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# DISCIPLINE AND DRAIN: RIVER NORMALIZATION AND SEMARANG'S FIGHT AGAINST TIDAL FLOODING

Lukas Ley

In 2015, I attended a late night subdistrict meeting in Kemijen, a coastal neighborhood located in northeast Semarang and built on former marshland. The *balai* (hall) was teeming with people and the atmosphere was official. A projector was displaying a resident-produced documentary on tidal flooding. The *lurah* (head of the subdistrict administration) had driven down from his upstream residence and was accompanied by his formally dressed wife. It turned out he had to make an important announcement concerning the mayor's neighborhood inspection, scheduled to occur in about two months. Namely, that the mayor couldn't make it. The *lurah* began his speech by expressing his sincere disappointment about the cancellation to those in attendance—various Kemijen neighborhood figures, leaders, and residents. All had been awaiting the visit of Semarang's highest state official as an opportunity to voice local ambitions and showcase community efforts to improve the neighborhood. Then, the *lurah* added that there was yet another chance to receive the mayor, as he had offered them an alternative date—a weekend one month hence. Sure, it would not give

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them much time to prepare. But shouldn't they try to make it happen anyway? The *lurah* was adamant that they should make a point of showing the mayor "visible proof" of their work (e.g., clean streets, reinforced and mostly unobstructed riverbanks). There were people in this neighborhood, he pointed out, who "cared and [could] stop being defiled [*jorok*] and dirty [*kumuh*]." Because of this visible change, Kemijen had been "showered [*digelontor*] with funds" this year.<sup>1</sup> The *lurah* imagined that the mayor's inspection would center around the Banger River and coincide with the annual river-cleaning event (*resik-resik kali*). Community members would clean a good stretch of the river and its embankment to impress the mayor. He ended his speech by reminding them that they should send a positive signal to the mayor: their *kali* (river) will be *terbebas dari sampah* (free of waste).

The *lurah*'s pitch was followed by another speech. The representative from LPMK (Lembaga Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Kelurahan, Neighborhood Community Empowerment Board), who co-preserved over the subdistrict meeting, chimed in with an even more passionate pep talk: they had struggled for a long time to build a "great" Kemijen, even though their neighborhood was suffering most (*paling menderita*) from the river, because it was at the receiving end of the stream, where it was most strongly polluted and susceptible to spillage. Despite these risks and circumstances, Kemijen always seemed to be the government's most left-behind development target (*sasaran paling tertinggal*). This was going to change, as they now had a clear plan (*gambaran jelas*). With this plan, they would move the subdistrict forward. The people of Kemijen should demand that the government prepare "normalization" (*persiapan pelaksanaan normalisasi*) and carry it out promptly.<sup>2</sup>

In the neighborhood meeting's speeches, the river's condition appears as a stain on the subdistrict's reputation: visible and odorous evidence of lagging behind relative to other areas' improvements and progress, and a sign of being abandoned by the city government. As the focus and central issue of official visits, the river is an indicator of development—both moral and economic. The river needs to be clean, that is, presentable, for the area to develop. From a cleaner river, development and improvement would flow in the form of *normalisasi*.<sup>3</sup> Normalization, in turn, would modernize the area by equipping it with proper river infrastructure—straight and unobstructed riverbanks. As a state official, the *lurah* could not publicly criticize the government, but the LPMK representative asked fellow community members to make demands on the state based on their collective desire to improve the neighborhood.

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In this article, I explore how imaginaries of the river and neighborhoods situated on former marshland shape Semarang's urban and infrastructural practices. I specifically pay attention to river normalization, as a narrative and practice that is legitimized by but also sustaining of these imaginaries. As a collaborative strategy to fight "excess" (of water and unruly social elements, which I explain later), the

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<sup>1</sup> Author's personal notes.

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<sup>3</sup> The term *normalisasi* (normalization) refers to a process of rectification. According to Indonesia's state-issued dictionary, *Kamus Besar Indonesia*, *normalisasi* is the intervention (*tindakan*) by which something is returned to its normal state (*menjadikan biasa kembali*).

normalization of rivers relies on *kampung*-state relations that have accreted around rivers and their management. Normalization mainly allows the state to enact normative views of citizens and urban spaces. However, I also show that it serves residents to overcome social stigmatization and actualize urban rights. Drains and roads in Javanese cities, as John Sullivan has shown, are “foci of communal sentiment: hard evidence of neighborship.”<sup>4</sup> They often confirm the existence and value of community for residents of Indonesian *kampungs*. Increased state attention to (infra)structures of communal life symbolized by normalization programs is thus often welcomed by residents. Yet, normalization can also be a highly disruptive intervention into *kampung* life, destroying homes and leading to displacement. In Kemijen, scores of residents lost riverside property or land when the state carried out normalization. But some residents affected by this upheaval welcomed the continuation of normalization works. How, then, did normalization become an infrastructural commonplace through which the state *and* residents seek to define urban life?

To contextualize civil calls for normalizing the degraded Banger River, this article provides a genealogy of *normalisasi*, the Indonesian term for “river normalization,” in Semarang and beyond. It makes the argument that modern river infrastructure was and continues to be conceptualized as a cure for northern Semarang’s former wetlands. In Semarang, as in many other Javanese cities, river management began in colonial times. The Dutch colonial government gradually drained the wetlands by building canals, but deemed the littoral uninhabitable. After independence, the New Order regime continued the drainage (*drainase*) strategy by deepening and embanking Semarang’s flood canals. These efforts to drain the former wetlands are today often thwarted by tidal flooding (*rob*), which is caused by a combination of land subsidence, sea level rise, and deficient infrastructure, and which affects some inhabited areas daily.<sup>5</sup>

Repeated incidents of *rob* have attracted new attention to coastal neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup> In response, Semarang’s municipality has promised to continue and intensify its normalization efforts in coastal neighborhoods where riverbanks do not yet correspond to the national norm. However, this article does not consider river infrastructure as a neat outcome of national schemes. Instead of considering water infrastructure as a product of the “hydraulic state” (a centralized formation of power and knowledge), I observe how national norms, urban imaginaries, and local histories coalesce. Further, by expanding my analysis of normalization to “incorporate the rich insights of people at the receiving end of governmental schemes,” I avoid attributing to these schemes a “coherence they do not have.”<sup>7</sup> In her study of floods in a poor

<sup>4</sup> John Sullivan, “Kampung and State: The Role of Government in the Development of Urban Community in Yogyakarta,” *Indonesia* 41 (April 1986): 79.

<sup>5</sup> Muh Aris Marfai, “Coastal Flood Management in Semarang, Indonesia,” *Environmental Geology* 55, 7 (2008): 1507–18; see also Lukas Ley, “On the Margins of the Hydrosocial: Quasi-events along a Stagnant River,” *Geoforum*, in press.

<sup>6</sup> This type of flooding has also been observed for Jakarta; see Michael Kimmelman, “Jakarta Is Sinking So Fast, It Could End Up Underwater,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2017, <https://nyti.ms/2DlozjS>, accessed July 13, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Tania Murray Li, *The Will to Improve: Governmentality, Development, and the Practice of Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007), 283.

neighborhood of contemporary Jakarta, for example, Roanne Van Voorst has demonstrated that, in dealing with flood risks, “the state comes to the fore as comprising a variety of institutional actors that are part of both society and the government.”<sup>8</sup> Analytically, it is therefore imperative to see the state and local society not as separate but interpenetrating domains involved in normalization.

