Kisah Sukses: Stories of Indonesian Migrant Worker Returnees Living in Greater Jakarta

by

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Abstract

Based on interviews with Indonesian women migrant workers and informed by their experience living in Greater Jakarta, this dissertation explores how migrant worker returnees view their work experience overseas and how their lives in Asian urban centres affected their life back in the Indonesian urban centre. It focuses on their relationships with the complex notions of “city,” that reflect the returnee women’s attachment to “home,” and their desire to build it in a new space where they have settled. The dissertation also seeks to unfold how the city is represented through their experiences. In telling the stories of the past and present, the women shared their written works, documentary films, and their everyday life experiences to provide a more nuanced understanding of “migration” and “migrant workers.” The dissertation explores the returnee women’s interpretations of “Jakarta” and “Indonesia,” notions of return, and the idea of an emotionscape.
Lay Summary

This dissertation considers Indonesia in looking at the experience of migrant women workers’ return in their labour migration, and using the return experience to understand the Indonesian women and culture. The stories told by the Indonesian returnee women help shape the concept of return and “home” and contribute to the understanding of transnational migrant lives. The research was built from interviews with returnee women and their stories of work overseas, the return process, and their new lives in Greater Jakarta. The interviewees had a number of diverse occupations, including an office worker, a writer, an activist, and a filmmaker.
Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Kilim Park. The fieldwork was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H15-01482.


Note on style:

1. Most words in Bahasa Indonesia have been italicized. Salutations (Ibu, Mbak, Pak), acronyms and geographical names are not italicized. Translations are my own, placed in brackets in-text and separated by a line for long quotes.

2. Indonesians do not have given names and family names. For Indonesian authors, I have treated first names as family names. For well-known authors whose second names have been used in the academia as their family names, I have followed the convention.
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List of Abbreviations

BMI Buruh Migran Indonesia: Indonesian migrant workers

BNP2TKI Badan Negara Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia: National Agency for the Protection and Placement of International Migrant Workers

JABODETABEK An acronym for Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, Bekasi. Refers to the Greater Jakarta area.

KTKLN Kartu Tenaga Kerja Luar Negri. Overseas Worker’s Card

Kemlu Kementerian Luar Negeri Indonesia: Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Indonesia)

Kemnaker Kementerian Ketenagakerjaan Republik Indonesia: Ministry of Manpower (Indonesia)

TKI Tenaga Kerja Indonesia: Indonesian migrant workers

TKW Tenaga Kerja Wanita: (Indonesian) female migrant workers

PRT Pekerja Rumah Tangga: domestic worker
Glossary

angkot: (n.) minibus

Buruh Migran Indonesia (BMI): Indonesian migrant workers

hati: (n.) heart

ibu (or bu): (n.) Mrs. or an honorific term for an older woman

jilbab: (n.) Muslim headscarf that covers the face and neck

kos: (n.) short for rumah indekos. Rumah means a house and indekos means to live in someone else’s house by making monthly payments.

mbak (or mba): (n.) Miss or an honorific term for a younger woman or a woman of the similar age group

Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (TKI): Migrant workers

Tenaga Kerja Wanita (TKW): Female migrant workers

Pekerja Rumah Tangga (PRT): Domestic worker. Also referred to as a helper (a popular term in Hong Kong), maid (Singapore) or pembantu (Indonesia).

pulang: (v.) to return.
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Not to us, O LORD, not to us
But to Your name give glory
Because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth.
- Psalm 115:1

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Dedication

To appa and omma

Park Changsoo and Kim Heakyeong
Chapter 1: Introduction

Upbeat music throbs in the background as the camera pans to show dozens of children running and playing in the tropical forest, bamboo thatched roof houses nestled by a peaceful stream. In what looks like a typical Javanese village, two young girls wearing *jilbab* (Muslim headscarves) are shown writing something down in a notebook with a pen. The camera angle shifts to the left and we see Rahma Hayuningdyah, the host of an Indonesian TV talk show called *Satu Indonesia* (One Indonesia). Rahma asks one of the young girls what she is writing. With a shy smile and confident voice, the girl replies that she is writing about her dream of becoming a doctor. With a humble thatched roof house serving as the visual backdrop for their conversation, and the loud, enthusiastic chirping of birds filling the soundscape, the young girl tells Rahma that she wants to be a doctor in order to help her village, where people have died because of lack of access to medicine and medical care. The screen then cuts to a smiling young woman with a kind, round face, wearing a pink *jilbab* pinned under her chin with a small, white flower broach. She is the subject of this episode, Mbak Heni Sri Sundani.

The episode dedicates much of its 21 minutes to relating Mbak Heni’s many achievements as a social entrepreneur, selected as one of Forbes Magazine’s 30 people under 30 in Asia. Viewers learn all about her efforts to revitalize agricultural education and training in villages—her husband is a lecturer at the Bogor Agricultural University—and to take village children on excursions to big cities and to the President’s Summer Palace in Bogor to find foreigners to talk to. The piece begins by mentioning Mbak Heni’s time spent as a domestic worker in Hong Kong, but that aspect of her story is not explored in depth until roughly 14 minutes into the episode.

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1 The program is available on YouTube at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0fUh9_LriY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0fUh9_LriY). Retrieved 12 December 2017.
when Mbak Heni tells the story of working in Hong Kong for six years as a domestic worker and obtaining a bachelor’s degree at the same time. Fighting back tears, she recalls the day she called her grandmother to say she had received her university degree. Mbak Heni says her grandmother did not know what a bachelor’s degree was, and had heard of only three professional occupations: teacher, engineer and civil servant. When Mbak Heni explained that her bachelor’s degree meant she could now become a teacher and help children in need of education, her grandmother asked at once, “Kapan pulang kampung?” meaning, “When are you coming back to our village?”

Today, Mbak Heni has developed into a well-known social entrepreneur with the ability to inspire, motivate and encourage others. In a voice steeped in conviction and experience, she argues during the episode for the need to educate children from the villages of Indonesia—whom she calls anak petani cerdas (the bright children of farmers)—and to subsequently reach out to farming communities all over Indonesia to educate and support them. She articulately explains the need for diverse experiential learning opportunities for village children and the provision of quality education. As the episode proclaims, Mbak Heni’s story is luar biasa, which literally means “outside the ordinary,” and has naturally received a great deal of coverage in the Indonesian media, including Femina Magazine, Nova Magazine, the Indonesia Morning Show (TV), Kick Andy (TV), and Good Times (NET TV), to name just a few.

Mbak Heni’s story of going overseas to work in hopes of obtaining a university education is an unusual story for an Indonesian migrant worker. An Indonesian film called Minggu Pagi di Victoria Park (2010), is a recent attempt at telling a more familiar version of the story. In the movie, Sekar, the protagonist’s troubled sister, becomes a migrant worker in Hong Kong because
her family’s finances are in trouble. Mayang, the lead character performed by actor-director Lola Amaria, is resistant to her father’s wish that she join her sister overseas, but eventually leaves for Hong Kong when Sekar goes missing. The movie also tells the story of other migrant workers—many of them caught up in financial trouble, falling in love, and resorting to desperate measures that render them helpless and in danger. In one scene, in the dilapidated, beige bathroom of an old Hong Kong apartment, as the water pours down from the shower, Sekar sits with her arms wrapped tightly around her body. Everything is dripping wet. Sekar is on the ground, wearing skimpy clothing and clutching a knife. She has reached a point of wanting to kill herself because life has become impossible. Finally, Sekar, her posture resembling that of a damsel in distress from some 19th century European painting, drops the knife on the floor and collapses against the sister who has come to find her. This scene of emotional climax makes it clear what is the perceived fate of TKW (Tenaga Kerja Wanita: Indonesian female migrant workers) in Indonesia, despite the happy ending of the film—a gathering of friends in Victoria Park—that follows shortly.  

In fact, stories and images of Indonesian women working overseas as domestic and factory workers or in so-called low-skilled occupations are becoming typified in a rather singular way. The majority of the stories are distressing and heart-breaking, and the public memory of a migrant worker is dominated by tragic accounts that continue to strengthen discursive constructions of migrant women’s vulnerability. Given the film’s portrayal of migrant workers, 

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2 I have discussed this film in my article “Research Report: No Longer a ‘Damsel in Distress’: Indonesian Migrant Returnee Women Living in Jakarta” in Migration, Mobility, & Displacement 2 (1): 90-99. I argue that Sekar, facing the loss of her innocence and the crushing of her dreams, could not see the point of it all, and the very idea of life was becoming impossible for her. The movie offers another point to ponder: in the final scenes, Sekar—seemingly recovered—pledges she will come back to Hong Kong to work, hinting at the circular nature of the migration of domestic workers in Hong Kong. The movie was shot on location in Hong Kong, and is well known among Indonesian migrant workers there. In the conclusion of the article, I relate my brief conversations about the film with the migrant workers in Hong Kong.
Mbak Heni’s journey from serving as a domestic worker to being a well-known social entrepreneur has all the dramatic elements that Indonesian audiences cherish, inspiring TV stations and national newspapers to travel with her to remote villages to witness her in action. Everything about her—from her articulate speech, to her confident attitude, university education and strong leadership—does not fit the popular narrative of an Indonesian migrant worker. Yet without Mbak Heni’s stint as a migrant worker, her story would not have followed the impressive arc it has, opening onto a new chapter in life as a university graduate and a semi-celebrity.

1.1 Encountering a “Migrant Worker” and Locating a “Returnee”

My introduction to Indonesia in 2007 began with a short-term research assignment on women and migration as part of the practicum requirement for my master’s degree. This research culminated in a policy report that led to substantial programming on trafficking in persons in the following years. My role as a researcher ended, but I remained keenly interested in migration, particularly in the context of Indonesia. Over time, through personal and professional connections, I had a chance to meet with a number of Indonesian migrant workers before they left home, after they returned, and while they were working, and realized that I had become complacent about the complexities and complications in their lives. Upon reflection, I realized that my report from 2007 was cursory and that I had fallen into the trap of simplifying migrant workers and, more importantly, who they could be once they were understood outside the definition of “migrant worker.”

The friendships and relationships I developed over the years made me realize how challenging it was to tell complex, even redemptive stories of migration. It has seemed that not all stories can
be told. In this project, while recognizing the challenges and struggles that exist in migrant returnees’ lives, I have sought to bring to the fore the untold stories that are excessive to or complicate the simple expected storyline.

Particularly in the Indonesian context, “migrant workers” seem to be unable to exist in Indonesia; in other words, they are located only overseas or only when working to fulfill their role. In modern day discourse, the term “migrant” seems unable to exist on its own, being always attached to a set of meanings and circumstances whenever it is enunciated (Bhabha 1994). Those who see, hear and read the word “migrant” cannot escape this wide range of temporal, spatial and contextual relationships and the continuum of negative and positive connotations associated with the term. It is assumed that migrant workers could not make ends meet at home and were helpless and victimized through the process of migration. To be sure, many of them experience difficulties during various stages of migration and must seek assistance. However, the practice of simplifying and categorizing their entire being is typically carried out in such a sweeping manner that after return, former migrant workers or returnees cannot find the space to be anything else. The abuse and marginalization that took place within a definite timeframe while they existed as “migrant workers” seems to carry over indefinitely. Collectively labeled as “migrant workers,” as such, their identities are flattened and they lose a degree of autonomy and self-direction.

This use of the term “migrant worker” is not unique to Indonesia. It coincides with the era of labour migration and migration management, and is pervasive in studies of labour migrants that seek to understand neoliberalism and capitalism and expose and analyze what is behind the systems that require the global migration of human labour. The phrase “migrant workers” almost
always indicates those working in low-paying jobs in service and “3D” (dirty, difficult and dangerous) sectors, thus signifying “migrant” as a racialized, bio-political being under state discipline. Thus the term “migrant worker” in current discourse places such workers in a moral economy on a global scale (Ong 2006). However, “migrant worker” or “migrant”— terms interchangeably used by scholars of Southeast Asia studying labour migration (myself included)— can limit our understanding of a person engaged in labour, that is in income-generating activities, and of lives lived beyond this labour relation—before, during and after migration. Rodriguez (2010) and Tadiar (2009)’s works concerning Filipino/a migrant workers reflect on active state-led labour export policies in the Philippines and their impact on the Philippines as a whole. Migration in the Filipino sense of the word also means labour migration led by desperate motivations for upward mobility, as explained by Rodriguez (2010) in her effective critique of state policy towards migrants and conceptualization of “migrant citizenship,” a state of affairs preconditioned by contributions from labour activity engagement abroad sanctioned by the state. The conflation of the terms “migrant worker” and “migrant” has led to the conceptualization of anyone who migrates based on economic motivations to seek “a better life” as a homogenous group—a conceptualization that flattens several intersecting planes of human identity.

Additionally, in Southeast Asia, the use of the term “migrant” has been for the most part reserved for transnational migration involving international border crossing (see for instance Chin 2013; Ong 2006; Parreñas 2001; Rodriguez 2010; Silvey 2007; Suryakusuma 2004). Transnational migration tends to be more well recorded than intranational migration for border control reasons and therefore is easier to track. Moreover, a focus on transnational migration offers a structural
and institutional look into governmentality through practices of state officials which illustrates lived expressions of the limits of state rule (Silvey 2007). Tracking domestic or internal migration is a challenge, especially in countries like Indonesia, where migrants do not always report their change of residence for bureaucratic complications and social benefits. However, Diane Wolf (1992), Aihwa Ong (1987), and Suzanne Brenner (1998) have conducted research on rural to urban migration, focussing on groups of women from small villages who migrated to work in factories in nearby towns, though not using the term “migrant” to describe the workers. These authors’ discussion of the issues of social and economic mobility challenged by spatial differences of kampung or desa (both meaning “village”) versus town resembles what is found in the field of transnational labour migration in terms of home versus abroad. Their work also indicate a possibility for migration research to become not as reductive as transnational migration studies, without using the term “migrant.” In this regard, Pratt and Yeoh (2003) suggest that feminist geographers have left an opening for further study to more nuanced analysis of transnational migration, while using the word “migrant,” and consider borders as both stretching beyond the nation and consolidated within, producing and challenging transnational connections and national difference (see also Silvey 2004a). The notion of “migrants” in transnational migration studies may have been limited to a certain type of manifestation of social dislocation, but transnational migrants can be observed “on a variety of operative geographic and analytic scales that begin with the body and extend across continents” (Mahler and Pessar 2001, 441).

