuate the near future, but allows locals to adapt to plans that merely gesture to a future. This meantime, which easily disappears from the horizons of policy-makers, deserves our attention as anthropologists, as it is a placeholder and structure of violence. It is not only an ethnographic reality, but it shapes, even cripples, the ability of individuals to engage with the plans that governments currently devise to address climate change. Furthermore, the meantime is a main function of the chronic, in that it allows institutions to develop a government of time in line with the shifting conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

But I’m not a friend of conclusions. It feels presumptuous to me to try to reach a final word on anything, especially if it is as contingent as an urban delta and its manifold forms of existence. I don’t dare make future predictions based on the material I have collected. But there are a few things I would like to say on re-examination of the claims that I have made in this work. In a book focussed on water in Southeast Asia, Boomgaard (2007) provides an overview of types and representations of water in this vast and politically and culturally diverse region. Boomgaard does a respectable job at presenting anecdotes, data, and ethnography culled from a plethora of studies and historical material. Regarding Indonesia, Boomgaard specifically points to the dangers of living by the sea due to regular exposure to disease, winds and floods, and the problems of river pollution. He also mentions the dangers of global warming, which constitutes a new challenge to coastal populations. As the present work revealed, at least since the beginning of the 20th century, living in the swampy North indeed exposed dwellers to many dangers, in particular outbreaks of disease and seasonal flooding. Over time, due to the stigmatization of the North in colonial times as forming an urban pathology, danger also started to emerge from within the kampung, as
gangsters and rogue state officials roamed this landscape and often clashed, leaving a trail of death and fear in peoples’ memories. Thus, the water of the Banger River became doubly constructed as dark, dangerous, and demoralizing.

Today, in coastal kampungs of Semarang, danger arises from dysfunctional infrastructure that was supposed to cure the North of its assumed ‘dark’ characteristics. Instead of offering cure, communities and individuals must mobilize their own resources in hopes of adapting to an unequally distributed threat – rob. Residents claim that rob began after the normalization of riverbanks in the wake of state forays into the dark realm of Northern kampungs. But these dangers are less visible and they are not nameable. Rob is a normalized occurrence, whose effects on peoples’ health and levels of agency are unaccounted for and can be related to the vagaries of globalization and coastal nature. Boomgaard, in fact, hints at threats that are difficult to account for, such as low quality of drinking water “for the many to whom piped water or water from uncontaminated sources is not available.” This danger, a result of underinvested or abandoned infrastructures, such as the flood gates of the jalan inspeksi, however, “does not yet show up in the overall mortality figures” (2007:14). Rob, as well, has corrosive effects that do not show in official figures. Though well-intended and timely, studies of land subsidence and climate change cannot account for such accumulated and combined risks. Rob as the aftermath of normalization is like Cazdyn’s bombs that have been launched and that force people to metaphorically live under the shadow of destruction. Ethnographic dwelling, a methodological ‘sinking in,’ has allowed me to show the consequences of building on borrowed time; these consequences are accumulating (building) effects and stem from attempts of outlasting, that is, enduring the decomposing present.

Fortun (2013, n.p.) points to the “renewed relevance of ethnography and anthropology in these – disastrous – times.” In these times, so she argues, “disaster can be chronic as well as acute. Asthmatic, or delivered by a toxic cloud that kills on contact.” One could say that I tried to show
that disaster occurs when established institutional structures ignore the realities at hand and when they respond to them. Which disaster deserves our attention most? I offered a theoretical perspective on infrastructural breakdown and tidal flooding that builds disaster into society.

As this dissertation argued, the chronic is an effect of political marginalization and produces hopeful strategies to deal with the dead-ends of infrastructural adaptation. The strategies respond to and foster a meantime. I suspect that we will see more of such ‘meantimes’ in the future. What liberal states today – stripped off their tax bases and dismantled by neoliberal policies – can protect the millions, perhaps billions, of humans that are living in zones endangered by climate change around the world? Climate change is here and yet most governments are still pretending that it is a distant threat, one that can be dealt with in due time. The meantime is a trap for many subjects and communities who have to respond to the onset of ecological transformations. This trap is perpetuated by the failing modernist infrastructures of their environment.

Insightfully, Fortun (id.) warns us that treating everything as a disaster “risks playing into what can be excessive state control in what has been deemed an emergency; disaster calls for surveillance, policing, and new rules.” People who have endured in an extended meantime are particularly vulnerable to the controlling mechanisms of emergency management. I urge social scientists to do more dwelling in these sites of emergency management to identify the conditions that they deem disastrous and reveal effects that are really disastrous; “conditions that can’t be conceived through extant frames.”
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