In the analytical section below I outline my contribution to the literature on infrastructure, followed by a description of the coastal subdistrict of Kemijen in geographical and sociological terms. I then go back in time to trace out the root causes of Kemijen’s marginalization. I pay attention to (1) the infrastructural repression of the northern wetlands that are portrayed as uninhabitable and disease-ridden by the Dutch (as well as the indigenous political elite) and (2) the criminalization of the coastal marshland based on its heterogeneous demographics and non-normative uses of space. Lastly, I describe infrastructural responses to increasingly frequent and expansive tidal flooding.

### Imaginaries and Infrastructures of Excess

Lisa Björkman has pointed to the relational work that infrastructures do.<sup>9</sup> She argues that their embeddedness in everyday life tends to obscure how infrastructures connect things. In her study of Mumbai, it is disruption of water flow that reveals critical nodes of urban infrastructure, forcing them to come into focus. These events 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.”<sup>10</sup> I find this relational understanding of infrastructures useful for an analysis of normalization. In Kemijen, flooding is often understood as a result of partially realized urban infrastructure. It reveals a hierarchy of urban space and an elite politics that considers northern neighborhoods as unattractive for urban development. Normalization is supposed to extend full urban membership to coastal areas—a recognized and legitimate relation with the city—and root out the bad image of the locale. I consider normalization as a social practice based on cultural values and imaginations of city space. Normalization is supposed to counter excess—of water, population, and immoral behavior. As the North has long been imagined as producing such excess, this imaginary has become a significant driver of transforming Semarang’s wetlands and continues to be constitutive of the city’s socio-spatial form.

According to Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender, the reproduction and naturalizing of the city depends on an interplay of social practices and imaginaries. They consider the imagination “as constitutive of social reality in general and of urban space in particular.”<sup>11</sup> This imagination is stimulated by various social practices—daily errands,

<sup>8</sup> Roanne Van Voorst, “The Right to Aid: Perceptions and Practices of Justice in a Flood-hazard Context in Jakarta, Indonesia,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 15, 4 (2014): 341.

<sup>9</sup> Lisa Björkman, *Pipe Politics, Contested Waters: Embedded Infrastructures of Millennial Mumbai* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa Björkman, *Pipe Politics, Contested Water*, 12.

<sup>11</sup> Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender, eds., *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), xiii.

trading, or weaving social ties—that “function as the media through which certain collective narratives are produced and disseminated.”<sup>12</sup> Urban narratives offer accounts of the city, especially its multiple boundaries, and map dwellers onto city spaces according to their social status, race, profession, or time of arrival in the city. Çınar and Bender add that narratives can also bar dwellers from certain urban spaces. As a scheme of urban planning, normalization depends on evoking the northern Kemijen as an out-of-bounds and primitive place while also reifying normalization as the solution to flooding.

As I pointed out, in Kemijen, it is moments of overflow and infrastructural dysfunction that provide epistemological entryways for the study of normalization and the transformation of Semarang’s coastal neighborhoods. 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*). Sometimes, tidal flooding is called *banjir rob*, where *rob* qualifies the overflow as relating to tidal activity. Taking seriously the ambivalent nature of *banjir* requires that I do not strictly focus on water as a material capable of excess.<sup>13</sup> Northern Semarang, as a whole, is imagined to produce excess—not only in terms of water, but also population, waste, and crime. This imaginary is widespread and does not have its origin at the center of power. Rather, residents throughout Semarang agree that the north is not only threatened by tidal flooding, but is itself a threat to the rest of the city by virtue of its cultural and material unruliness and excessiveness. Accordingly, normalization in Semarang is not just aimed at controlling floods or reducing river pollution, but is supposed to implant a specific idea of urbanity and development in space. The latest round of normalization, for example, impugns the association between urban water and poor residents and criminalizes riverbank dwellers.

This paper investigates the following questions with that analytical perspective in mind: how did the river become an object of governmental intervention? In the context of these interventions, what role did colonial rule play in shaping relations with rivers? How did the narrative of normalization work itself out in Kemijen’s ongoing infrastructural transformation? And how does normalization figure into contemporary residential care-taking of river space?<sup>14</sup>

Brian Larkin has argued, drawing on Nikhil Anand, that state delivery on infrastructure defines forms of citizenship and urban belonging. In Anand’s ethnography of Mumbai’s water infrastructure, he shows that this membership is

<sup>12</sup> Çınar and Bender, *Urban Imaginaries*, xiv.

<sup>13</sup> Jeffrey M. Banister, “Are You Wittfogel or against Him? Geophilosophy, Hydro-Sociality, and the State,” *Geoforum* 57 (November 2014): 205–14.

<sup>14</sup> Much has been written about the Indonesian *kampung*, or urban neighborhood (e.g., see elsewhere in this issue). 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 brilliantly done; see: James T. Siegel, *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Janice C. Newberry, *Back Door Java: State Formation and the Domestic in Working Class Java* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2006); and AbdouMaliq Simone, *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads* (New York: Routledge, 2009). Rather, it is an attempt to understand the development of Semarang’s poor northern neighborhoods against a background of shifting concepts of urban ecology and infrastructure, expressed in river normalization.

enabled by the social and material claims that residents make to the city's water infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> Like Mumbai's unpredictable pipe system from which water needs to be conjured up by means of pressure, normalized river infrastructure requires additional social and material labor to actually work. Residential labor and official representations of normalization as cure produce normalization as "social fact." But in view of alternative uses of enhanced riverbanks and continued littering, it is important to consider normalization's varied social effects. While it gestures to inclusive development, it does not benefit all residents. As such, it masks the fact that the substantive right to a life that is safe from floods is not provided to all northern residents. Instead, it is more a medium through which state and civil actors can influence each other. This is particularly important when we try to understand residents' own continuous efforts at dealing with flooding, as normalized infrastructure doesn't reliably prevent flooding in all places.

Further, I understand residents as subjects involved in responding to and thereby shaping the dynamics of infrastructural arrangements meant to prevent flooding. In Semarang's northern areas, the provision of *kampung* infrastructure is often the result of "strategic misrecognition." The notion of strategic misrecognition, articulated by John Bowen, refers to the role that state-sanctioned, cultural forms of *kampung* organization and labor played in founding and constructing the Indonesian nation-state.<sup>16</sup> Both Bowen and John Sullivan,<sup>17</sup> in their work on *kampung* communities and the role of *gotong-royong* (mutual aid; common goals), have pointed to the strategic use of *gotong-royong* by the state and citizens. I suggest that normalizing (the infrastructure in) the coastal neighborhoods of northern Semarang depends on specific collaborations between the state and communities. Sullivan translates *gotong-royong* as "mutual assistance." *Gotong-royong*, as a local system of reciprocity, embodies "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,"<sup>18</sup> *gotong-royong* endowed the *kampung* also with legitimacy. In turn, the government expected citizens' "voluntary" engagement in and promotion of state projects. *Gotong-royong* labor was built into the state's provision of public infrastructure. Based on this notion of *gotong-royong*, I suggest that it was both residential labor and state projects that allowed and continue to effectuate the transformation of the swamp into a "dry" and recognized, that is, legitimate, space. Misrecognizing forced labor for cultural duty 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 attaining membership

<sup>15</sup> Nikhil Anand, "PRESSURE: The PoliTechnics of Water Supply in Mumbai," *Cultural Anthropology* 26, 4 (November 1, 2011): 545.

<sup>16</sup> John R. Bowen, "On the Political Construction of Tradition: *Gotong Royong* in Indonesia," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 45, 3 (May 1986): 545–61.

<sup>17</sup> John Sullivan, "*Kampung* and State: The Role of Government in the Development of Urban Community in Yogyakarta," *Indonesia* 41 (April 1986): 63–88.