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3 See Beazley (2000) for a detailed account of the challenges the Indonesian youth experience in regards to KTP (Kartu Tanda Penduduk): “Streetboys in Yogyakarta: Social and Spatial Expansion in the Public Space of the City” in A Companion to the City edited by Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, 472-488. Residential addresses are often not updated because of practical and sentimental reasons.
The category of “returnee” has been selected and developed purposefully in this dissertation to question the TKI (Tenega Kerja Indonesia: Indonesian migrant workers) category and open up the futurity of the category of “migrant.” By situating Indonesian migrant workers beyond the temporal and spatial limitation that defined them as such, the returnee category expands the migrant experience into the present after return. This work is part of the larger effort to question the categorization of migrants as a marginalized subject and the practices that accompany myopic comprehension of their humanity. As a response, I take Neferti Tadiar’s (2009) search further to “tangential experiential practices that, while participating in the making of a dominant order, nevertheless elude its logical categories of social and political agency” (p. 14) and work with conceptualizing “returnees” as those who exist excessive to the space of marginalization. I also build on a number of scholars who have acknowledged the nuances and colourfulness of migrant lives and engaged in constructive critique of the use of the term “migrant” and “migrant workers (Mohanty 1997; Spivak 2000; McKay 2016; Pratt 2004, 2012) and add to the discourse with an examination of the Indonesian workers’ experience. Furthermore, with the Indonesian migrant worker returnees’ guidance, I take part in reorganizing their memory and experiences from the space they call home and working them out in a retrospective and evaluative tone. Considering where the TKI category situated in the discourse of migrant workers in Indonesia, an examination of the returnee experience opens up a possibility for an approach that conceptualizes “migrant” as a suspended entity constantly in movement in the space of temporal and spatial ambiguities on a continuum.

The stories of Mbak Heni and others that I discuss here disturbed and disrupted the singular notion of TKI that I had come to learn as a result of being exposed to the narrative. When I asked
women migrant workers in Hong Kong about *Minggu Pagi di Victoria Park*, most would respond by asking me, with a faint and puzzled smile on their faces, if I thought it to be their story. Confused in the discursive space concerning TKI, I began this research project with a desire to create a discursive space not concerning migrant workers but inhabited with migrant workers themselves.

1.2 **Tracing the Indonesian Female Domestic Workers’ Migration**

Tracing the Indonesian female domestic workers’ movement across Asia requires considering historical and cultural contexts of the migration of domestic workers in “Indonesia” even before it was called Indonesia. In colonial times, Europeans came to Southeast Asia in search of wealth and power and ultimately to distinguish themselves from those in the homeland (Stoler 1995). In many parts of what was then called the Dutch East Indies, colonizers encountered domestic workers who were operating in traditional ways, and began to employ them as housemaids. Called by a derogative term, *baboe*, these were barefoot dark skinned “native” women wearing crisp *kebaya* (See Figure 1). Domestic service has a long history in many parts of the archipelago, and as any Javanese or modern-day Indonesian family would explain, has been considered an indispensable part of family life. Within the technologies of colonization, however, those who worked in colonizers’ homes were fashioned into the *baboe* identity. This has fed into the cultural memory of domestic workers in Indonesia and their presence as an essential element of a household, which has shaped practices and norms around their employment and conditions thereof.
During the colonial period, domestic servants were characterized as an abundant supply of labour and were often the only Indonesians that colonial women met in daily life. While domestic servants were not exclusively female, Elsbeth Locher-Scholten (2000) suggests that they were “presented more as the ‘other’ than as ‘one step behind’ on the evolutionary ladder” with their intimate connection to the family, and formed part of a paternalistic system (88-90). Nonetheless, it is difficult to imagine that domestic helpers working for Dutch families would have been able to exist outside the colonial psyche and be rewarded for their contribution to family life. To understand this better, we must be able to tap into the historical and cultural narrative around domestic workers; the literary world, in particular, has paid attention to the complexities domestic workers embody when they are placed across a political plane. Glimpses offered in *Buru Quartet* by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1996a, 1996b, 1996c, 1997) allow us to see colonizers looking for ways to control and discriminate against the local population, a desire that manifested in an excessive and arbitrary binarism that emphasized differences and justified barbarianism. Nonetheless, domestic workers held a surprisingly influential position in the household, particularly when very few European women migrated to the Dutch East Indies.

Nyai Ontosoroh, a central female figure in *Buru Quartet*, is a domestic “servant” for an influential local family, and a woman who takes over her Dutch master’s house after his death. While remaining as a Nyai, or concubine, Ontosoroh possesses an intimate understanding of the colonizers and achieves a kind of mastery in making her way through the colonial conditions; she speaks in “beautiful Dutch,” which inspires and educates Minke, the protagonist who grows into a nationalist.

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4 The parallel between this and the situation in Hong Kong was undeniable during my fieldwork.
Nyai’s move to work for a Dutch family meant that she was going to live in an environment dictated by different cultural values and norms than those to which she had been accustomed, and that she would be subjected to marginalization. It is likely that in the past someone in Nyai’s position would never have returned to her home village, since de facto concubineage in a European household would have led to fears she would no longer be accepted at home, and because her current situation would have offered some benefits in terms of the power and class newly bestowed on her. Nyai’s dialogue exudes confidence and offers a sharp analysis of the current political climate, allowing author Pramoedya to make a strong statement against the colonial state and feudal Java through his characters. Modern-day Indonesian domestic workers working in Asian urban centres prepare for their departure from home in similar ways, but the idea of return is much stronger and more attainable to them and acceptance from “home” proves to be more difficult, as discussed in the *Pulang* chapter.

As has been explained, domestic service migration has a very long history in Indonesia and is an experience that meets with relatively little resistance because of this cultural memory. In “Indonesia,” a historically challenging construct that imposes a series of common denominators and is imbued with differences and adaptation assumed in daily life, border-crossing in the context of domestic versus transnational migration has signified little difference in terms of the experience on the part of the workers. The eventuality of arriving at and living in an unfamiliar culture exists in both scenarios as an accepted and given everyday reality, and the reasons for the decision to migrate or for resistance to migration has little to do with the fear of crossing the border. In other words, the cultural memory around domestic service may have allowed potential
domestic workers overseas to tap into the facility that prepares Indonesian migrants by a way of linking similar and yet different cultural concepts, and may have allowed them to develop a competence to adapt to their changing environment that could have historical and cultural roots.

Most importantly, in the Indonesian context, displacement is the experience of being uprooted from the land and being forced into the value systems constructed by colonial and nationalist projects. The turbulent years of Sukarno saw the independence and birth of the Indonesian Republic, and in the process of nation-building, memories continue to be colonized and thus displaced; it is suggested that the past is no longer memorialized by the indigenous but has become “a human landscape of perfect visibility” (Benedict Anderson 2006, 185) as time and space is altered and replaced. Threatening memories are eliminated in order to be reimagined according to an outside agenda, as local narratives of the past are found to be an insult to national integration projects of the state (Keyes 2013).

It was in the second year of Suharto’s rule in 1969 that domestic work as an export became operationalized as a state economic project in the form of a government placement program (International Organization for Migration 2010). Indonesian domestic workers were routed in the directions of colonial and nationalist legacies, towards binarism and categorization and subject to mobility restrictions in their destinations and occupation. Official measures (Government Regulation No. 4 of 1970) allowed private sector brokers to control much of the infrastructure of labour migration (International Organization for Migration 2010) such as recruitment, training and documentation. Coupled with post-Suharto economic reforms and the Asian economic crisis of 1997, there was a demand for more Indonesian domestic workers in Asia. The Indonesian
government developed policies to promote working overseas as an income-generating opportunity, which has resulted in a large increase in the official number of TKI (Silvey 2007; Hugo 1995).

Soon, brokers, some of whom are former migrant workers themselves, sprang up everywhere in the country to recruit millions of migrant workers and handle their papers (Lindquist 2012). In 1994, 175,187 migrant workers left Indonesia to work overseas, in 2004, 380,690 people, and in 2007, 696,746 migrant workers went abroad (BNP2TKI 2008a). The number has decreased in recent years as seen in Table 1, due to a government moratorium barring migrant workers to the Middle East (World Bank 2016). Between 2004 and 2007 the total remittances per year had grown from US$1.88 billion to US$5.84 billion (BNP2TKI 2008b) and IOM (2012) recorded US$7.6 billion in 2014, and World Bank (2016) recorded US$9.4 billion in 2015. According to BNP2TKI (2014), it is estimated that there are currently 6.5 million Indonesian migrant workers working abroad.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of workers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>586,802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>494,609</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>512,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>429,872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>275,736</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>234,451</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is not coincidental that the authoritarian, repressive regime of Suharto (1967-98) chose female bodies as the object over which to exercise power and upon which to impose restraint, continuing Sukarno’s legacy to legitimize such an endeavor with its preoccupation of Indonesia in its myth and history. The government’s watchful eye was manipulative and tricked its citizens forcefully and tactically (Simone 2014; Siegel 1998; Wilson 2006). As part of the nation-building process of the New Order regime, the Indonesian government tried to instill the spirit of *kodrat wanita*, referring to a woman’s God-given nature as a supportive wife and sacrificing mother (Hellwig 2001; Wieringa 2003). Indeed, the regulation of female bodies and spirits was a key factor in the nation-building project. Rather than acknowledging various gender roles and manifestations of
femininity in different cultures and ethnic groups, the New Order essentialized womanhood and *kodrat wanita* turned women’s behavior into a reverent matter (Hellwig 2011).

The intricate labour migration system began to be created in such a way that visits to multiple ministries were required to obtain numerous papers to make someone a “legal” worker. A number of activists have told me about the sensitivities between Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Kemlu: Kementerian Luar Negeri Indonesia*), Ministry of Manpower (*Kemnaker: Kementerian Ketenagakerjaan Republik Indonesia*) and National Agency for the Protection and Placement of International Migrant Workers (*BNP2TKI: Badan Nasional Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*) when it comes to issues concerning migrant workers. While the Law Number 39 Year 2004 concerning Placement and Protection of Indonesian Workers Abroad (*Undang-Undang Nomor 39 Tahun 2004 tentang Penempatan dan Perlindungan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia di Luar Negeri*) lays out responsibilities of each government departments and agencies involved in the process, many insiders have told me about resistance on both sides when there was an informal talk of merging BNP2TKI into Kemnaker, because neither party wanted to reduce their responsibilities in managing migrant workers. Some activists I spoke to suggested no ministry would like to give up the power that comes from substantial budget and human resources. For instance, the placement of workers, including initial counselling and screening, is handled by both Kemnaker and BNP2TKI with varying responsibilities and interventions, and issuing of passports and counselar assistance abroad by Kemlu, while both Kemnaker and BNP2TKI still getting involved in a lot of the cases.

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5 For more detailed analysis of the Indonesian state agencies’ roles in managing out-bound labour migration, see Wayne Palmer (2016), *Indonesia’s Overseas Labour Migration Programme, 1969–2010*. 
The complicated bureaucratic procedures effectively blindsided many workers from villages who were unfamiliar with bureaucratic processes and instead believed every word the brokers—both the good and the bad ones—said. In addition, the uniform worn by domestic workers upon departure from the airports also became a status and class indicator that restricted people’s mobility by routing them in certain directions (See Figure 2). Pei-Chia Lan (2006) has observed that the government has enforced “surveillance of their physical ‘quality’” (43) and such tight control over their bodies also strengthens the immobility of their being. In the scene of migrant workers departing, working and returning, no aesthetic sensation in their being is allowed, and the tone completely subdued.

As the government continued to focus on economic development from the late 1990s until today, women migrant workers are not perceived as skilled workers with overseas work experience. Prusinski (2014) has observed that many Indonesian women migrant workers had to develop skills on their own while working overseas, which went “unacknowledged and unappreciated upon their return.” This problem does not apply merely to domestic workers; Efendi et al (2013) have found that Indonesian nurses who worked in Japan had trouble getting a new job after returning home. Curiously enough, despite their tangible economic contributions in the form of remittances and international work experience, there has been no consideration of tapping into this skilled population for development of the domestic labour force. The recent offering of a suite of entrepreneurship trainings provided by the government and private sector has proven to be a mixed bag. In her study of return migrant entrepreneurs in the Philippines and Indonesia, Denise Spitzer (2016) found their business endeavours have not had a positive impact on local employment or household income. It is puzzling that the trainers continue to publish success
stories, while the trainees talk about the difficulties involved in sustaining the business.

Consistent with Spitzer’s findings, I have seen in the villages that remittances go towards household expenses rather than getting reinvested in income-generating economic activities and the government and private sector blame migrant entrepreneurs for their failure. Many returnees also point to nepotism and corruption in meeting the quota in local areas and criticize the accessibility and effectiveness of the programs. The structure of the trainings does take advantage of the skills and experience of the participants but is built on general assumptions and stereotypes about women from small villages.

In tracing the movement of the workers, it is important to note that the female bodies shown in the discourse of Indonesian migrant workers are injured and damaged. The employers’ physical and mental abuse is visible and the scars, often permanent, serve as a reminder of these women’s experiences. Their bodies serve as, to borrow James Young’s (1994) term, a “counter-monument” to their dreams. The bodies of women who have repeatedly suffered physical and emotional trauma come back carrying stories of helplessness and vulnerability. They embody a perception of Indonesian women’s role, as a disposable, readily replaceable labour supply. As Jenny Edkins (2003) argues, trauma is seen as a betrayal by the state. Trauma that occurs as a result of these workers’ participation in economic development activity promoted by the state prompts questions about the state’s failure to protect them. Conversely, these injured and damaged bodies as inherently political symbols and practices shape changing fields of power relations as they enter the public sphere and popular consciousness of wider society (Ong and Peletz 1995). These bodies also enable migrants’ rights discussions to gain ground and keep the memories of betrayal fresh, providing a reminder of that betrayal and reasons not to place further trust in the state.
Indonesian migrant workers, in terms of both terminology and policies, include both men and women, but focusing on women migrant workers opens up an opportunity to examine domestic work as an export, almost always performed by women, to see how the migrant workers “challenge and define socio-spatial marginality” and how boundaries of the nation-state are reproduced and enacted (Silvey 2007). Furthermore, considering the case of women workers helps us explain women’s unequal access to decent work, financial assets, mobility, personal safety and security, and representation in formal structures of urban governance (Chant 2013).