<sup>18</sup> Sullivan, "*Kampung* and State," 85.

in the “imagined community” of the nation.<sup>19</sup> Affective labor 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 northern *kampungs*, but, literally, their geo-ontological foundation. Moreover, research by Sullivan on community building in Yogyakarta showed that infrastructural repair as well as *kampung* beautification efforts not only relieved the state of expenses, but also fostered a sense of community.<sup>20</sup> Today, *gotong-royong* labor, often framed as *kerja bakti* (community service), is coordinated by variously organized actors that facilitate infrastructural repair. I mentioned one of them, the LPMK, in the introductory vignette. Another resident organization is the BKM, whose work I describe below in the context of “improving” the north.

Normalization works in part to contain the threat of *rob* in northern Semarang, but it is equally a medium through which the state and residents communicate and exact services or actualize rights. It further works to spread norms of urban conduct and notions of “right” development. The fortified riverbank (*talut*), a key ingredient of normalized river infrastructure, produces a specific conduct around water and, therefore, neighborhoods and subjects. At the same time, since these infrastructures themselves produce excess, I show that residents’ care of them can draw the state into a new dialogue with citizens whose rights have been especially ignored in the past.

### Kemijen: Improving the North

The Banger River runs through two districts before flowing into the Javanese Sea: East Semarang and North Semarang. Today, administratively speaking, the waterway constitutes a drainage “sub-system” within the city’s wider drainage plan (*rencana induk drainase*).<sup>21</sup> Kemijen is the northernmost subdistrict of East Semarang district, located right on the northeastern border of the city of Semarang. The area, inhabited by about fourteen thousand residents, lies adjacent to an industrial zone featuring an oil refinery and an electric power plant fueled with natural gas. 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. All residents can tell stories about times when monsoon rains and concomitant flash floods caused extensive damage to *kampung* infrastructure and residences, sometimes even drowning people. Monsoon floods, however, also brought welcome movement to the river’s normally languid water flow, flushing excreta and refilling the riverbed with fresh water. Today, seasonal floods still occasion a festive atmosphere: kids play in the canals and adults get together to assess the situation and exchange ideas.

<sup>19</sup> Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>20</sup> John Sullivan, “*Kampung and State: The Role of Government in the Development of Urban Community in Yogyakarta*,” *Indonesia* 41 (April 1986): 63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3351036>.

<sup>21</sup> In the following, I refer to the Banger as a river, as its original physiognomy resembled more a “natural” 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 self-evident.

*Banger* means “rancid” in Javanese; the name refers to the strong smell of the river, which contains toxic substances, such as industrial and domestic waste, but mostly human excreta. Despite the smell and mostly stagnant water, many everyday activities take place by the river—eating, cooking, smoking, gambling, haircutting, playing music and games, selling and buying (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 people’s interactions with the Banger: an unauthorized food shop set up on its southern bank (normalization laws prohibit the erection of shops and houses on Kemijen’s banks). What emerged from many conversations with its owner, Arief, and his wife, Ariel, as well as their customers, was that the river had always been a dumping site. In the absence of reliable waste pick-up services, the river served as a ready conduit for refuse, both 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. Now the river barely flows, which is why waste stays well in sight or starts decaying right where it was dumped. Seen through this lens, acts of littering are instances of good riddance—people relied on the biophysical properties of Banger to absorb their waste. These acts assumed a river that could provide relief. In its current, visibly deteriorated state, however, the river stops being useful to residents. Rather, largely anthropogenic changes of the delta ecology have undermined the river’s man-made functions—irrigation, recreation, and the absorption and transportation of sewage.

Alongside economic growth, Semarang experienced a surge in population beginning around the start of the 1990s, often “at the expense of the existing ecosystems and community systems.”<sup>22</sup> Population growth exacerbated problems with waste and water drainage North Semarang. Historically, the government has prioritized drainage and sewage improvement projects to alleviate the effects of population growth in southern and western areas. This trend is reflected in several major recent or ongoing public-private infrastructure projects, for example, the West Flood Canal and 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 are elite priorities that place northern and eastern areas at the bottom of the government’s to-do list.

Unsurprisingly, residents of Kemijen are concerned about water pollution.<sup>23</sup> They bear the brunt of environmental degradation. Inhabiting a toxic environment not only exposes people to waterborne diseases, but demands inhabitants’ constant attention and energy. Especially in coastal *kampungs*, daily unaccounted-for (invisible) labor is required of residents just to keep the water at bay or flowing at all. For example, some communities pick waste from gutters and organize annual waste-picking parties to

<sup>22</sup> Tjahjono Rahardjo, “The Semarang Environmental Agenda: A Stimulus to Targeted Capacity Building among the Stakeholders,” *Habitat International* 24, 4 (2000): 444.

<sup>23</sup> Over the course of my research I realized that the local population bore a responsibility for the river’s pollution: everybody used the river as a dump, in more or less visible ways. Even though some people abstained from publicly throwing waste into the river, preferring to use designated garbage disposal sites, all inhabitants channeled their wastewater into the river; boys and men smoking on the riverbank flicked their cigarettes into the river; and women dumped food leavings and scraps and dishwater into the river. Even respectable neighborhood leaders and important civic figures contributed to river pollution, even though they liked to scold poorer residents for littering.

permit unobstructed water flow. Other forms of invisible labor are house cleaning and personal-hygiene activities after minor floods. Residents are further caught in a kind of poverty trap as they have to pay the high cost of raising their homes' foundations to prevent water damage during floods. People call this predictable, circular relationship with environmental and infrastructural risk "paying a rent to nature." While some residents raise (parts of) their houses annually, others try to adjust floor levels at least every five years.

When I spoke with people during my fieldwork in Semarang about the current state of Kemijen, especially the effects of tidal flooding, they did complain about regular flooding of streets and houses caused by leaky riverbanks, but they also said that conditions had markedly improved in the last twenty years or so—things were looking up at last. At first, this optimism, also evident in the speeches related above, deeply confused me, for two reasons. First, in national and regional newspapers, reporters and interviewed politicians were painting the floodplain's future in increasingly gloomy tones.<sup>24</sup> Were my interlocutors not concerned about land subsidence and the concomitant increase in tidal flooding events? Second, my contacts at Semarang's urban-planning department, or Bappeda (Badan Perencanaan Pembangunan Daerah), called the area I had chosen to study extremely poor and a "problem zone." Reports determined the area was backwards and degraded. Hearing people speak positively about progress in the same area made me wonder what could have caused such optimism. I knew better than to assume that people were unaware of flood risks and health hazards. After all, most families residing in North Semarang had defied floods for decades. Listening more carefully, I found out that people were referring to other parameters of improvement—low criminality and infrastructural development. Over the years, access to medical and social services had improved; state subsidies and aid projects flowed to the area; and people began to feel safer. Local organizations credited with driving local improvement were the BKM (Badan Keswadayaan Masyarakat), which can independently carry out repairs of roads and riverside infrastructure; the LPMK (Lembaga Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Kelurahan), which is charged with facilitating exchange between the government and local residents to relay bottom-up incentives (*aspirasi*); and members of neighborhood communities, or RW (Rukun Warga), who either worked for the above-mentioned organizations or offered regular infrastructural maintenance through *gotong-royong* activities, such as sweeping, cleaning, and monitoring.

This imaginary of improvement was, however, not inclusive. North Semarang was considered a hiding place for gangsters (*preman*), and, according to many interlocutors, a place where "dangerous" (*bahaya*) and "violent" (*keras*) people were still believed to exist, but who lived in pockets and could be kept in check. For instance, people living in downstream neighborhoods contended that "dangerous" people lived even further downstream. Such accusations drew a rather diffuse image of the area, one that contained violence and unrefined manners, but was undergoing a positive shift. In that shift, negative characteristics were either erased or displaced northwards. I came to understand that the imaginary of development often correlated with the extent of

<sup>24</sup> Jonatan A. Lassa, "Semarang Joins the Sinking City Network," *Jakarta Post*, October 6, 2012, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/10/06/semarang-joins-sinking-cities-network.html>, accessed July 16, 2018.

normalization: the “wild” (*liar*)<sup>25</sup> communities of the north lived on grounds that were fast to sink and flooded regularly, because they had not been normalized yet. I will now show that the origin of this imaginary can be traced back to the colonial era, when the northern wetlands were incorporated into the city’s territory.

### The “Kampung Question”: Semarang’s Wetlands in Colonial Times

Industrialization between 1900 and 1930 brought “problems” of indigenous welfare and control to the forefront of colonial discourse,<sup>26</sup> which resulted in Semarang’s coastal *kampungs* being disparaged and stigmatized. Indigenous coastal dwellers were shunned as “other” relative to modernity and urban order, and could only be modernized and saved by destroying their ties with the swamp. According to Rodney Giblett, “in the patriarchal Western cultural tradition, wetlands have been associated with death and disease, the monstrous and the melancholic, if not the downright mad.”<sup>27</sup> The typical response to these horrors and threats posed by swamps and marshes has been “simple and decisive: dredge, drain, or fill, and so ‘reclaim’ them.” Therefore, Giblett quips, a critical history of wetlands could carry the title “Discipline and Drain.”<sup>28</sup>

A critical history of Semarang’s normalization can show us what kinds of relations with nature and infrastructure were desired in colonial times. Understanding this web of spatial and cultural relations, I argue, helps appreciate how it continues to inform contemporary interventions into the (social) environment and *kampung*-water relations. To advance such understanding, next I draw together colonial (mis)representations that variably posit *kampungs* and their inhabitants as a source of danger or victims of colonial modernity and capitalism, but always as the counterpoint to a desired urban future. Imperatives of capitalist development as well as the racial-hygienic concerns of the European population played crucial roles in attempts at undoing and repressing the wetland *kampung* and its “unmodern” relations with urban water.

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. When Semarang’s burgeoning port businesses started attracting impoverished peasants from the rural inland and other parts of Indonesia, the living spaces of the indigenous workforce became 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.”<sup>29</sup> Ultimately, these labor migrants started populating vacant space outside of the city’s primary network of streets and rivers. Along drains and rivers, they cultivated marshland to generate additional income. The accompanying map shows this swampland, which further contained fishponds and

<sup>25</sup> Neighborhoods are called “wild” if they are located on land that is not officially designated for residential purposes.

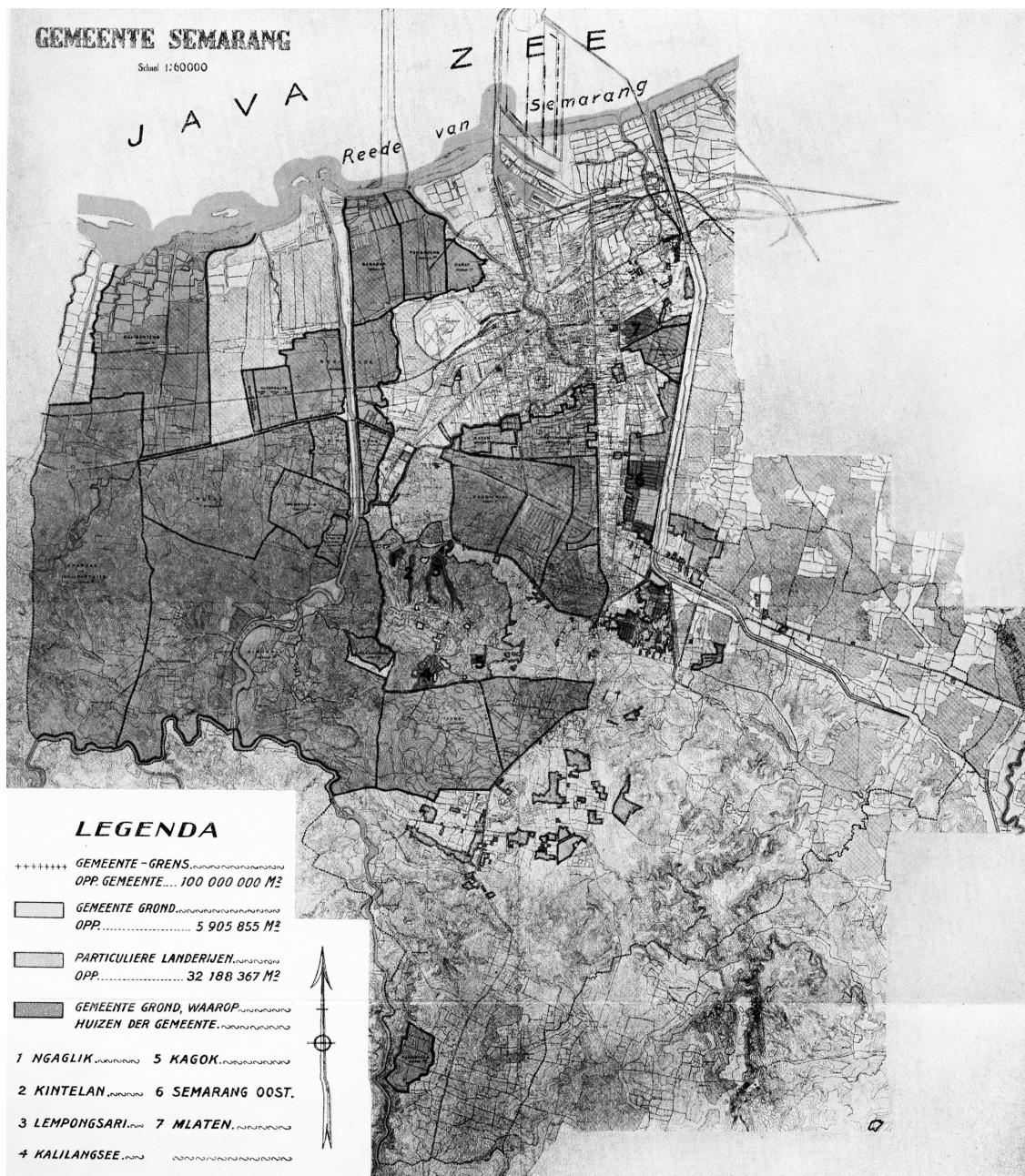
<sup>26</sup> Wertheim and The Siauw Giap, “Social Change in Java.”

<sup>27</sup> Rodney James Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), 3. My thanks to Jamie Linton for drawing my attention to this work.

<sup>28</sup> Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands*.

<sup>29</sup> Joost Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association: H. F. Tillema, Semarang, and the Construction of Colonial Modernity,” in *Indonesian Town Revisited*, ed. Peter Nas (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2002), 320.

stretched from the shoreline to the railway (*spoorweg*). Giblett argues that wetlands are “an anomaly in a classificatory order predicated on a hard and fast distinction between land and water, time and space.”<sup>30</sup> This representational classification is found in Dutch



The land between the shoreline and railway was once swampy and home to fishponds.