1.3 The Storytellers

In my attempts to learn from the migrant workers about their experience, it became clear that the project needed to be discursive, allowing the stories from the women themselves and the context within which the stories were told to form the guiding principles. Out of 20 Indonesian migrant worker returnees I have interviewed, six women have spent the most time with me and serve as key storytellers informing the main arguments, observations and analysis that come through in this dissertation. I wish to stress that the stories I have gathered and upon which I have based my explorations are told in various contexts, but rarely in a stationary setting—rather they exist in moments of in-between. I am not able to reproduce the colours and textures specific to each context but these have greatly contributed to the analysis of these stories and will be mentioned throughout. My storytellers, in their process of opening up, reminded me that “a story is always situated; it has both a teller and an audience” (Abu-Lughod 1993, 15). They did not simply answer my questions; they also asked questions about me. As I will discuss further in the Methodology chapter, aspects of these women’s lives began to open up gradually as I visited
with them. The discursive approach demanded that I seek to establish the space in which we could share, because the stories were told, always, when the moment was right for both of us and we could create a shared memory of our time together.

1.3.1 Friends

In the case of some of my interviewees, such as Mbak Heni and Mbak Efa, the memory of being a migrant worker is also a shared one. Over time, their lives have moved along different trajectories, and the only thing that truly connects the two of them is the shared memory and, most importantly, the shared identity of migrant worker, or TKI. Mbak Efa and Mbak Heni met each other in Hong Kong while attending university there. During the time they worked as a caregiver and a domestic worker, respectively, they each completed a bachelor’s degree in business at St. Mary’s University, a Filipino university that offers a four-year degree program in Hong Kong. The space they inhabited together was never one other’s work place—which only existed in the other’s imagination after being articulated in words—but the university. They became fast friends, commiserating over shared experiences: late night studying in the corner of their employer’s house, having to borrow laptops and obtain permission to study (as this fell outside their duties), and other friends giving them a hard time when they fell behind on group projects.

They both share insatiable desires for education and in many ways serve as proof that education can make a positive difference in anyone’s life. Mbak Heni has recently started a master’s degree in entrepreneurship at a local Islamic university and, as expected, is excelling. She smiles, saying, “Having a lecturer husband definitely helps! But I also correct a lot of his writing.” Mbak Efa,
for now, has to support her mother and siblings instead of pursuing further education. She tells me she makes more money now than what she made as a migrant worker, and she proudly points out her sister is now attending university, clearly influenced by Mbak Efa’s drive and accomplishments. In the eyes of the Indonesian government, her degree is yet to be recognized because it was obtained elsewhere, but her Japanese employer hired her because she had a degree from a university in Hong Kong.

Figure 3 Mbak Heni on "Satu Indonesia." Photo courtesy of Heni Sri Sundani.

Figure 4 Mbak Efa at the office in Jakarta. Photo courtesy of Efa Dawnia.

The two women now exist in such different spaces. Mbak Heni, who wears the jilbab and dresses conservatively and who has recently completed an umroh, recently moved further out into the countryside to dedicate herself to assisting children in villages. Mbak Efa is still single, and blends right into the crowd of office girls working and living near Bundaran HI where life is always on the move. She does not wear the jilbab, and wears make up everyday. Mbak Heni is a featured speaker at events and has been interviewed by TV personalities. Mbak Efa manages an office and deals with office politics. Mbak Efa talks about counting cash in the office and Mbak Heni talks about giving out cash in villages. In this changing context, their friendship is

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6 Umroh is a pilgrimage to Mecca, but done outside the Hajji period. Umroh is a more affordable option for the Muslims who want to fulfill this religious obligation but have limited financial resources.
maintained through a commonality of being a *mantan* TKW, a former migrant worker, a connection which is reinforced by their networks (including me) and memories clearly carrying the symbols and remnants of TKW, rather than by their present.

**1.3.2 Creators**

With the negative stereotyping of migrant workers to fight against, domestic workers are situated in a power structure of transnational labour migration that puts them at an unfair disadvantage in the economic, political and social hierarchy while working and after returning home. An increasing number of migrant workers are turning to creative outlets to disrupt the very power structure that denied them opportunities to be active subjects, and to negotiate the prevailing power that stripped them of their agency. Most migrant worker returnees who now work in the creative industries did not receive adequate formal training before starting their career. Both Mbak Ani and Mbak Ida, a well-known filmmaker and a writer, respectively, obtained the skills needed for their craft from their peers in the field. Migrant worker returnees’ engagement in various forms of creative practices without access to privileged knowledges, networks and information is in fact a reordering of power relations.

Since the early 2000s, Indonesian literature has witnessed the mainstream emergence of *Sastra BMI* (Indonesian migrant workers’ literature), and creative writing by domestic workers has been beginning to be published by Indonesian publishers in increasing numbers (Kuswinarto 2010). Pratiwi Retnaningdyah (2015) traces the origin of Indonesian migrant workers literature to Dhenok Rokhmatika’s *Hongkong Negeri EloK nan Keras di Mana Kami Berjuang* (Hong Kong,
a Beautiful, Rough Country, Where We Struggle) in 2002, and Mega Vristian, a migrant returnee
writer, has declared Indonesian migrant workers’ literature a new genre.

Becoming a writer requires very little start-up cost, which means that as a creative medium,
writing is far more accessible than others such as photography, painting or filmmaking. Given
that domestic workers remit most of their salaries back home and tend to have a small amount of
disposable income, the rising number of Sastra BMI can be partly explained by financial
accessibility. One of Mbak Heni’s first exposures to the media was her short story, “A Blood
Stained Letter to the President,” which won a contest in Hong Kong. Mbak Efa, when a laptop
became available to her for school purposes, started typing up the incidents she had experienced
and the stories she had heard from friends, and the manuscript became her first book, 3.000
Impian Kilometer. Both of these women have since stopped writing professionally, but both
have identified writing as a key factor in their journey toward gaining confidence and fulfilling
their hidden potential.

Mbak Ida also started writing in Hong Kong while serving as a domestic worker, and remains a
full-time writer to this day. She always had creative impulses, but growing up in Lampung,
Sumatra, without electricity, she did not even think about becoming a writer, let alone pursuing a
career of her own. While working in Hong Kong, however, she noticed a newspaper
advertisement for a local writing group. Having only an elementary school education, she pushed
aside the thought of joining, but kept running into the group on Sundays on her way home from
hanging out with other Indonesian friends. To her surprise, no one from the group told her she

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7 Officially the book has two co-authors as shown in the bibliography. However, the book was written by
Mbak Efa. Mbak Daniela Jaladara did not write the content but edited the book for a more publishable
format. Mbak Efa included Mbak Jaladara’s name as an expression of gratitude.
could not join because of her lack of education, and she felt instantly connected to the members after attending just a couple of meetings. Mbak Ida started writing, and eventually became a published author. Her work of biographical fiction, *Cintaku di Negeri Jackie Chan* (2012), is used throughout this dissertation.

Figure 5 Cover of Ida Raihan’s *Cintaku di Negeri Jackie Chan*. Photo courtesy of Ida Raihan.

Figure 6 Author meeting Ida Raihan (right) and her mentor, Pipiet Senja (left). Photo courtesy of Ida Raihan.

Mbak Ani, who also wanted to be a writer, stumbled into filmmaking by accident. After returning to Indonesia, she moved to Surabaya, the biggest city near her village, and attended university as a psychology major, which she thought would help her become a writer. She had been reflecting on her time as a migrant worker in Hong Kong when she came across a call for proposals for an education-themed filmmaking competition. She wrote up the proposal quickly—saying, “I already had the material!”—and despite the fact that she was not selected as a winner, one of the judges offered to help her personally to produce her film. She has been working as a filmmaker ever since. Most of her films have won at least one award: *Donor Asi* won the Citra
Award\textsuperscript{8} for Best Documentary Feature (2011) and \textit{At Stake} was part of the official selection at the 2009 Berlinale.

Figure 7 Mbak Ani receiving an award from the former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Photo taped to the dresser in Mbak Ani's living room. Photo by Kilim Park.

Figure 8 Mbak Ani filming her son in the living room. Photo by Kilim Park.

For Mbak Ani, filmmaking is not only a creative outlet but also a part of her identity. As a mother of two, she always ensures that she can work while taking care of her children at the same time. As she once wrote on her Facebook page, “\textit{Alhamdulilah, karir jadi ibu dua balita berjalan lancar, masih bisa terima kerjaan juga dari luar}.” (Thank God, the career of a mother of two babies is moving forward, and I am still able to accept work from outside.) (23 June 2016)

1.3.3 Activists

Back in the summer of 2014, I met with a number of migrant rights NGOs in Jakarta, where I asked for help out of desperation and worry. Where could I find migrant returnee women in Jakarta to interview? The response was always: “Yes I can help you find them,” “You can talk to

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\textsuperscript{8} Citra Award is given out every year at the Indonesian Film Festival organized by the Indonesian Film Board.
me” or “She’s downstairs at her desk.” In fact, there are many migrant returnee women who are now living and working in Jakarta as full-time activists. They know what migrants go through both overseas and at home. They operate in a tightly knit network of national and local organizations that support one another and are involved in running numerous programs to help migrants before they leave and after they return home. Many of these activists are from other parts of Indonesia but have decided to settle in Jakarta in order to make use of urban networks to effectively lobby the government. They are consulted, their presence is visible, and in fact, many migrant workers and their families who experience difficulties overseas choose to contact activists over Indonesian diplomatic missions, the Ministry of Manpower or National Agency for the Protection and Placement of International Migrant Workers. Benny Hari Juliawan’s (2014) recent piece in Inside Indonesia, “Back with a Vengeance,” highlights the role these migrant workers turned activists play in Indonesia’s vibrant civil society. Their experience as migrant workers fostered their consciousness of a collective struggle, and as they recuperate the notions of power, their sense of resistance is developed (Parreñas 2001) and maintained in accordance with their newly discovered vocation as activists.

These activists defiantly and subversively call on the Indonesian state to respond to its failure to protect and provide for migrant workers. Many of these activists regularly participate in protests related to advocating for migrant workers’ rights and labour issues in general. Ibu Dewi and Ibu Lana speak fondly of the time when they actively participated in what locals call demo. Now their age and health hinder them from being more active on the scene at protests, but that does not stop them from showing me pictures of them in their youth, holding a loudspeaker and wearing anti-trafficking promotional t-shirts. Ibu Lana in particular talked about the feelings of
solidarity and camaraderie that imbued these gatherings, and even added that she met her husband at a May Day rally at Bundaran HI in Jakarta. If the term *kodrat wanita* attempted to define “nurturing” as a female responsibility to a family unit carried out inaudibly in the background, these activists expand and complicate it further with vociferous demands and opinions.

While I consider all of my interviewees to be official and unofficial activists in their drive and determination to give other migrant worker returnee women hope, two of them, Ibu Dewi and Ibu Lana had full-time jobs as activists. I have known Ibu Dewi for some years as a leader of a well-known migrant advocacy organization in Indonesia. I also remember her for her fiery, short red hair, tight shirts and colourful skirts. I remember her for her sparkly eyes and smooth skin. Her years of experience as a mother, wife, maid and activist have made her appear confident, friendly and peaceful. Her honesty and emotions come through in her words: she talks about not being able to come home to visit her dying mother while working in Hong Kong, and about how everyone cried when she was leaving her position with the organization. Her emotions are measured, yet tender.

I remember meeting Ibu Lana for the first time, when her almost tenor-range voice, both confident and soothing, instantly calmed me down. She is someone who is able to have two full-time jobs as a government consultant and an activist working for a shelter for migrant workers, and has a commanding and assuring presence wherever she is. She was promised a job as a nurse in Taiwan but instead worked as a domestic worker for a year. After months of physical and mental abuse, her employer eventually kicked her out of the house and she had to return home.
Now she is a well-regarded expert in Jakarta on labour migration issues, though when I comment on her “fame,” she shows me a clip from her recent interview with a local TV station: her voice is altered and her face kept in the shadow.

1.4 “Jakarta”: Backdrop and Protagonist

Situating this project in Jakarta has several implications. Considering that the overwhelming majority of Indonesian migrant women reside in the urban areas of Southeast Asia during their employment overseas—Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei and Kuala Lumpur, for instance—understanding the returnee experience in Jakarta offers a glimpse into the motivations and experiences of urban-to-urban or interurban migration. Given the prioritization of families in Indonesian society and culture and the fact that the overwhelming majority of these workers are from rural areas, the question then becomes why these women have not returned to their villages where strong, existing networks of support would welcome them, and instead have settled in urban areas.9 While the majority do return to their villages, exploring this question will allow a deeper examination of changes in the urban areas that migrant returnees now claim, occupy and make their own. In the chapters related to Jakarta and Pulang, I explore various implications of this decision, but here I would like to set up a few guiding posts to understand these women’s experience.

Jakarta in its nature is a city of (internal) migrants. Reflecting the diversity of the nation, Jakarta contains Indonesians from every corner of the archipelago, all with different cultural backgrounds. As a nation’s capital, Jakarta also offers a wide range and a large number of employment opportunities. Jakarta can therefore serve as a research site offering access to

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9 Read Ibu Lana’s explanation on this in Chapter 4, section 2: Dreaming of a Return Home to a Family.
migrant women from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. For instance, these migrant women’s mental, conceptual map of Jakarta will be different from the physical, geographical map of the city and reveal how the city as a space has come to be claimed, appropriated and configured. If migrants tend to claim particular spaces within cities, their role as the force of modernity and progress, and their knowledge-seeking, knowledge enabling activities in Jakarta would show such urban, social, cultural transformation in the Indonesian or Global South context.