Source: Flierenga, G. De zorg voor de volkshuisvesting in de stadsgemeenten in Nederlansch Oost Indië in het bijzonder in Semarang (Rotterdam: Rotterdamsche Boek- en Kunstdrukkerij, 1930)

<sup>30</sup> Giblett, *Postmodern Wetlands*, 4.

colonial maps, which pictured in opposition the clear lines of roads, channels, and ownership with the unwieldy conditions of the coastal wetlands. For settlers, living in this incipient urban space was a trade-off: proximity to Dutch drainage infrastructure allowed for irrigation of agricultural plots but also exposed *kampung* residents to waterborne diseases and regular flooding.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, administrators of colonial urban centers, such as Semarang, worried increasingly about the “squalid living conditions of the indigenous people within the cities.”<sup>31</sup> 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”?<sup>32</sup> Especially, 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 indigenous subjects. The 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 civilizations perceived as weaker. In view of the impoverished indigenous population living in *kampungs*, the Dutch government decided that money had to be found for their improvement. Notably, members of Semarang’s colonial elite were at the time developing new sensibilities to the incongruences of colonial modernity, promoting an “enlightened” style of urban governance.<sup>33</sup> The entrepreneurial and reformist spirit of Dutch residents new to the colony 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 justification for a “dramatic intensification of colonial intervention into native life.”<sup>34</sup> The decentralization of the colonial apparatus further allowed for a “new conception of the duties of the state.”<sup>35</sup> The principle of indirect rule and minimal intervention that characterized the Liberal Period was replaced by a more direct and entrepreneurial approach of municipalities. In combination, the questions of how to address the problem of the impoverished underclass and in whose authority such acts lied morphed into the “Kampung Question.”

As a Dutch study argued, the Kampung Question was how to make the *kampung* population become “even with the times.” As a Dutch study argued, it would, above all, necessitate eliminating “the slum dwellings situated in the northern, marshy district of Semarang.”<sup>36</sup> This intervention would destroy people’s ties with the unhealthy swamp. In view “of any northward development [...] facing an unhealthy swamp, [...] the municipality agreed to develop the city towards the hilly area in the

<sup>31</sup> James L. Cobban, “Uncontrolled Urban Settlement: The Kampong Question in Semarang (1905–1940),” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 130, 4 (1974): 407.

<sup>32</sup> Cobban, “Uncontrolled Urban Settlement,” 403.

<sup>33</sup> Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association,” 322.

<sup>34</sup> Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association,” 323.

<sup>35</sup> Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association,” 327.

<sup>36</sup> Wertheim and The Siauw Giap, “Social Change in Java,” 232–33.

South.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, when the municipality could not find the money for the eradication of dwellings in Semarang’s marshland, the area became the object of unprecedented scientific investigation, curiosity, and knowledge production that tried to define problems and formulate improvement strategies. The Dutch architect J. J. Rückert noted that elementary steps towards improvement would require new “housing statistics, proper maps, legislation, [and] financial possibilities.”<sup>38</sup> Rückert also warned that hands-on maintenance would be required after improvements had been carried out. Semarang’s city council began to envision 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.”<sup>39</sup> Inspections became more regular, also in response to plagues that affected colonial cities, such as Deli (1905), Malang (1911), and, five years later, Semarang (1916).<sup>40</sup>

Politically engaged residents of Semarang, like the apothecary and businessman Henry Tillema or Dutch architect Thomas Karsten, played important roles in defining spatial improvement strategies.<sup>41</sup> Tillema and Karsten argued for a gradual integration of “native” quarters into the body of the city.<sup>42</sup> Although the option of eliminating the slums and relocating the people was never off the table, it was generally judged too expensive, hence unrealistic for municipalities.<sup>43</sup> Tillema, who called himself an “engineer of health and hygienist,” drew attention to the problem of water.<sup>44</sup> He dreamed of a sanitized and well-regulated colony that would improve the lives of the European and indigenous population. 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 *riolering*: sewage),<sup>45</sup> published in 1911, he urged the introduction of a general sewage 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.”<sup>46</sup> But the districts of the Javanese population were

<sup>37</sup> Pratiwo, “The City Planning of Semarang 1900–1970,” First International Urban Conference, Surabaya, 2004, [http://www.art-in-society.de/AS6/Pratiwo/Pratiwo\(1a\).shtml](http://www.art-in-society.de/AS6/Pratiwo/Pratiwo(1a).shtml), accessed June 29, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> P. K. M. van Roosmalen, “For Kota and Kampong: The Emergence of Town Planning as a Discipline,” in *For Profit and Prosperity: The Contribution Made by Dutch Engineers to Public Works in Indonesia*, ed. Wim Ravenstein and Jan Kop (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2008), 297.

<sup>39</sup> Roosmalen, “For Kota and Kampong,” 297.

<sup>40</sup> The use of chemicals around wells is a potent example of Dutch anxieties around contamination; officials feared that dangerous particles could slip through unseen cracks in this “modern” artesian system.

<sup>41</sup> Their publications and work have received intensive and commendable scholarly scrutiny; see, for example, Joost Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association: H. F. Tillema, Semarang, and the Construction of Colonial Modernity,” in *Indonesian Town Revisited*, ed. Peter Nas (Münster: LIT Verlag, and Singapore: ISEAS, 2002), 319–47; and Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Joost Coté, “Thomas Karsten’s Indonesia: Modernity and the End of Europe, 1914–1945,” *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde* 170, 1 (2014): 66–98.

<sup>43</sup> Visions for moving the coastal population to the sparsely inhabited highland, first brought up by the Dutch lawyer van Deventer, were entertained for a long time but eventually dropped; see Wertheim and The Siauw Giap, “Social Change in Java.”

<sup>44</sup> Rudolf Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land: Technology and Nationalism in a Colony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 56–57.

<sup>45</sup> H. F. Tillema, *Rioliana* (Semarang: n.a., 1911).

<sup>46</sup> Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association,” 331.

unsuited for the construction of such infrastructure, according to him. Therefore, “adequate urban planning was essential and had to be based on hygiene considerations.”<sup>47</sup> The wetlands were judged unsuited for adequate urban development. Most of Dutch interventions aimed at opening up the *kampung*—by esthetic and infrastructural means. 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 (ac)countable. The obsession with the visibility and mobility (and perhaps fluidity?) of the “native” meant that the Dutch put themselves increasingly in charge of natives’ most private affairs. For instance, *kampung* inspections that took stock of native household-keeping were “undertaken in all parts of the city including the *kampungs*.<sup>48</sup>

Despite virtuous plans and technological interventions, modern water infrastructure remained exclusive to the Dutch in Indonesia.<sup>49</sup> The differential distribution of access to potable water translated into distinct practices of hygiene and water consumption. As Mrázek pointed out, “the water ordering, in dreams, plans, and actuality, in the Indies—in a special sense—worked,” as the “dirty” world of indigenous neighborhoods formed the contrast to European water sophistication.<sup>50</sup>

Differentiation forms the first principle of the colonial order as well as development.<sup>51</sup> As I showed, the transformation of northern Semarang was based on labeling native subjects as intrinsically different or “other.” Especially, coastal *kampung* residents were framed as inhabiting deteriorated and toxic lifeworlds and in need of modernization. Next, I show how this discursive framing of wetland *kampungs* and its inhabitants forms a thread that runs through Indonesia’s development and subsequent intervention plans, and continues to shape *kampung*-state relations.

### Improving a Dark Area—(Post)Colonial Imaginaries and Semarang’s North

Colonial imaginaries and conceptions of subjects inhabiting the marshy areas of Semarang still have a huge influence over contemporary ideas of Semarang’s north. About a century ago, Dutch chemist and urban visionary Tilemma called the northern coastal wetlands “the darkest Semarang.” Today, Semarang’s floodplain is still referred to as a “black” area (*daerah hitam*), a place that emanates danger. People consider Semarang’s north as filthy (*kumuh*), as does the government in reports. Such reports generally resonate with negative images of people living in coastal regions (*daerah*

<sup>47</sup> Coté, “Towards an Architecture of Association,” 331.

<sup>48</sup> Mrázek 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 and adding them to a comprehensive register, “the natives could be made to stand still”; see Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Michelle Kooy and Karen Bakker, “Technologies of Government: Constituting Subjectivities, Spaces, and Infrastructures in Colonial and Contemporary Jakarta: Technologies of Government in Colonial and Contemporary Jakarta,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 32, 2 (June 2008): 375–91.

<sup>50</sup> Mrázek, *Engineers of Happy Land*, 57.

<sup>51</sup> James Ferguson, “Anthropology and Its Evil Twin: ‘Development’ in the Constitution of a Discipline,” in *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Randall Packard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 150–75.

*pesisir). Hitam* (black) also refers to the putatively darker complexion of coastal residents' skin. In this section, I query the roots of these attributes and ask why Semarang's marshy areas remained firmly equated with moral and social decline, and how local imaginaries of this moral geography map onto suggested transformations of the river.

Although Indonesia's *kampungs* underwent a symbolic reevaluation after independence, Semarang's coastal *kampungs* continued to represent a "dark" realm. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president, held that the *kampung* was an important anchor for the working class and its patriotic virtues, a place from where Indonesian nationalism derived legitimacy. According to state propaganda, *kampungs* sheltered the *rakyat*—the unified mass of wage-workers in whose name the Indonesian state was proclaimed.<sup>52</sup> But when Sukarno's influence dwindled and Suharto's authoritarian military regime eventually came to power, the *kampung* once again elicited fear among the elite. 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, *kampungs* became the stage of deathly violence against assumed "criminals." The oppressive regime behind Indonesia's New Order wanted to eliminate subjects who once agitated against the Dutch, to curb their revolutionary power. Thus, while former political discourse equated the *rakyat* with the nation, now members of this class, including their livelihoods and habitats, were turned into objects of public suspicion. The point of view that saw the *kampung* as the cause of national regress and criminality seemed alive and well.<sup>53</sup>

In conversations with me, residents of Kemijen remembered this period as "fearful" and "dark." Blacklists circulated and people were afraid. One of my research participants, Rendy, still considers the environment of the north as morally toxic. When Rendy, who is coordinator of the BKM (Badan Keswadayaan Masyarakat, Center for Local Empowerment), which oversees many infrastructural projects in Kemijen, spoke about his personal development, he deplored the area's negative effects on his character: "my environment wasn't right" (*lingkungan saya tidak benar*). Today, Rendy oversees the implementation of development programs. He thinks that people in his *kampung* have changed, which shows that people can be "persuaded and inspired" (*bisa diajak, jadi terinspirasi*). They want to follow the lead of enlightened residents like him. While Rendy thinks that the area is undergoing positive change, the "bad environment" still exists in certain parts of the subdistrict, according to him. Sustaining the wind of change hinges on mobilizing and inspiring residents. And it has to do with attracting infrastructural investments to Kemijen.

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<sup>52</sup> Siegel pointed out that Sukarno amalgamated the *rakyat* and the state in an attempt to "limit their social revolutionary impulses" and consolidate his power; see James T. Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta: Counter-revolution Today* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

<sup>53</sup> 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 *kampung*. Like these marginal spaces, the criminal was "always on the edge of Indonesian society, but never outside it." According to Siegel, the criminal element returned "at a time when the division between classes has become increasingly marked by disparities in material conditions while explicit definitions of those who have and those who do not have are suppressed." See Siegel, *A New Criminal Type in Jakarta*, 4.

Another resident, named Marsudi, traced his decision to return to Kemijen to infrastructural transformations. In the 1990s, the family decided to move to a different part of town, fearful that their oldest son would become like the many rowdies and gangsters who, as they thought, roamed the neighborhood at night.

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. [...] People living here, they're in for it. We always say, we're happy anyways [*senang sama saja*].

Despite continuing flooding, the family decided to return to their old neighborhood a few years ago. The situation had markedly improved, Marsudi informed me; he observed that crime rates had 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 capable of controlling [through community policing] 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 their own responsibility for handling crime and creating safer streets—not the government's. However, he noted that material transformations played a central role in facilitating neighborly 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. Previously, we would lose track of him down there. The sight was hindered by houses and the public toilet building [*semacam MCK*].

Marsudi depicts the river as a magnet for criminals. Control of this space was made possible by material changes of the neighborhood in the form of river works. Infrastructural changes are credited with returning authority to the community. *Normalisasi* played a major role in bringing this kind of change to the area and transforming the “darkest” part of Semarang into a place that both residents and the municipality believe has development potential.

### **“Normalisasi”—Sterilizing the *Kampung***

The state intervention known as *normalisasi* shaped the wetlands of northeast Semarang socially, politically, and ecologically. As a top-down physical intervention into the *kampung* realm, normalization effectively disrupts people's lives, entailing evictions and losses of household-owned land. Today, however, the notion of normalization as necessary for progress is upheld by the government and many residents alike. Normalization took hold, so to say, and is generally expected to cause progressive change. Moreover, through normalization programs, citizens can “speak” to the state and exact their citizenship rights. In a sense, they claim a kind of right to

the city, counteracting alienation, as normalization is expected to bring development to this neglected area.

Indonesian is a language “thick” with technocratic terms.<sup>54</sup> *Normalisasi* certainly is such a technocratic term. Yet, the salience of *normalisasi* in bureaucratic, political, and local discourse suggests that the term has been embraced without irony. In fact, *normalisasi* has strong moral-esthetic resonances. For example, Semarang’s West Flood Canal is often referred to as pristine, clean, and prosperous, as a result of being completely “normalized.” As mentioned above, these imagined benefits of river normalization underline the poetics of infrastructure—*normalisasi* carries specific ideas of well-being and urban belonging.

River normalization, or *normalisasi sungai*, began in 1985 in Kemijen. While this state program purportedly aimed at reducing floods and river pollution, it notably coincided with regulatory measures taken by the Suharto regime since the early 1970s to bring the *kampung* within the purview of the state. These measures were further intensified in the 1980s, a “watershed period in both economic and political terms.”<sup>55</sup> River normalization had lasting spatial effects on Kemijen and 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 so-called *jalan inspeksi* (inspection road) was to introduce more visibility into the densely inhabited riverside *kampungs*. Normalization thus continued the formalization and forms of land use begun in colonial times. Both technological intervention and the proper extension of a regulatory framework to the *kampung* were supposed to introduce a different set of human relations with urban rivers. The perceived parasitic influence of *kampung* dwellers on modern infrastructure had to be curbed, by creating a proper distance between the river and residents and installing a new regime of environmental conduct.

In the following quote, my correspondent Marsudi mentions the manifold purposes of the river before it was embanked in 1985:

Initially, there was no [manmade] 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* (river tamarind), 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 livelihood. But Marsudi also refers to the riverbank as a space of concealment: here, in between trees and shrubs, “criminals” could become literally invisible and evade the police. This ambiguous nature of riverbanks, defying the panoptic surveillance of the state, was a thorn in the side of the Suharto regime. Thus, river normalization could be seen as “part of the

<sup>54</sup> Ariel Heryanto and Nancy Lutz, “The Development of ‘Development,’” *Indonesia* 46 (October 1988): 23.