In many ways, “Jakarta” is not merely the city itself with its geographical boundaries, but the experience, expectation and—in some senses—rights that the city offers. In light of this, the viewpoint of migrant women returnees in Jakarta helps us consider several factors in urban transformation: the systematization of patriarchy, the mechanization of women’s economic participation, and the exercising of social and cultural rights as an urban citizen. Simply put, the details of migrant women returnee’s life in Jakarta, which many call a place of opportunities, will reveal the role of women in this fast-changing society.

Starting by establishing migrant women workers as significant actors and agents who reconstitute their daily lives as well as the economics and politics of cities (Glick Schuller and Çağlar 2011) we come to understand that the “city” is an entity and space of dynamic interaction that these migrant women live in, transform and are influenced by. The notion of citizenship is brought in as a means for them to (re-)claim their active role in their own lives and identity vis-à-vis the political, economic, social and cultural space with which they are interacting. In that
sense, the “city” as the centre of economic activity and prosperity not only symbolizes a site of opportunity and advantage, but also signifies a process of complete reordering.

Thus, “Jakarta” has a role both as a place in which the returnees live and as a key player in their daily lives. The experiences of the returnee women elucidate Jakarta’s many involvements and interpellations and their stories in “Jakarta” present an opportunity to examine what “Indonesia” was, is, and is to be. The ever-changing urban culture of Jakarta explained through the returnee women emphasizes the shared nature of their experiences and helps us consider the spatial politics existent in the migrant returnees’ stories.

1.5 No Longer a Damsel in Distress

This dissertation intends to highlight the work of former Indonesian migrant women workers who have finished their work overseas and then become “activists” for migrant rights in their home country as a social entrepreneur, an office worker, a writer, a filmmaker, a full-time NGO activist and a government consultant. It intends to show the chasm between how migrant workers are stereotyped, portrayed and conceptualized and how some of the returnees are carving out their own space in the nation’s capital, Jakarta.

In their current endeavors in social, cultural and political spaces in Jakarta, the returnees make themselves credible by claiming the migrant worker experience as their own. Following Rudolf Mrazek’s reading of Simmel (2009), the returnees have found a way to become audible by placing exaggerated emphasis on their personal identities as migrant worker returnees. Their work requires the experience of vulnerability and victimhood to be recalled as part of their
identity, and to be put on display and shared with others; at the same time, they must unravel this experience and identity analytically and assertively in order to prevent the very experience they had from happening to others. Despite being weak and helpless before, their present existence defies the concept of femininity packaged into a one-dimensional stereotype as a state-assigned notion and as a defined element within the social structure. These returnees display a different brand of collective consciousness than one might expect from TKW. These women activists manifest multiple identities and gender roles, and occupy a place of innovation and transformation. They stand visibly against masculine control over their bodily and aesthetic sensations. Nonetheless, the new political and social space they occupy does not represent binary oppositions in gender relations.

The migrant worker returnees occupy what were previously gender-specific, male-specific post-colonial spaces in the social make-up and hierarchical power structures, and are treated as experts and key players on a daily basis in their chosen profession. While seeing them speak at protests, meetings, conferences and other public events, no one utters the word “kasihan” (poor thing), a word often invoked by migrant worker-related news. Compared to what Diane Wolf (1992) observed in her study of Javanese women in the 1980s, Indonesian women no longer see their contribution to the economic gain of their own families—and in broad terms, their state—as insignificant. Instead, armed with the recognition of their economic, social and political power, migrant returnee women have begun to work the system in creative ways.

To sum up, popular consciousness has impacted the discursive construction of TKW to some degree, and such construction has affixed the existence of migrant women workers to an image of permanent vulnerability and temporally restricted their identity by placing it in moments of
abuse. However, when placed on a continuum, migrant women workers’ identity does not start when abuse begins overseas and does not stop when they are no longer “migrant workers.” This dissertation seeks to add and trouble multiple and contradictory layers to the popular notion of TKW and to actively challenge the singular construction of gender, because no returnees will call themselves “kasihan,” nor damsels in distress.
Chapter 2: Methodology

In describing the methodology for this research, I look at the beginning of this project. I am a life-long migrant, who immigrated to Canada at the age of 18, and before then, I attended four elementary schools, two middle schools, and three high schools. In my professional career, I have been a frontline worker assisting asylum-seekers and refugees, a decision-maker in an economic immigration program, and a funding officer giving out grants to community organizations to help immigrant youth. I recall my eagerness to find answers to the victimization of some of the most resourceful and resilient people I have ever met and learning about the discourses that happened daily in all kinds of communities including academia, non-profit organizations, government, and international organizations. After spending years working with different groups of migrants and having reflected on my own experiences, I began noticing several patterns in the policy-making of the state agencies and many non-governmental organizations. In the day-to-day activity of providing assistance to migrants, I was lacking the discourse about the colourfulness of their lives, the dispirited historicization of their experience, and the simplification of their desires, memory, and life. In Jakarta, I became involved in the lives of a group of women and was trained on relationship-building, which became a key piece of the methodology of this dissertation.

This research project seeks to understand the lives of Indonesian women migrant worker returnees based on their stories of migration and return, accompanied by the processes in and outcomes from the creative projects in which they were engaged that involved the social, political, economic, and cultural arenas of Greater Jakarta. Using key themes that emerged from the women’s accounts, I have analyzed the meaning of transnational labour and “return,” while
exploring the notions and role of the emotional content. In this chapter, I discuss several challenges in applying the theoretical tools and ethical standards from Western academia to a study of Indonesian women. I argue for the importance of relationship-building as a key methodology rooted in feminist and urban ethnography that has informed some of my vital decisions during the fieldwork. This chapter briefly explores the practices of Indonesian oral storytelling as used in this research project and the prominent themes highlighted by the women returnees.

Besides addressing specific experiences of the Indonesian returnees, this dissertation explores oral storytelling, dialogue processes, and how emotion is related to space. Centered on discursivity as a key principle, this research project has relied on the stories told by the returnee women to identify two themes—*hati* (heart) and *pulang* (return)—that comprise two chapters in the dissertation, often unassociated with Indonesian labour migration. The stories also require the urban space to be treated as an “emotionscape” for migrant worker returnee women. The experiences of the returnee women reveal many personalities and manifestations of Jakarta, and lead to emotional geographies of the urban space, as they relate to particular experiences that have shaped the women’s interpretations and interactions with the city. They also indicate the formal and informal forces that attempt to govern the city. In the process of oral storytelling, emotions are both expressed and implied, creating a kind of emotionscape that is never uniform. The emotionscape includes the interactions with the researcher and is complemented by the situatedness of the relevant spaces.
2.1 Introduction: Being Ethical in Their Own Terms

In preparing for the fieldwork that began in 2016, I had spent approximately 12 months in Indonesia between 2013 and 2015, and had traveled to communities in and around Jakarta, Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta, Ambon, Lombok, Bali, and Malang. I stayed at people’s homes or at small boarding houses for most of my trips and learned from the people about the history of their communities and the everyday lives of Indonesians. I began to understand the rhythms of their conversations, essential ingredients in the food, and daytime and nighttime routines for the families across different regions. For the purpose of this research, I learned an important lesson that establishing a clear boundary between the researcher and the informant will be problematic. To have open conversations on a range of topics, I needed to be open to unexpected turns and shifts, and could not take the stance of an observer in these conversations. After reflecting on my preliminary visits, I began developing the structure for my research proposal, and obtained verbal, not written consent from the participants and attempted discursive, conversational interviewing. I prepared a series of predesigned questions to set the parameters of the research, but arrived at the field expecting the unexpected.

When the fieldwork began in 2016, I initially tried asking the women questions while using an audio-recorder. The initial conversations were casual but I soon realized that the interviewees tended to be formal and would deliver prepared comments in proper Indonesian. I could hear many of their stories this way, but they also tended to be superficial. I had known some of the interviewees for a few years before the interviews began, and some of their stories seemed to be overly consistent with the narrative of migrant workers in Indonesia, focusing on poverty, misfortune, vulnerability, and helplessness. The recordings captured the “origin” story of many
Indonesian migrant workers in relation to such themes, but I could not relate these to my present-day returnee friends. I believed that the interviewees could and wanted to tell me more.

Instead of using questions to prompt their responses, I needed to build some kind of space that would trigger their responses, stories, and emotions, and encourage them to share their stories with each other. The space would need to involve more than just rapport, or practices and conditions for the interviewees to feel comfortable and collegial, so that the conversations could really open up. First, we needed to have more free-flowing conversations, as opposed to simply receiving answers to my questions. After realizing that the discursivity principle would be needed in the interview process, I began immersing myself in the everyday lives of the interviewees, not only to start the conversations but also to build trust. It was important to be present, and I understood that I needed to be part of their lives, participating in their routines, and becoming a fixture in their circle of friends and families to uncover the experiences and emotions within the narrative of migrant worker returnees. I sought to co-construct an environment where our shared stories would naturally touch on the lives of returnees living in the city and use observation and questioning to clarify the descriptions and explanations.

To facilitate the process, my interviewees often invited me to be part of their lives. I usually accepted their invitations and never turned down an offer to stay at their houses with their extended families, go out for food, or eat a meal with their family members. Being “present” during the fieldwork was always a central aspect, and consequently, I became more familiar to those in the neighbourhood. My interviewees realized my real interest in getting to know them, and that I did not want to see them as research subjects or one-off interviewees. In the project,
the participants played roles as teachers, commentators, analysts, and friends, and I often explained this to them as well. I enjoyed being part of their community, and the community seemed to open up to me, allowing me access to their communal and quotidian knowledge of the urban life in Greater Jakarta.

As the learning process continued, I reached a critical juncture in my research design that connected all threads and remained as an undercurrent for the interpretation and analysis. Whose ethical standards was I subject to? Was my priority more to establish trust with the interviewees or meet the North American university tradition of recording and documenting? While struggling with these questions in the field, one day at the migrant women’s shelter, I was doing laundry with Mbak Ayu, one of my two housemates. The day had begun like any other, with a bright morning sun and scents of kampung (village) waking me up. I was not ready for the profound, teachable moment that was to happen later. In fact, I had not really spoken to Mbak Ayu before, as her depression and mood swings made it difficult for people to get to know her. Nevertheless, that morning in the laundry room, amid the soap and dirty water, she decided to tell me the stories of her childhood, adolescence, and marriage. I could not get myself out of that shared moment to ask her for consent to record, and started recording. The moment was real and raw; she wanted me to hear her, nod with her, and feel her pains and joys. I was humbled by her complete honesty and how her innermost thoughts were flowing out. Her honesty demanded that I also be honest in the moment. By trusting and opening up to me, she showed her respect and revealed her vulnerability in missing home and thinking of home as a forbidden place for her, as her family had refused her return to their village. In the moment, I followed her cue, as an
Indonesian woman migrant worker returnee, instead of my own. Afterwards, she became completely open to me, and we talked much more often than before.

In my research proposal, my intent was to leave the communication channels open between me and my interviewees throughout the project to ensure that discursivity would be a guiding principle. I believe the interviewees to be authors of their own stories, and have tried to treat them as such. I also believe that they have authority over the materials they provide, and would know best how to handle them. Their “status” in my research is to be more than just data-providing figures who have experiences for me to observe. Some of my fellow PhD students were concerned about how I maintained contact with the interviewees after the fieldwork period. Another student once said that I did not maintain enough distance from my “informants.” I was contacting the interviewees to ask them how I should approach certain issues, especially when the analyses of the materials they provided needed more depth or insight. My very act of approaching the “informants” after the fieldwork was complicating their place in the research, because I had invited them to a space that was usually occupied by academics after the data collection phase. The interviewees did not consider this to be an issue at all, and did not expect me to maintain a distance from the structural and systematic position as an academic, in keeping with the Western tradition.

I consulted with the six key interviewees about the stories and materials they shared with me. In particular, four of them were writers and they were articulate, thoughtful, skilled storytellers, with different personalities and backgrounds. Two of them had published works, and the others had written on social media and had unpublished manuscripts. One of the published writers, Mbak Ida Raihan, was a migrant worker-turned essayist and novelist. After reading her novel
Cintaku di Negeri Jackie Chan (My Love in the Country of Jackie Chan, 2012), which was loosely based on her time as a migrant worker in Hong Kong, I asked her what she wanted her readers to understand or experience from her writings. She responded:


I am more interested in knowing what my readers understand from what I write, Kilim. I do not have a theme in my blog. It’s like it has a mix of themes. Because I write what I feel like at the moment. Whatever I think and whatever I feel.

She turned the table for me—writing is not about the writer but about the reader. In “The Death of the Author,” Roland Barthes (1987) writes “writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away…” also suggesting “As soon as a fact is narrated… the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death and writing begins” (142). As with Barthes, Mbak Ida did not view the author as an all-powerful, theological omnipotent being, but instead, immediately recognized that the author was not the only person in creation and re-creation of literature. Her response highlights Barthes’ assertion that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination…” (148).

I asked the same question to another writer, Mbak Jaladara (2014) whose short story “A Bloodstained Letter to the President” was featured during the Ubud Writers Festival. The story is

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[10] Mbak Ida was posting her writings on her blog at the time of the interview.
about Mina, an Indonesian migrant worker in Hong Kong who meets a tragic fate. She responded, “I hope the readers feel what I feel… What the tokoh (character) feel[s] in the story.” Writing is an adventure through expressions, and it cannot escape some elements of being autobiographical.

Mbak Jaladara recognized that her story was grounded in her experience and she wanted her readers to consider her feelings and thoughts when she was a migrant worker. “A Bloodstained Letter to the President” ends with a fictional newspaper article that leaves out much of the detail from the incident. In the absence of the complex layers and ignored realities, Mbak Jaladara wanted her readers to reflect on the emotions in a rather sterile reality. She drew a direct link to the characters in her writing, and carefully removed the boundary that separated the author from the characters. Mbak’s words also validated reading and writing as a continuum, as the Argentine writer, Jorge Luis Borges (2010) confessed in “The Superstitious Ethics of the Reader.” Borges, known as an imaginative writer fond of fantastical elements, highlighted the organic relationship between reading and writing and lamented over the reader’s inability to simply feel what the writer had envisioned. Mbak Jaladara wanted her readers to come along with the experience and she invited them to imagine. Learning from Mbak Ida and Mbak Daniela has been a valuable experience, and by not distancing myself from them, I had a greater opportunity to learn about their views and the role of the writer.