<sup>55</sup> Joshua Barker, “State of Fear: Controlling the Criminal Contagion in Suharto’s New Order,” *Indonesia* 66 (October 1998): 10.

effort to sterilize the public space from any revolutionary potential amongst the masses.”<sup>56</sup> Whereas public space had been the theater of mass mobilizations under 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.<sup>57</sup> Joshua Barker argued that the “criminal specter” is a “symptom of a structurally weakened state (and society) and [...] a convenient excuse for actions aimed at trying to overcome this weakness.”<sup>58</sup> Another well-known example of counterrevolutionary measures is the state-sanctioned program NKK (Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus, Normalization of Campus Life). Implemented in 1978, NKK discouraged students from “any involvement in so-called *politik praktis* (practical politics).”<sup>59</sup> Based on these motivations for normalization, river normalization has to be seen as an effort to deter people from settling along rivers, as they 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 outcasts due to their ambiguous social status, were (and still are<sup>60</sup>) often blamed for flooding and other river-related problems. While municipal governments argued that normalization was required to achieve proper sanitation standards, they implicitly outlawed specific riverbank uses unrelated to hygiene. Ongoing criminalization of riverbank activities explains why Kemijen residents are ambivalent about normalization. They are saddened by the loss of joyful riverside bustle and lush riverbank vegetation, but also welcome riverbanks that are clear of undesirable subjects, especially gangsters.

Many residents nostalgically remember a clean river, contrasting it with a present-day, strongly degraded environment. But they rarely if ever blame pollution on normalization, which arguably played a significant role in exacerbating the river’s degradation, inasmuch as widening and deepening the river channel slowed water flow towards the sea. In fact, the deeper riverbed made the river vulnerable to ocean-water intrusion. This was compounded by land subsidence due to rapid population growth between 1971 and 1980. Coastal neighborhoods, like Kemijen, quickly built up, which accelerated soil solidification and intensified groundwater extraction—itself a major factor in land subsidence. People generally hold that, in the past, flooding was tolerable. They reminisced that when it stopped raining, the flooding also stopped. Normalization was supposed to improve drainage by connecting the Banger with the ocean. As Marsudi remembers, “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 people’s homes.” A local labor activist, Adin, also noticed that the rerouting of Banger River led to more

<sup>56</sup> Manneke Budiman, “New Enemy of the State: Youth in Post-New Order Indonesia,” in *YOUTH: Future Agents of Change or Guardians of Establishment* (Singapore: Panorama Insights into Asian and European Affairs, 2012), 51.

<sup>57</sup> Abidin Kusno, *Beyond the Postcolonial: Architecture, Urban Planning, and Political Cultures in Indonesia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> Barker, “State of Fear,” 10.

<sup>59</sup> Budiman, “New Enemy of the State,” 52.

<sup>60</sup> Roanne van Voorst and Jörgen Hellman, “One Risk Replaces Another,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 43, 6 (2015): 786–810.

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 flooding, most residents speculated that the central Agency for Public Works (*Dinas Pekerjaan Umum*) acted solely in the interest of port-area businesses. Bending (*pembelokan*) the Banger allowed officials to drain marshy land that is now used by the city's electric power plant. Previously, the swamp functioned as the mainland's protective belt from tidal waves. Given these problems that were, to say the least, exacerbated by normalization—destroyed marshlands and flooding—it is surprising that people still believe in normalization as a necessary intervention. Neither did normalization curb environmental pollution by reducing downstream residents' harmful behavior. Rather, it reinforced the general perception that coastal residents need governmental supervision and are helpless without it.

Implementing *normalisasi* took a long time, as scores of residents I spoke to remembered it. Many of those living along the river had to be resettled, with most of the landowners refusing to accept housing elsewhere in the city. Instead, they claimed monetary compensation (*ganti rugi*) with the intent of buying property in the area. The project was eventually terminated, several years behind schedule, in 1992. The remaining riverbank dwellings suggest that normalization never achieved its goal and remains an unfinished process. Rumors circulate that the government caved in to resistance from *preman* (gangsters). Others believe that government employees embezzled project funds and used the *preman* story as a cover-up for running out of money. In other words, river normalization neither entirely rooted out fear and the specter of criminality nor achieved public monopoly over that urban space. Nowadays, the *jalan inspeksi* (inspection road) is one of Kemijen's liveliest spaces. It is mainly policed by local community members who enforce traffic regulations and norms of conduct (for instance, women are discouraged from walking alone after nightfall, and alcohol and drug use is prohibited). At the same time, in many neighborhoods the *jalan inspeksi* has been appropriated, and some spaces were reclaimed by residents not long after the riverbanks were cleared and widened. For instance, former landowners laid claim to parcels (mostly with the permission of local leaders, who expect an informal tax in return) and built wooden structures that serve as tea shops or hangouts. Further, the riverbank again features dwellings built by undocumented residents. Building makeshift or somewhat-permanent houses on the riverbank is considered illegal, but often tolerated by the subdistrict government and residents. Yet, riverbank dwellers are discursively framed as disturbing a harmonious coexistence with the water.

What normalization did achieve was to reaffirm the north's dominant image as being deviant and backward. Therefore, the local administration, in cooperation with residents, is urging the government to go forward with its plans, as demonstrated in the opening vignette. The recent phenomenon of tidal flooding underscores this request and conveniently lends the agenda of *normalisasi* new urgency. In fact, Semarang's Spatial Plan (Rencana Tata Ruang Wilayah, RTRW) envisions the normalization of all urban rivers (*aliran sungai di seluruh kota*). Its five-year development plan for 2010–15 (Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Daerah, RPJMD, or Local Mid-term Development Plan) defines river normalization as a measure to increase the capacity of the city's drainage system as well as prevent flooding. According to

Semarang's 2014 work agenda (Rencana Kerja Pembangunan Daerah, RKPD), normalization serves the purpose of flood control (*pengendalian banjir dan rob*), which is the government's second highest priority after poverty reduction. The government agencies responsible for river normalization are PSDA and ESDM (Pengelolaan Sumber Daya Air and Energi Sumber Daya Mineral). They are supposed to carry out such tasks as the construction of drainage canals and tunnels, and the operation and maintenance of drainage infrastructure. Government interest in normalization is likely to be maintained.

Daniel Mains points to a paradoxical relationship of citizens to public infrastructural projects in Ethiopia. While residents of Jimma viewed hydroelectric projects with suspicion, "there was a great deal of faith in the potential for roads to bring economic development."<sup>61</sup> Similarly, while the construction of water infrastructure, such as pumping houses, retentions basins, or polders, is viewed with suspicion in Kemijen, normalization is believed to be a means of bringing economic development and prosperity to the area. Larkin has argued that dysfunction can actualize a relationship between the state and society.<sup>62</sup> If a floodgate does not work, a pumping house remains unmanned, or a riverbank collapses, a whole range of feelings, such as frustration and nostalgia, can arise that allow for a reevaluation of state competence. As such, the failure of infrastructures and the necessary fixes it entails can allow for a "new esthetic experience of the present."<sup>63</sup> Residents may, in turn, decide to reclaim the deadweight of systems that have become obsolete and create alternative infrastructural arrangements, thus reclaiming autonomy from the state. In Kemijen, residents see a chance of creating new relationships with the state that, historically, as I showed above, have been weak or absent. Posing as victims of *rob* who welcome normalization and actively maintain state infrastructures, residents force the government to live up to its formal commitment to communities. While normalization is a disruptive intervention fraught with corruption and potential delays, most residents consider alienation from the state and its organs of power a worse fate. As I showed, this fear of alienation is related to a longstanding trend of infrastructurally delaying a connection of the coastal north to the rest of the city based on imaginaries of development that removed Kemijen from the map of progress.