Feminist research methodologies allow researchers to recognize the impossibility of completely separating the research subject from the notions of objectivity in collecting and articulating the stories. A number of feminist scholars have long argued that, to understand a community, the researcher must be part of the community. Hondagneu-Soleto (1994) injected herself into the community as an “informal social worker,” and Martin (cited in Lykes and Crosby 2011, 147)
characterized relationships within a research project as mutually dependent and cooperative. Continuing with Finch (1984) and McNamara (2004), I cannot claim that I am giving my research subject “voice,” or as the researcher, intruding and interrupting the migrant women’s daily lives. I made a conscious effort to work as a “culturally responsible researcher” by exercising sensitivity to the culture (Liamputtong 2014), where the developed research methods were culturally responsive and responsible (Chilisa 2012). In cross-cultural research, such as this project, the approach must be responsive to the triggering and invitations of the interviewees while being responsible to the project in hand. The women’s involvement in the research design with feedback from the preliminary fieldwork came from recognizing the power dynamics and privilege that existed between me and my co-researchers, and from the risk for me to claim “epistemic authority.” Instead of deciding “whose knowledge is recognized and validated and whose is silenced” (Naples and Gurr 2014, 21), I use ethnography as a reflexive critiquing and iterative revision process to inform the methodology (Buch and Staller, 2014).

I have also rigorously applied lessons learned from research with Indigenous communities to ensure that the project is conducted in a meaningfully collaborative, respectful, and dignified manner. A number of ethical considerations found in the Aboriginal Research Ethics Initiative’s (AREI) work on *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans* (TCPS) (2008) have been helpful in this regard. The AREI identified the research guidelines developed by First Nations and Inuit organizations to address participation in research that may affect aboriginal communities, and pointed out that “Involvement at all levels is generally sought, from concept, to project design, through data collection, analysis and dissemination of findings” (7). Thus, the research protocol and guidelines were developed and
modified in the spirit of openness and partnership with my interviewees, while keeping in mind the dynamics of community relations with institutional researchers, community organizations, and individuals. The responsibilities of the researcher must be conversant in the local culture to avoid using methods of inquiry that could end up being offensive, which could also result in interpretations of the data reinforcing negative stereotypes of the migrant returnee community.

During an interview with Mbak Ani, she asked me, “Kilim, what do you do when you go home at night?” We had been talking about the time when she was a single girl living in the Blok M area, and discussing the gendered experience of “Jakarta.” She wondered if my after-work routines resembled hers. Years ago as a budding filmmaker, she had to work at an editing studio until late at night, and did not enjoy the commute back to her boarding house because the buses were full and the streets were dark when she walked home alone. Nonetheless, she found a well-paid job in her industry, and even after sending money home, had enough left to go out to eat at a Pizza Hut with her friends from the boarding house or work. As we were talking about Jakarta, a city that represents “Indonesia,” we discussed her contributions to the urban space with her experiences as a migrant worker returnee. As a skillful storyteller, she was also curious about me being her potential research subject. We spoke about Mbak Ani’s life in the city, but she turned our conversation from being unidirectional to a shared one, by asking me to talk about myself. The shift Mbak Ani created reflected her culturally acceptable way to converse, that is, to make the discourse personal and relevant to both people in it. The turn here resonated with Mbak Ida’s and Mbak Heni’s thoughts on the relationship between writer and reader. My conversations with the interviewees had to be mutually dependent and relationship affirming, while minimizing the distances in-between and inviting the listener to speak. That afternoon, Mbak Ani filmed me
singing along with her son’s karaoke performance of Indonesian rock music, saying that she would use it later for a story. I have also helped her with her film project of some cityscapes in Vancouver and Hong Kong. I am not just an interviewer existing as a punctuated memory in her life; she invited me to be part of her everyday life. To her friends and family, she always introduced me as *teman*, a friend, and never as *peneliti*, a researcher.

The notion of consent also led to some meaningful discussions with local activists with whom I consulted during the preliminary fieldwork to get feedback on the initial research design. In visiting with them, I asked what methods or processes I should use to get written consent from the interviewees. They all shook their head vigorously and told me never to give people a piece of paper to sign. I was told it would raise suspicion about me—what might she do with that paper? The act of asking for consent at the beginning of the interviews often amused or confused many of the interviewees. After they agreed to meet me to share their stories, we would meet at the location of their choosing and I would ask them for oral consent and permission to record. Initially, they laughed and looked puzzled but they would agree with a smile. Their agreement to tell their stories was based on an often unspoken assumption that I would honour their stories and life experiences. I was entrusted by them from the moment they heard me explain my research project and we decided to meet and talk. In other words, if they spoke to me, it meant that I had their consent. Through our conversations, taking place within the confines of my research project, the interviewees told their stories and described their experiences to me.

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11 In my repeated visits to Jakarta, I had opportunities to help Western-educated or based researchers on their first visit to Indonesia and many of them showed up with consent forms to be signed. High level bureaucrats and English-speaking academics and researchers were familiar with the Western style, consent process and did not hesitate to sign the forms.
with a permission and invitation for me to “use” them. If they told me the stories, I understood that to be a permission for me to bring them to my context.

In an interview with Mbak Ani, her laugh in response to my question, “boleh rekam?” (may I record?) can be heard in the recording, as if she tried to erase the strangeness from my behavior so that she could settle herself back to the culturally comfortable setting. The interviewees were curious about the kind of consent process I described as being common and often mandatory in Canadian universities, and they asked why my university required this. They were interested in knowing why such a process had to be implemented and asked if researchers might not honor and respect the participants in the absence of such a process. I had also explained that the process included meeting the detailed requirements from the ethics review. When I mentioned that I would use a pseudonym for each interviewee, Mbak Ani said she wanted her own name to be used. Later, she added that if it was absolutely necessary, she would choose her own pseudonym and asked me to use her daughter’s name.¹²

For the interviewees, it was more important to own their stories by claiming them as their own, rather than being told that they were protected by a process established and confirmed at a North American university. None of them saw themselves as a person in need of protection by way of anonymity. Instead, they were eager to be identified, included, and considered to be as who they were in my writing. The level of trust between myself and the interviewees was shown by their desire to appear in the research, and some of them preferred—Mbak Ani, Mbak Ida and Mbak Heni—that I use their real names. While finding the requirement for anonymity and oral consent to be unusual, all of the interviewees were still obliged to have their consent audio-

¹² In respecting Mbak Ani’s wish, I have used her real name in this dissertation.
recorded. *Boleh* Kilim, *boleh*, allowed me to be complicit with the Western academic traditions and research ethics, while having them work with a new set of rules. I could not help but consider their openness as a metaphor for their returnee experience. They were experienced in daily negotiations with capitalist ethics, which was a kind of ethics that originated somewhere else but dominated the urban experience in Jakarta. The participants became well-versed in the new rules and standards, and the guiding principles in urban centres where they lived, but they did not embrace them blindly. They moved in and out of the new standards that were being actively reshaped to produce a new brand of ethics that would challenge the old. They let me record them and change their names, but they took every opportunity to make the conversations and experiences about everyone involved. They allowed me to set up the basic parameters but did not let me keep the walls between us or between me and the others in their lives. My experience as a researcher in urban Indonesia suggested that in cross-cultural research, one tends to assume that the consent process will protect “third-world women.” Nevertheless, the assumption may need to be reconsidered and concealing the identities of the participants raises the question: whose process needs to be valued more: ours or our informants?

When I applied to the Canadian research ethics in Indonesia, the process turned out to be more profound than I had imagined. After I had done some preparatory work, including preliminary research, language training, and the relatively smooth application for a research permit, I thought I was ready to meet the challenge. Nevertheless, the field research required more detailed research questions and design, as I will describe later. I was among many typical Canadian doctoral students who spend years preparing for the research phase, taking courses, testing the

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13 My field notes on this topic read: “When it feels like sailing in an open ocean without having a compass and knowing how to swim, I rely on my own instinct and ambition. I feel uncertain and unsure.”
methods and theories, and investigating the research sites, occasionally making preliminary visits to field locations to become familiarized with the situation and to learn the language. In the dramatically different cultural context, I had to re-examine my relationship to the project and the research design. I found that the research project defined and influenced my preconceived notions and my sense of identity. Ultimately, I completed the predetermined tasks with “good intentions.”

2.2 Relationship-Building in the Indonesian Context: Reflections on Feminist and Urban Ethnography in the Field

Relationship-building may sound like belonging to the realm of gaining access to the field (McNamara 2004; Naples 2003; Robson 1993) as opposed to the methodology itself. Nevertheless, it is one of the most meaningful epistemological engagements, particularly with regard to ethnographic research projects in Indonesia. Relationships are treated as a visible currency in Indonesia (see Li 2007; Rodgers 1995; Tsing 1993) and I found interviewees and informants to be more likely to respond when introduced directly by friends or after having met them on previous occasions. Relationship-building was the key guiding principle for conducting the fieldwork and it turned out to be part of the methodology.

Black feminist scholar, Patricia Hill Collins (1999) uses the term, “outsider within” as a status to describe African-American women’s access to the white society and suggested that it provides a special standpoint on “self, family, and society for Afro-American women” (s14). While class, status, gender, and power define relationships, Collins (1999) also recognizes that establishing a relationship provides black women with a unique angle into the white society. Although I do not
have the *exclusive* viewpoint of marginality that Collins (1999) described, her argument on oppression is relevant to my positionality. Relationship-building allowed me to position myself as an “outsider within,” genuinely interested in understanding who the interviewees were, as opposed to collecting data on them and disappearing afterwards. Therefore, I was “within” their community, wanting to open the doors into it and keep them open. As the researcher is placed into the relationship matrix of the interviewees, her or his presence also becomes meaningful to them. The exchange then becomes mutual, which lend itself to the sharing of lives and stories. Jackson (2002) emphasizes the importance of building and acknowledging relations:

> This reciprocal movement between the real and the imaginary is grounded in the intersubjective interplay of self and other. No one exists except in and through relationships, both empathic and antipathetic, with others. As a corollary, it is impossible to conceptualize one’s experience except in through a relation with otherness (138).

One of my original research questions was to find out why migrant workers return to Indonesia. It was difficult to get a fully developed answer to the question, but as our relationships developed, I waited for the answers to come out in the sharing of our lives, and for unexpected terrain to open up. For researchers wishing to conduct fieldwork on the theme of everydayness in Indonesia, the exercise of waiting for the right moment to discuss the central issues of the research can have critical implications and consequences. It is all about listening to the bodily and spoken cues of the locals and those who hold the key to entering the community to gain a spot in the relationship matrix and gradually create my own identity. In fact, I had to learn the meaning of the Indonesian concept, *terserah* (to be resigned; to go with the flow) in many

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14 Many people in the field compared this to overseas development assistance (ODA) funding given by aid agencies of developed countries.
situations. It was essential to be there and meet tête-à-tête and to stay as long as possible, depending on the flow of the conversations. Moreover, it was less important to be on time but important to inhabit the shared space even if it meant to wait by idly. The North American standards of setting up an appointment and being on time were abandoned on several occasions, though the interviewees and I would often check in on each other and simply show up where the other person was. Whoever was available at the time could be part of the plan, and usually, more friends from all kinds of circles would join in to the dinner party that might grow over night. I was often asked to come and show up at someone’s home for a lunch or dinner, and after some time, I would be invited to stay overnight. The invitation to stay the night was never *basa basi* (well-mannered behavior), and a struggle could ensue for a good half an hour to discuss why I could not stay longer.

I do not deny my place high up in the hierarchy, because of what I represented and how I acted. My efforts to become an ally were appreciated and rewarded by the friendships formed and the stories told. In any case, I functioned representing Western academia, and as a transient subject associated with two economic powers—Canada and South Korea—and thus, I was a kind of gender and class that was differently constructed and foreign. The female gender that I inadvertently introduced to the social fabric of my interviewees signified both a possibility and an anomaly. Despite my experience of having lived in some of the biggest urban centres, like Taipei and Hong Kong, my singleness and pursuit of further education were puzzling to some of the interviewees. I was the only female remaining unmarried in my mid-30s and still in school, and for a short period I was a constant figure in their lives, carrying on with a series of actions that likely seemed unusual to the interviewees. Ibu Lana suggested that I should stop studying.
and become an Indonesian banana trader in Canada after getting married, and Ibu Dewi advised that I should marry someone rich so that I would not have to worry about high housing prices in Vancouver. While the idea of education was important and exciting to all of the interviewees, obtaining it while sacrificing having a married life and growing a family was not easily understood in the Indonesian context. The ideal urban female of Jakarta was described to me as being a woman who is capable, entrepreneurial, and intelligent, but is most likely about to be married or is already married. Many of the young Indonesians who I spoke to expressed annoyance with the comments of their elders in regard to marriage expectations and they often continue to remain single, though they openly and strongly acknowledge the importance of having a family eventually.

The daily interactions that contributed to relationship-building temporarily defied political and economic implications and instead allowed us to find a common ground, which prompted an invitation to build the relationship together. Building on Haraway (1988), Collins (1999), and Visweswaran (1994), I proposed a revised ontology where individuals with various standpoints converge and negotiate the idea of shared space, and go beyond the valorized notion of experience (see Scott 1991). In other words, while recognizing class as a privileged location and representation for the location of struggle, the interviewees and I began claiming a new space of conversations, where we interrogated one another’s identity, appropriated a series of characteristics, and left “mimetic traces” in the process (hooks 1995, 11-15). We shared a meal and continued to eat the food offered by the host, while watching *Dangdut Academy* 3\(^{15}\) for five hours. We commented about the contestants and just hung out at someone’s boarding house.

\(^{15}\) Indonesian version of the *American Idol* type of TV show where contestants sing the traditional Indonesian music of *dangdut*. 
(“main di kos”) after dinner. I would not claim to have been successful in relationship-building with every person I met. Not everyone was curious enough or interested to get to know me, and I had been described as a Canadian who looked like a Korean celebrity. Nevertheless, I learned that establishing the shared space was critical and it could only open up if we somehow resided and dwelled together.

If the participatory observation method used in ethnographic fieldwork (see Buch and Staller 2014; McNamara 2009 for a discussion) can be considered as a practical strategy, I would suggest that relationship-building is a fundamental element in feminist ethnography that allows the research to be reflexive and discursive. As I treated the process to be reflexive (Holliday 2007), I became interested in auto-ethnography (Richardson 2006; Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Wolcott 2001) and applied this method to the Jakarta chapter, where I show how I was affected by the research process. Rather than keeping a distance, relationship-building involves recognizing the complexities of the researcher’s presence in the qualitative research process and attempts to situate interviewees in a mechanism of question and answer that does not force the interviewees into a pre-defined position. Rather than focusing on the differences—while acknowledging them—the method problematizes the notions of power in the ethnographic tradition where the often colonized, Third-World other, is not exoticized or essentialized. It also allows the research project to be continuous, therefore enabling the longue durée approach over quotidian practices.

2.3 Interviews

From January to April 2016, I interviewed 20 women and conducted in-depth interviews with six of them. Of the six, I had known four women for more than a year. In addition to the interviews,
I spent many hours following them in their routines, going to the market, playing with their children, meeting their business contacts, and attending public and family events. They felt they knew me well enough to introduce me to their close friends who eventually took part in my project. Two of them let me (or asked me to) stay at their homes over an extended period, usually for a few days at a time. I also had an opportunity to live at a migrant women’s shelter on and off for a month where I had two housemates who were both former migrant workers. I conducted interviews at places of their choice or places that we shared at the time with a conviction that “an account cannot be understood outside the interlocutory scene in which it takes place” (Butler 2005, 112). Often, our conversations took place while frying chilli and garlic, washing clothes by hand, sipping our morning coffee, watching the news on TV, chasing children running around in the living room with toys everywhere, or sitting helplessly in traffic congestion.

Ostensibly, the only common thread among all of the interviewees was the fact that they worked as Indonesian female migrant workers and their job was to take care of someone else’s home as a maid or domestic worker, in Indonesian, commonly called pekerja rumah tangga (PRT: housekeeper). In any case, they were a diverse and eclectic group. Of the six in-depth interviewees, four lived in kampung in Jakarta, Tangerang, and Bekasi, one lived in a residential housing complex in Bogor, and one lived in kos (also spelled as kost, a boarding house) in Central Jakarta. Three had university degrees, and the other three had finished elementary school. Of the six women, two were Christians and four were Muslims. Only one had never been married and the others were married or divorced, with their ages ranging from the late-20s to early-50s. Except for one interviewee who originated from Sumatra, the others were

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16 PRT can be compared to a term for housewife in Bahasa Indonesia, ibu rumah tangga.
17 Translates to village. In cities, it refers to village-like settlements. See the kampong section in the Jakarta chapter for more discussion.
from various parts of Java. They had worked in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Saudi Arabia. At the time when I met them, they were enjoying careers as a well-known activist, a social entrepreneur, a professional filmmaker, a novelist, an office administrator, and a government consultant/businesswoman.

As for the interviewees with whom I had shorter interviews (approximately two hours or so), they were Muslim, either married or divorced, and had worked in Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Most had come from East Java, while one had come from Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB). These women were usually housewives but most had a small side business running a *kos* or a small eatery selling noodles, *pecel* (a boiled vegetable dish served with peanut sauce and rice) snacks. I met them in small villages in East Java and *kampung* in East Jakarta. In most cases, I met them at their homes and workplaces on multiple occasions and continued our initial conversation. I met their children, neighbours, workmates, and other family members.

![Map of Indonesia](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indonesia_map.png)

**Figure 9** Map of Indonesia. Source: Wikimedia Commons (File:Indonesia_map.png). Retrieved 7 Jan 2018
Not all of the interviews could be recorded because of the nature of the conversations that took place. In such situations, I tried to make detailed notes right after the conversation. As I discussed earlier, we sometimes began talking as we were handwashing dirty laundry or when we ran into each other on the street. Furthermore, I found that in the recorded interviews, the women stuck to their “scripted” stories that were mainly about their time in Hong Kong and the things that I was already familiar with. I realized that they probably had the opportunity to tell these stories many times, given that some of them had already been interviewed by the Indonesian media. When the recorder was off, I asked impromptu questions and as soon as we were not interviewing, and merely chatting, the women more freely shared their ideas and feelings and were able to have free-flowing conversations with me. Their answers also tended to be curt when the recorder was on. The presence of the recorder caused some discomfort because of the possibly unknown audience, and even though they always gave me consent, their attitudes and stories changed when the recorder was turned off. I understood that making things official would not be a fruitful approach in the fieldwork. With some of the interviewees, I carried on the conversations on popular messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, which some of the women indicated was their preferred way of communication. All of the women provided their work products to me free of charge, sternly refusing any voluntary payment. Their work products included published and unpublished books, documentary films, food, clothes, and promotion pamphlets. In an attempt to provide compensation, I brought them souvenirs from Canada and Japan and gave their children clothes and school supplies.
2.4 Oral Storytelling as a Method

There are a number of elements that make storytelling in an oral form a unique and critical contribution to knowledge. First of all, it begins with the physical and unavoidable presence of an audience or a listener. The process therefore never isolates the storyteller from the listener and the two are always in direct contact, never falling into solitude (Benjamin 1969). Being in the company of the listener, the storyteller is unable to retract or reverse the words, creating a version that can never be repeated. What could be seen as didactic is counterbalanced by the audience’s immediate reaction, in my case, exclamations or affirmatives, “gitu ya Ibu...” (oh like that) “bagaimana Bu?!” (how come?) that would lead to the discursive reshaping of the story with a reactionary emphasis, which may have been missing in the original construction of the story. What is said indefinitely remains in that shared space of thoughts, while some things are left to the imagination, thus locating the story between fact and fiction (Gough 2008). For instance, in the interviewees’ stories of Hong Kong and Kampung Melayu, both areas that I had visited, they seemed to have been changed significantly. “Hong Kong” was recreated discursively, containing specific geographic references and nameless buildings and street corners, with the people they met and the feelings they had in those places. Instead of being recreated as a transportation hub, “Kampung Melayu” invoked anxiety and hostility and the faces of suspicious angkot (minibus) drivers at night could still be recalled. When re-imagined from their stories, I had to place Hong Kong and Kampung Melayu somewhere between my experiences and their experiences, and could never situate them in the same way again.

This is where the richness of the oral tradition lies. While my fieldwork was supplemented by the visual and written materials provided by the returnee women, their stories were the grounds for
their work products that provided the background and situated the women in their desired spaces. In this project, I was the only interviewer, and the only constant audience for the interviewees. I always felt that their stories were gifts to me and that they were generous and performative by drawing from the rich aesthetics, articulating the scenes where they said good-bye to their children, were surprised by a phone call about the departure the next morning, or were fearful of shady characters at the urban bus terminal of Jakarta. They soon picked up that I appreciated these seemingly unimportant details in their stories. I wanted them to paint the scene for me as they remembered it. I was curious how they were reimagining and reconstructing it. While writing about the migrant women’s life stories in late-20\textsuperscript{th} century Britain, in \textit{Migrant Women’s Voices} (2016), Linda McDowell notes that the stories took an unwieldy or non-chronological form in the storyteller’s mind and could still become a coherent story when it was retold. This also happened with some of my interviewees who initially gave me rehearsed versions of their stories as TKW (their past) and mantan (former) TKW (their present). Over time, their prepared stories became richer with new characters, place names, memorable events, and most importantly their feelings. The stories were not necessarily consistent, but they were decisively colourful and dynamic. As Abidin Kusno (2003) suggests, I see the Indonesian oral tradition as not pretending to be authoritative, adequate, or accurate, but instead revealing the repressed part of the stories by removing the blockage.\textsuperscript{18} The storyteller needs to recognize and accept the presence of the listener, and have the desire to tell and the willingness to co-create the narrative with varying levels of contributions from both sides in visible and invisible ways. The Indonesian oral tradition allows the stories of “Indonesia” to be told through personal narratives with deep public resonance, as “telling a life involves telling history” and the animation of social

images and societal histories related to the time (Rodgers 1995, 3). Thus, in a discursive co-construction, the stories become sufficiently fertile for unplanned trajectories and explorations that bring us along on the journey.

For the initial interviews, I composed a series of specific questions for the women that were designed to answer the research questions. In the actual interviews; however, this approach did not work well. After a couple of interviews that evolved into conversation and casual chats, I discovered that each woman functioned with a unique and clear rhythm in storytelling of their own. Some of the questions that I had prepared were about the family, which I believed would be easy to answer, given how Indonesian women are open about their marital status. But when I asked Ibu Lana to tell me about her family in East Java, she faintly smiled and answered:

Ibu Lana: *Ya... Saya nggak ingin. Karena apa, keluarga saya marah ketika saya jadi TKI.*

_Dan setelah itu, sejak saat itu, komunikasi kami tidak bagus._

Kilim: _Mereka masih di Malang ya?_

Ibu Lana: _Sudah tidak ada. Bapak dan ibu sudah meninggal._

Ibu Lana: Yeah, I don’t want to. Because, um, my family was mad at me when I became a migrant worker. After that, since that time, our communication has not been good.

Kilim: They are still in Malang, right?

Ibu Lana: They are not there any more. My father and mother already passed away.

Later, Ibu Lana told me that she had been estranged from her family ever since she decided to become an activist and relocate permanently to Jakarta.
With Mbak Yani, who was one of my housemates at the shelter, I used to watch TV for hours late into the night eating snacks, discussing the ridiculously high price of an antibiotic ointment, and wondering why cellphone chargers had to be so expensive. She was a diligent caretaker. She also made sure that I had working power outlets in my room every night so that I could have an electric fan while sleeping, even though it might mean that she would not have one for herself. She made me coffee whenever I was working on my computer and seemed to be losing my focus. Once I took photos of her working in the kitchen, and she started smiling and posing for me with a ladle. As the days and weeks passed by, she somehow felt comfortable enough to open up about the most painful and traumatic experience in her life. One night at the shelter, a night like any other, she held her smartphone in her hand and said to me ever so softly, “I use this phone to talk to my child.” I did not know at the time, but it felt like she wanted me to know that she had a child and the reason for her to have a smartphone in addition to an older mobile phone. It was the first time she had mentioned any of her family members, or anything about her personal life. A few days later, I learned from a female friend who often visited the shelter that Mbak Yani’s son was born as a result of rape while she was a domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, and she was forced to leave him there. Mbak Yani never mentioned her son again, and I did not ask about him.

Oral stories provide a remarkable picture in spite of their uneven development. Linda McDowell (2016) suggests that the very act of telling, together with the language used in recollection, not only reflects but also constructs experiences (15). After two or three hours of chatting with me at Grand Indonesia, a mall frequented by upper middle-class Indonesians, Mbak Efa paused to ask, “Why do you think all Indonesian migrant workers are women?” She raised the question after she told me about her TKW friends and their misadventures and misfortunes in Hong Kong. Not
all Indonesian migrant workers are women—men also work in fishing boats—but her recollection of her migration experience in Hong Kong was gendered in terms of sex, occupation, and impact. Recounting stories that seemed to equate suffering with female gender troubled her and prompted her question that politicized the migration process, which until that point, remained an economically-driven process. In other words, storytelling in and of itself became an experience that constructed the present for Mbak Efa, and as I recall, changed the direction of our conversation into gender equality, rural development, and education.

2.5 Telling Stories: Relationship-Building and the “Emotionscape” in Social and Political Spaces

Surprisingly, one of the most notable aspects in the interviews was that none of the interviewees were afraid to become emotional in telling their stories. As much as my questions had been prepared and rehearsed, I greatly enjoyed hearing from the interviewees during their spontaneous outbursts about their past and present vis-à-vis their perceived situatedness, as it led to a discovery of the Indonesian women’s modalities of modernity in the urban. Their interpretations of class, politics of space, and economic injustice were told through their stories of suffering, triumph, and humour. Working with the notion of agency and accepting the complex nature of the subject helped my attempt to look at migration as a human experience. In the deep, profound exploration of the humanity of migrant women that begins with uncertainties, and that allows life with its contradictions and emotions to creep in, I began forming questions about the nature and formation of spaces in the “emotionscape” where human emotions are made visible and circulated through representations and shape discourses (Saraswati 2013, 2). In our discourse of affect and emotions, the women revealed various structures of power that existed in spatial,
social, and political spaces, which they claimed and occupied. In other words, the relationship-building that prioritized reflexivity and situatedness could also highlight social spaces with a focus on female gender that underscored the spatial and power dimensions.

For the returnee women, the notion of “space” did not seem to build up from the abstract, but instead, it was relational and inherently political. Their articulation of space was often defined by being and feeling. Mbak Ani spoke about her house as a structure with contempt and disappointment, as she often complained to me about banjir (flooding) in the house in Tangerang due to the nearby river and the leaking air-conditioner pipes in the living room. When I asked if she knew about the problems in the house before she bought it, she said that her brother-in-law, who tends to have a dominating voice in the family, lived nearby and had recommended for her to buy it. The house is chaotic most of the time. With two children running around the house and a husband who is often bedridden, she was always being disturbed by someone or something. Nonetheless, she continued to work from home editing her films, because she had no other way to get the work done. She established a workspace in her domestic domain, where she knew where everything (or every problem) was and she knew when everything and every person fell asleep. She also brought her children to the film shoots, thus extending her domestic domain as a workspace. Her children, a key component in her domestic space, accompanied her outside, and thus, Mbak Ani’s interpretation of the domestic domain was a space where she could be a wife, mother, and professional filmmaker, disrupting the accepted notion of a “domestic,” which is clearly separated from “work”. Mbak Ani challenged the spatial politics of domestic space where the main relationships are built between family members by expanding it to include her work relationships, where her children also appeared and formed relationships of their own.
What seemed to be really critical with Mbak Ani’s story was the way in which the definition of space was tied to familiarity and extendibility based on affect. In her workspace, she always considered herself as a mother who was both provider and caretaker. I was astounded by her busy schedule and remarkable ability to coordinate her production team to arrange transportation and lodging for herself and her children for film shootings. She did this every time, not occasionally. When I expressed my admiration, Mbak Ani explained that she “learned it in class” as a psychology student in university. She read a study that encouraged mothers to spend as much as time as possible with their children until they reached three years of age. She wanted her children to know their mother was always around and where she was, so they could feel safe at home. For the children, it was not the physical structure of the house that signified “home,” but it was the presence of their mother, something that Mbak Ani knew all too well. By making herself available as the source of her children’s affect, she extended her domestic domain into the film shooting locations and transported her role as mother. The shooting location’s situatedness in this context served a dual purpose without much of a chasm.