### Polders—Old Wine in New Bottles

A 2012 *Jakarta Post* article 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."<sup>64</sup> Based on scientific evidence, such as IPCC (UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports and vulnerability assessments conducted by foreign experts, Semarang's government is poised to undertake a range of infrastructural projects that aim to protect coastal industries and neighborhoods from floods. The

<sup>61</sup> Daniel Mains, "Blackouts and Progress: Privatization, Infrastructure, and a Developmentalist State in Jimma, Ethiopia," *Cultural Anthropology* 27, 1 (February 2012): 3–27.

<sup>62</sup> Brian Larkin, "Generator Life" (unpublished paper, University of Toronto, October 21, 2016).

<sup>63</sup> Larkin, "Generator Life."

<sup>64</sup> Lassa, "Semarang Joins the 'Sinking Cities Network.'"

plans foresee the fortification of the coastline by installing breakwaters off the coast and building a seawall along the shore. Another step in this process is the closure of river outlets to stave off tidal intrusion. The city has received funding from international organizations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, whose 100 Resilient Cities program encourages policy reforms to adapt to environmental challenges. In fact, Semarang's drainage policy shows that the city is one of the first Indonesian cities to pay close attention to potential future environmental threats, such as climate change.

At the moment, the municipality pays external experts to monitor rivers' absorptive capacities and simulate flooding. One of its trusted advisors, whom I interviewed, strongly suggests implementing multiple polders (closed hydrological systems) to fully regulate water flux and prevent the intrusion of ocean water into the littoral. This advisor and other engineers often referred to closing these waterways as "killing" them (*mematikan*). Government fixers<sup>65</sup> also used this phrase when informing (*sosialisasi*) neighborhood dwellers of the government's plans. The scope of these interventions is nothing less than monumental, very much like the utopian (and hitherto unachieved) dream of river normalization. Incrementally, according to this imaginary, the shore will be fortified and rivers running through inhabited or industrial areas will be dammed and embanked. Importantly, such infrastructural changes are supposed to coincide with adjustments in the social and cultural spheres of floodplain communities: engineering water flow through polders will require educating riverside dwellers so that they learn to treat rivers as delicate parts of an organic system.

Recently, Semarang's Bappeda crafted a new drainage bylaw that works as a blueprint for building a coherent and integral drainage system in which residents play a significant role. It takes into consideration potential environmental challenges, such as land subsidence and rising sea levels, but not how they affect residents. The technical details of this bylaw are so tedious that Bappeda has to outsource a lot of its work to consultants. Scaling the grand vision to the local level, these external experts help the agency envision the drainage system with all its different parts (*bagian*). For example, the drainage law delineates the 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 encouraged to assist government agencies, such as the water agency PSDA, in operating and supervising drainage infrastructure. The role of civil society is further specified in paragraph 59, where 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*).<sup>66</sup> In a conversation with a low-ranking member of Bappeda, I learned that this section was an important change to the previous drainage policy. It was considered so new that agency officials were finding it difficult to imagine the way in which citizens would

<sup>65</sup> Fixers are often residents who work as intermediaries between the government and the *kampung* population.

<sup>66</sup> "Rencana Induk Sistem Drainase Kota Semarang Tahun 2011–2031," Walikota Semarang.

actually cooperate with the government. It would have to be specified at a later stage through another bylaw (*perwal*).

Although incomplete and fairly idealistic, the new drainage law publicly was heralded as remarkable and prestigious. Semarang was considered the first Indonesian city to adopt such participatory measures, in line with developed countries, such as the Netherlands. While the plan has not yet been realized, conjuring a specific future has already translated into concrete changes in the urban fabric. Semarang's government started operating the much-awaited Polder Banger in 2017. Suffice it to say that this pilot project is expected to epitomize a novel form of association between government and society. Improvising on the new regulatory framework created by Bappeda, the polder project was able to assemble diverse actors, including residents, and became a model for replication projects (e.g., in the coastal city Pekalongan). It is difficult to say at the moment whether these projects will end up introducing real change. However, it clearly plays on the ideology of normalization. A flyer created by the water authority that governs the polder, BPP SIMA (Badan Pengelola Polder Banger Schieland Semarang), informs residents that they should, "as citizens of East Semarang, help support the operation of the polder's pump by keeping the Banger area clean and by cleaning the surrounding drainage channels and by making sure to not litter, especially not into the river."<sup>67</sup>

The polder project jibes well with *normalisasi*. According to Semarang's water agency, damming major urban rivers and engineering stable water levels is the key to maintaining the water capacity of Semarang's delta. In an interview with a water engineer, I learned that, historically, the drainage system had been able to "contain" (*mampu menampung*) water. Now, population growth, particularly in socioeconomically weak areas, added significant amounts of discharge to the river's water debit while reducing catchment areas. Further, unrestrained river pollution diminished the original water-holding capacity of rivers.

The Semarang government's ongoing plans suggest that its dreams of taming the northeast waterscape are still just that, a dream. While political conditions have shifted, the plans nevertheless stem from concerns that are often still the same as in colonial times. Enrolling the community in new programs that abide by the principle of normalization echoes well-rehearsed arguments that patronize and pathologize northern residents, and see in the north's polluted and degraded environment the reasons for residents' moral and environmental misconduct. The phrase "killing the river," then, refers to a precise incision into the body of the *kampung*. Polders are a new form of treatment, while the pathology hasn't changed.

## Epilogue

In colonial times, Semarang's city council aimed at eradicating and then modernizing Semarang's northern *kampungs*, laying the discursive groundwork for subsequent technological interventions called normalization. Today, it is through the more-participatory management of water infrastructure that the parasitic relationship between coastal *kampungs* and the city's drainage system is supposed to come undone.

<sup>67</sup> BPP SIMA, "Polder Banger Bagaimana Kabarmu?" September 2016.

*Rob*, as a form of excess, reveals the infrastructural processes and imaginaries underpinning the constitution of coastal *kampungs*. This paper speaks to the specific imaginary of north-coast *kampungs* and how they informed infrastructural dreams and projects in colonial and postcolonial times. One century after Semarang's colonial government tried to formalize and morally undergird the expansion of its colonial rule into the littoral's dicey *kampungs*, Semarang's swamp still requires repressing and taming, according to this imaginary.

Furthermore, the findings discussed here suggest that both the government and the local population perceive that development in the north is unfinished. I outlined two possible reasons for this sense of incompleteness. First, residents deplore regular flooding and turn paternalism and state anxieties of excess into catalysts driving the infrastructural improvement of the area, in which some residents, such as Rendy, find an active role. Second, the government strives to contain potentialities—trickles of illegal settlers, criminals, and polluted water that could turn into floods (*banjir*) of sorts. Conjuring up a commitment to development and environmental care has become a main interface through which inhabitants and the government set the terms of urban change through normalization.

Based on this, I suggest that, instead of being a new approach to flooding, “killing the river” is an iteration of normalization that relies on pathologizing coastal *kampungs*. While the impending danger of climate-change-related environmental impacts seems to play into the hands of the state in that it provides grounds for the use of disciplinary force, residents see in normalization an opportunity of actualizing rights to infrastructural improvement and development.

To scholars of contemporary Indonesia, especially those concerned with the ecological cataclysms of climate change, normalization should be a central issue. Normalization, as an ideological and socio-material construct, provides important clues to state-citizen relations in Indonesia. Being aware of the social and cultural context of flood prevention is crucial, given the ecological problems that Indonesia's coastal cities are dealing with and will face in the not-so-distant future. This article demonstrates the tremendous role that the imaginary of excess in coastal wetlands play in the transformation of these areas. It also shows that sites of river normalization are lively social settings in which multiple actors compete for recognition and agency. When studying the multiple disasters of climate change that Indonesia and the rest of the world are undoubtedly headed for, knowledge of state-citizen relations as expressed through normalization efforts will certainly come in handy.