I found it interesting that all of my core interviewees, despite having lived in the Jakarta area for years, had few experiences in most parts of the city and had no interest in seeing them, simply because they did not know anyone there. It was not that their production and perception of space was geographically limiting, but that they developed relationally with personal experiences directly and indirectly. “Jakarta” as a whole was never understood to be their city. “Jakarta” was always laden with emotions, giving a rich emotionscape to their lives as migrant returnees. To

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19 I also observed while living in kampung, that their notion of the domestic domain easily and habitually extended into the streets and while living in kos, it often extended into the kitchens, or other common areas and even to other people’s rooms.
Ibu Lana, Cikini is where all the hospitals are located, when she visits migrant returnees who are in need of medical treatment. To Mbak Ani, Gelora Bung Karno is where her film school used to be located. To Ibu Dewi, Rawamangun is where her old house used to be. Mbak Efa stayed a night in South Jakarta when she first returned from Hong Kong. None of the women go to these places in nostalgia or to put the past in perspective. The places claim a range of emotions, which became clear from the stories situated in them, though they do not evolve in their memories or develop new meanings. Somehow, as the sedentary pieces are charged with emotions, “Jakarta” is understood to be an assemblage of small domains, comprised of the women’s “spaces.”

The spaces that were mentally mapped to be accessible were situated where the women felt the least class differentiation and environments that were conducive to their on-going narrative. In a way, the women could call the space their own when they could produce what they considered authentic experience, that was unique to their identity and allowed their validation of their identity aesthetically and politically (hooks 1995). While many areas of the city are still considered inaccessible, especially by women, since they do not see themselves there, the women I interviewed were also acutely aware of the changes and developments that have been happening in the city and positioned themselves accordingly. Those living in kampung typically spend their weekends at home watching TV and catching up with neighbours, instead of heading to Grand Indonesia. Those living in the gated communities tend to visit the luxury malls instead of the local markets. Increasingly, in Jakarta, very little overlap occurs between the lives of the poor and the rich. Mahler and Pessar (2001) argue that the “‘gendered geographies of power’ is a framework for analyzing people’s social agency given their own initiative and positioning through multiple hierarchies of power operative within and across many terrains” (447).
Attending to emotions in relation to the space thus reveals the tension that exists in the power structure.
Chapter 3: Jakarta

Kita tetap melihat tekanan dan persoalan, tapi kita juga melihat solidaritas dan harapan. *(We always see pressure and problems but we also see solidarity and hope.)*

- Erik Prasetya (2014)


Ibu Lana: I felt it was nice here because the neighbourhood was able to accept my shelter.

The people who live in the shelter now are sick, depressed and the neighbourhood support them. The residents and the community support and welcome them. So we were able to open a shelter here.

Kilim: You already met with people here. How did you ask? Say, I have a shelter…

Ibu Lana: We explained that this house is for helping them [migrant workers] with problems. We help them take care of their problems. We help them who are sick to get well so they can return home. Turns out the community says, no problem! The most
important thing for us is to become part of our neighbourhood. The most important thing is where we are living in.

When I asked how Ibu Lana chose an area in Jakarta to live and build a shelter, she mentioned how she went and visited with the communities to see what they thought. Her “consultation” process was rather informal and took her and her husband to many neighbourhoods in Jakarta without preparing maps, documents or questionnaires. She had set a sight on integrating the shelter into the community, and spent time with the residents to see what they thought. She finally chose one that showed a genuine welcoming spirit to those in need, which was palpable to me while I lived there. Being the nation’s capital and one of the business centres of Southeast Asia, Jakarta may seem like a bustling financial centre, hungry for more power with its booming economy, but Ibu Lana and her friends are carving out places to restore hope and faith in the community they live in. The neighbours welcomed the new faces in their midst, and the shelter, completely invisible to those who focus on apartment towers and gated communities in Jakarta, helped migrant worker returnees find a temporary home to rest and recharge. In fact, my interviewees while actively participating in the political, cultural, and economic production of everyday practices in the city, allowed me to find a kind of hopeful terrain that seems to use a familiar language and yet still completely subverts the forces that seek to undermine them.

Jakarta offers completely different snapshots depending on the perspective: for example, to name just two, a kampung (village-like settlement) in Rawamangun where a smelly stream flows right by tiny houses and a walk into a short alleyway means passing by seven different homes, and a luxury high-rise in Senayan where the elevator opens its doors right into the suite and one suite is
as big as four to five typical houses in a kampung. For a city with many faces that traverses extremes with ease, it would be improper to consider Jakarta as a mere backdrop. Therefore, instead, this chapter seeks to explore its many personalities and manifestations through the experiences of the returnee women. I attempt to treat Jakarta as a subject itself in this chapter, weaving in and out of the stories as a protagonist and consistently maintaining its prominent role. The women’s stories in “Jakarta,” when placed in quotation marks, symbolizes so much about what “Indonesia” was, is, and is to be, and frustrates those who try to simply pin down the city as a place. By not distancing the returnee women from Jakarta, I wish to offer a glimpse into the city’s behaviour in response to women—as widely categorized as possible—in the urban space. I say women, because the intent in this chapter is to stay focused on the urban culture of Jakarta, as experienced and articulated by female migrant returnees, and to emphasize the shared nature of the experiences.

It is important to note in the Indonesian language, saya or aku (I) is often omitted in speech, which hints at the communal tendencies in storytelling. Therefore, in this chapter the autoethnographic narrative is used occasionally to support the migrant women’s stories and experiences. The stories are told from my point of view, but they are about us, kita, the word Erik Prasetya chooses to mean “we” in the opening quote, and one that includes the storyteller and listener. Here, kita, includes “Jakarta” as well.

This chapter also attempts to write emotional geographies of Jakarta, as they relate to particular events that has shaped the women’s experiences of the city. The emotions here are both

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20 For more discussion on autoethnography and examples, see Bochner and Ellis (2002); Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013); and Richardson (2006).

21 Kami also means we, and it does not include the speaker.
expressed and implied reactions that are specific to the places in the city, and indicative of the formal and informal forces that attempt to govern the city. I borrow Ben Anderson and Holden’s (2008) framework, the “enactments of hope” (143) and complement it with Prasetya’s point that for solidarity to unfold “neither only personal feelings nor a knowingly misleading rhetorical frill that can safely be ignored in favor of attention to the interests behind it, but rather material forces with performative effects” are required (144). By exploring emotions and other linked modalities such as affect and feeling, I would like to also consider the spatial politics in the migrant returnees’ stories. In other words, emotional geographies of Jakarta allow affect and emotion in and around certain places of Jakarta to articulate the forces that influence tangible and intangible manifestations of the city, because they are not necessarily always seen, but are always identified. Emotions and affect therefore constitute and explain the spaces within “Jakarta,” and stay alert to power relations particularly in terms of gender and class.

In fact, it is also worth noting here that the Indonesian language uses the same word, pikir, to mean to think and to feel. The recognition that the two are inseparable is supportive of efforts to consider Jakarta in terms of affect and emotion, and invites subjective interpretations of the cityscape composed of a diverse group of individuals who live in it. Therefore, I would like to show Jakarta where dreams converge and shatter, lives forge and scatter, and hopes enlarge and falter.

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22 Here, Ben Anderson (2009) finds Deleuze and Spinoza to make a distinction between emotion and affect, by claiming the former is defined as personal and the latter as impersonal and pre-personal and autonomous. See “Affect” in The Dictionary of Human Geography. 5th ed.
3.1 Kampung

At a glance, Jakarta landscape reflects the nascent nature of Indonesian modernity. Tall office towers along Thamrin-Sudirman Corridor and brand new apartment complexes boasting completely separate, isolated living environments from the “outside” world, seem to command the future direction of the city. The concrete foundations and metal beams sprouting from the ground everywhere could suggest Jakarta will turn into yet another urban centre with a generic landscape. However, the nooks and crannies of Jakarta—literally, thanks to the emergence of planned neighbourhoods—offer exceedingly vibrant and creative communities with unique conceptualizations of governance, culture and economy. *Kampung*, which can roughly be translated to villages or informal settlement, is where people’s politics and economy skillfully undermine the state’s desire to achieve omniscient governmentality over its residents. It often operates comfortably outside the law without coming into conflict with government legislation (Adi and Achmad, 1988). Antony Sihombing (2007) defines *kampung* as follows:

*Kampung* is the traditional, spontaneous, fine-grain, and diverse form of indigenous urban settlement in Indonesia which has grown locally, organically and incrementally over many years without planning guidance or regulations, building codes or the centralized and coordinated provision of services (15).

Twenty-first century cities seem to indicate that publicness is being replaced by new desires to build and live in exclusive communities based on distinctions of class, ethnicity and culture (AlSayyad and Roy 2006) and living in apartments in Jakarta means wealth and higher class. However, none of my interviewees were interested in them\(^ {23}\) and all lived in *kampung*. When I

\(^{23}\) For more discussions on similar sentiment and responses, see AbdouMaliq Simone’s *Jakarta, Drawing the City Near* (2014), Chapter 2. “Urban Majority”.

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commented on the notion of the Jakarta apartments, they would all immediately respond that they would rather live in kampung for the rest of their lives. It was not that they were oblivious to or disinterested in the idea of prosperity or power. My interviewees recently became car owners, because buying a car has become very affordable and possible in recent years. They are interested in accessing some of the conveniences that wealth brings and becoming influential, which in essence describes Jakarta. Nonetheless, the sense of community (masyarakat, which was the term used by Ibu Lana earlier) that kampung offered was considered an essential part of urban life. Is kampung then the last bastion of the resistance to modernity in the Indonesian city?

I argue that in kampung in the urban area, people are actively involved in the process of place-making, forging ways to diffuse a singular description of the capitalist economy completely taking over their way of life. This is based on a common understanding that a place is not to be of or owned by an individual without a sense of community, but to be shared and open. A place is expected to be peered into, interrupted, and formed through gazes and in exchanges. In the daily encounters with the dynamism in kampung in Jakarta, I become convinced how production of cultures, values, and identities could not possibly be limited to sites of dominance and governance, and therefore should not be the subject of a constructed national narrative.

Furthermore, several kampungs I spent time in demonstrated that it was a self-contained unit of community, often with its own governance structure, complete with leadership hierarchy (often led by “village heads” known as ketua RW/RT), policing volunteers, and religious clerics.

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This sentiment, perhaps, is more pervasive than expected. In September 2015, Kompas newspaper covered the stories of the former Kampung Pulo residents, where the city government forcefully evicted them to improve the drainage in the canal in the area to prevent flooding. The interviews reveal many of them would rather live in kampung, not in apartments. One resident states, “Kalau boleh memilih, saya memilih kebanjiran, saya lebih memilih rumah sendiri. Tetapi, kita enggak ada pilihan. Ya, mau enggak mau pindah.” (If I am allowed to choose, I would choose flood, I would choose to be in my own house. However, we don’t have a choice. Ya, we don’t want to move.) (KOMPAS, 9/6/2015)
Mbak Ani lives in Ciputat in South Tangerang, where out of all the communities I have been to within JABODETABEK\(^{25}\), I see the most number of women wearing headscaves. There are mosques, big and small, in almost every corner. When I asked Mbak which mosque she went, she said, “they are everywhere!” Ciputat is also seeing a fair number of new housing developments but that still remains to be a significant minority. The roads here are narrow—two angkots could merely pass each other by—and always full of people and all kinds of motored vehicles, and a strong smell of gasoline everywhere. The roads are never straight, and if they are straight, they would be either uphill or downhill.

\(^{25}\) An acronym that refers to the Greater Jakarta area that includes the following cities: Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi.
Getting off the *angkot* in front of a convenience store and waiting for Mbak to pick me up, it does not take me long to feel disoriented. The major streets in this area are filled with storefronts: a cell phone shop, a toy store, a district office, a school, a masjid, a small eatery, a car/motorbike repair shop, a clothing store, a bedding store, a hospital, a convenience store, a roadside snack seller, and they repeat again. Upon entering certain streets, suddenly vast markets appear with more hidden nooks with merchants selling all kinds of things. There is no empty space anywhere. Mbak Ani has never tried to explain to me how to get to her house from the nearest major road. Every time I go see her, she comes to pick me up in front of the district office and a convenience store; upon discovering me hidden in the busy streetscape, her eyes get bigger and she sends out
a smile. I am glad she has and rides a motorbike. She must make at least seven to eight turns until we get to her house. When we sit in her living room with doors open, I can see a few other houses in the neighbourhood with the sound of the kids dropping by asking where their friends are.

I also lived in kampung during my fieldwork, because it meant convenience to me. I could buy vegetables from the street vendors here whose carts were filled with goods purchased from the local market in the wee hours of the morning. I could buy rice porridge from the lady who lived five houses down from mine, or a half-blind old man who sometimes showed up at the nearby school complex entrance. A husband and wife team sold gado-gado (an Indonesian salad served with peanut sauce) around the corner. I got my fill of Padang food from a small restaurant by the river, where the entire staff were men dressed in orange and black uniform. There was another husband and wife team who specialize in soto ayam (chicken soup) and they would show up right in front of my house everyday. I could walk everywhere to get everything done – free wifi, printing, photocopying, cold drinks, snacks, massage therapy, and people watching. Mosques of varying sizes played sermons through their loud speaker throughout the day, but appeared to have coordinated their schedules, so that the sermons would not overlap and would be heard in every corner. Policing volunteers would lower the barrier every night at the gate, but when I needed to take a taxi at 3 am to go to the airport, a house boy at my boarding house phoned someone to make the necessary arrangements.

The modernity in kampung is not symbolized by, for example, new buildings and infrastructure. It is an assemblage of Jakarta’s interpretation and conception of community life that includes
elements of urban living. The very reality that life happens out in the open, instead of behind closed gates, disrupts the individuality and independence a modern city dweller aspires to achieve. In a strange way, maintaining such duality in Jakarta ensures dynamism in kampung to exist and as a result, to attract those who fear the absence of community spirit. There is enough modernity in kampung that allows people to access essential telecommunication and government services and it creates a unique environment that keeps people close to the political pulse of the city and yet close to their roots.

3.2 Kos

However, the kampung scenes are also changing in Jakarta. From my experience and observations, while in Menteng and Pisangan Timur, the neighbours went outside to the streets for entertainment and chats, in Salemba and Tanah Abang, more and more people were staying inside and opted not to hang out outdoors. A quick detour to a boarding houses will be helpful to place kampung in the social fabric of Jakarta. Commonly known as kos (short for rumah indekos), boarding houses are almost always found in kampung, given the income level of those who cannot buy their own places in Jakarta but have to live and work in the city. Some allow couples to live together in bigger bedrooms, but require a marriage certificate. The vacancy notice outside the gate allows people to guess what type of accommodation it is: male-only, female-only, singles, family, professionals, students, and etc. It is reasonable to assume that there are tens of thousands of kos in Jakarta.

Boarding houses are run by a live-in family or a group of live-in staff. In my boarding house in Salemba, there were two young women and two young men, all in their 20’s, living at the house
as workers. The women did laundry and cleaning, and the men guarded the gates and helped with parking at the front, taking turns carrying out their duties. One of the girls, whom I first met in 2013, was married and her husband was living at the house as well. It is quite common for husbands of the kos girls to work on maintenance and gate-keeping, but some get a job elsewhere and actually go to work. There was a shared kitchen on every floor where I cooked my meals and two washing machines with irons and ironing boards in a room on the rooftop. I paid about 2 million rupiah (C$200) every month. Mbak Efa, one of my interviewees, lived in a kos near Grand Indonesia, and we used to compare what each other’s houses had and did not have, after finding out she paid 1.3 million rupiah (C$130) for her room.

Living in kos provided me with several opportunities of an entrée into the urban culture of Jakarta, as I got to observe the changes in people’s routines. When I first stayed at a boarding house in Jakarta in 2007, I became friends with everyone who lived on my floor. Together we went to malls, shared nighttime snacks, and exchanged stories from work. They told me stories about the girl who lived in my room before me. I learned how they went to work by motorcycle taxi (ojek) and how much I should ask for my ride. But in 2016, this was more difficult than before. In 2016, in the new, hot-water-providing kos, the young professionals on my floor rarely came out of their rooms. Perhaps it was the TV in every room or unlimited wi-fi in the house. My Indonesian improved but I was not making more friends. People who would hang out together at the house were the live-in maids and houseboys. More and more people preferred to be left alone other than saying occasional hellos and “makan, mbak” (please eat, miss) as a common greeting while moving in and out of the kitchen. The experience seemed to be the same
for Mbak Efa. Though she lived in the house for many years, she had very few friends there and when she was at home, just watched TV in her room.

While meeting and hanging out with single, female friends in the city, the topic of *kos* is a popular one. As I mentioned earlier, Mbak Efa and I talked about our *kos* every time we met. Single women in Jakarta seem to always be on the hunt for a better *kos*, at least those who lived in a *kos*. The issues discussed are the live-in maids who are, mysteriously, all lazy or their intolerable husbands who refuse to do anything productive but giggle at funny videos on their smartphones. They also include broken washing machines, missing and stained clothes, and that loud girl in the other room who seems to be inviting a lot of guys over despite the house rules.

After a meal together in the neighbourhood, sometimes I would be invited or would be expected to invite female friends to “*main di kos,*” or to hang out at *kos*. (Male visitors are not allowed in my room and need to meet me in a guest reception area or around the communal dining table, which appeared to ensure others could watch what we were doing.) *Kos*, while functioning as a semi-serviced residence, is designed, governed and regulated as a gendered space which operates on class. All women at the house are expected to behave appropriately at all times. All girls, including myself, also watch other girls’ behaviour to ensure they do not taint the reputation of my *kos*, attracting questionable characters into my house. We were under constant surveillance of each other and of the house staff and making sure people like us were living with us. In this way, Jakarta manages to create gendered space within the private sphere.

As a communal space, *kos* serves as a home for the community of residents who engage in active place-making. Interacting with people inside and outside their rooms meant blurring of the lines between personal and communal space and *kos* acted as a smaller, recreated version of the
village. A smallest unit of kampung could be found in a kos itself, but in more and more boarding houses, the feeling of kampung is disappearing. Kos used to be, universally, a space containing shared emotions and it invited people to join and participate in that process. Over time, the emotions have come to reside within the walls of individual rooms, unlike in the past. This is similar to the transformation of some kampung where life happens behind closed doors. The idea of boundaries was blurred and fluid in the case of kampung life, but the emergence of ubiquitous apartment buildings means people are getting used to putting up walls, more concerned about individual rather than collective life. What kampungs represented were vitality and community spirit. Increasingly, these emotive qualities are getting brushed aside to accommodate new ones: independence and individuality.

3.3 “Jakarta”

In what is portrayed as “Jakarta,” time runs faster than the rest of the country. History gives way to cancerous growth and unforgiving, indiscriminate demolitions in all corners of the city. The city is busy cleaning and clearing up. It is beginning to look like any other Asian urban centre with skyscrapers, smartly dressed office workers, shiny automobiles filling up paved avenues, and giant malls with billboards attracting customers with disposable income and credit cards. Driving down the Thamrin-Sudirman corridor makes it easy for people to see what Sukarno envisioned in his version of the future Indonesia (Kusno 2013). Particularly, Kusno (2013) notes billboards, with their magnificence and scale, offer up to be not only an effective device to conceal and erase ethnic identities but also an extension of the unifying force that sought to build a strong, postcolonial Indonesia. Here in this “Jakarta,” “you can have more” is the pretext in almost every billboard in town that screams out promises of a big return on new and exciting
capitalistic ventures. It is capitalism in every form imaginable amidst mysteriously organized craze and chaos.

To my interviewees who chose to live in Jakarta after returning from overseas, Jakarta is portrayed as a perplexing place, as found in Mbak Efa’s novel *3.000 Impian Kilometer* (n.d.):

> Malam terakhir aku berada di tempat itu, aku naik ke lantai tiga dan berdiri memandangi area Jakarta yang terlihat dari tempat itu. Sebelumnya, aku tak pernah menginjakkan kaki di Jakarta. Hanya saat itu, ketika aku akan berangkat ke luar negeri. Aku menatap langit, sebentar lagi aku akan meninggalkan Indonesia, memulai perjuangan untuk kehidupan baru. Negeriku begitu kaya-raya, dari Sabang sampai Merauke tersimpan kekayaan alam yang tak terhingga, tapi kenapa kami harus mencari penghidupan di negeri lain?...

(47)

Last night when I was in that place, I climbed to the third floor and stood looking at the Jakarta area that was visible from there. I had never set foot in Jakarta before. Only at that moment, when I was about to go abroad, I would get to be here. I looked at the sky. I'll soon be leaving Indonesia, and begin the struggle for a new life. My country is so wealthy, from Sabang to Merauke, storing infinite natural resources, but why do we have to make a living in another country?...

The word for capital city, *ibu kota*, is made up of *ibu*, which means mother, and *kota*, a city. Jakarta, a mother who is sought for protection and care of Indonesians does not embrace many of its residents for who they are. Even on a temporary stop, the city makes people doubt their future
and amplify their anxiety and worries. Nonetheless, as Erik Prasetya put it in the opening quote, people of Jakarta turn the betrayal into hope. (I will talk about this in more detail later on.)

Before personal encounters with “Jakarta,” my interviewees initially considered it to signify the big city, with very little emotional attachment and generally unconfirmed affect of “bahaya” (dangerous). For many Indonesians living outside the Greater Jakarta area, some of the first descriptors they would use were dangerous (bahaya) and dirty (kotor), as if they all had been given these two words to associate them with the nation’s capital. In Ambon, Malang, Jember, Lombok and Bali, locals – most of whom have never been to Jakarta – suggested not to return to Jakarta but to stay with them instead. This kind of unanimous suspicion and pessimism over the city helped me imagine how my interviewees began their life in Jakarta with nervous beginnings.

Nonetheless, over time, ibu kota has not become a comforting home to migrant returnees, but instead continues to test its residents with a unique blend of urban and rural practices complicated by remnants of nation-building efforts and urban technicality and sociality. In other words, my interviewees hint that life in urban centres outside Indonesia equipped them to be able to live in a city that symbolizes their nation, not their upbringing or national identity. Mbak Efa said to me, before coming to Jakarta entirely on her own without any family connections or friends, she thankfully was already well-versed in life in the urban after two years of working in Hong Kong. She said she was able to get around in Jakarta, “karena saya sudah bekerja di Hong Kong,” because she worked in Hong Kong and had the experience of living in an urban area. In other words, it was not her Indonesian identity, but the urban migrant worker identity that helped her with the transition to Jakarta. “Jakarta” invoked the urban dweller side of her, with a set of
skills that she obtained while living in Hong Kong. One of Mbak Efa’s first major tests was showing up for an interview at an office tower on Jalan Sudirman. She said there were ten or more elevators inside with the central control panels. (When we did this interview, I had yet to use one of these and I asked her how one can operate these panels. She happily explained to me in detail.) She said she walked in confidently because she knew how to use such elevators. She added, “bagaimana kalau belum pernah naik elevator seperti?” (what if I have never used that kind of elevators?)

Without realizing, as a migrant worker in Hong Kong, Mbak Efa had trained herself to live in a city. This was not part of the plan when she signed up to become a migrant worker. She did not go to Hong Kong thinking this would help her live in an urban area, but she readily acknowledges that a foreign city taught her how to live in her own country and its capital city. As a TKI (Tenaga Kerja Indonesia: Indonesian migrant worker), Mbak Efa had acquired the ability to navigate complex systems—represented by the set of elevators in the office tower—and the confidence to move herself in and out of the spaces that were, literally, foreign, unknown and imagined. It is possible that this was somewhat of an unintended consequence of the state-sanctioned migrant worker program. The privileged knowledge kept within the walls of “Jakarta” that reveals the workings of the urban was now unlocked by a girl from a small village in West Java, who now works at an office on Jalan Sudirman, and gets paid more than a TKI salary. In another words, Mbak Efa’s life in Jakarta informs that she made it in “Jakarta” because she was a TKI, a perpetual subject of governmentality that defies a structure that did not seek to open up the possibility for upward mobility to low-skilled labourers.
3.4 Transportation and Traffic: Safety in a Gendered City

One night, a single, female friend of my age and I were chatting over dinner in front of TIM (Taman Ismail Marzuki: a cultural centre in Jakarta) under the dim street light. We were enjoying freshly grilled chicken with fresh vegetables on the side, and I was telling her how I was getting around the city. My story turned into exchanges of complaints about how some men just did not behave themselves in public. When she found out I was using the bus often, she asked me, “anyone try to touch you?” I said, no, and told her I usually stick to the women only area. She looked straight at me and demanded that I listen carefully. She said if someone were to grab me in public, I should yell, “copet!” meaning thief. While fixing her jilbab (also known as hijab: a short scarf worn by Muslim women that covers the head, neck, and shoulders), she reminded me with a big smile, “shout loud, OK?”

Not just the transportation, but the traffic in Jakarta is a topic of daily conversations. Elsewhere, weather may be the topic: harmless, neutral and engaging enough that it can be used in pretty much any social situations. In Jakarta, the more preferred choice would be traffic jam or macet. In my conversations with taxi, ojek, and bajaj (motorized rickshaw) drivers, traffic jam, together with flood, represents the government’s inability to deal with an issue that impacts every single resident of Jakarta. While chatting with strangers who strike a conversation on the street, it is a test that represents one’s ability to navigate through the order in the chaos—How long did it take you to get from point A to point B? What did you take? Which road was jammed? So many motorcycles and my car could not move!—and the main theme that paints urban dwellers’ stories about their work day. It is a topic that confirms the obsession of Jakarta people over the city’s perpetual problems and difficulties. Unlike other political issues in Indonesia, traffic appears to
come with an undisputable majority: everyone would agree that there is a traffic problem in Jakarta. Traffic serves as a common ground for visitors and residents alike who have to suffer through it. Rather than the positives, the negatives, or the problem that seems impossible to solve, draw people closer and create a sustainable social space for a dialogue and discussion that affects all socioeconomic classes.

Traffic also allows for an exclusive space of expertise and a contentious site for the struggle of modernity. Many transportation operators do not know how to use GPS, though it could be provided by their employer. Many times, GPS was not useful for my journeys. My experience taught me, usually in the peak of traffic, ojek drivers would take so many back roads that do not show up on Google Maps (the one I have turned on my phone and am holding in my hands) and eventually get to the destination earlier than taking taxis. On a car free Sunday, my ojek driver took every possible back road adjacent to Thamrin-Sudirman corridor, while not once hitting the major road, and dropped me off at my church fifteen minutes early. I often wondered how annoying the sound of GPS—the sound of modern technology—would be to these drivers, who memorized the entire backroads of the Thamrin-Sudirman area and would probably like to correct the navigation every time they turn into another alley unmapped by the system.

Traffic is also Jakarta’s teachable moment for its visitors on the true meaning of terserah, roughly translated as “go with the flow.” I learned preparing everything according to a checklist could actually delay a process, missing a few things on the checklist could mean you could get something done early, and showing up somewhere unannounced could mean it would get done today. I tried to set up meetings in Jakarta, but after a while, I would just pick up a phone in the
morning and message people to ask, “can we meet today?” or “where are you right now?” When it comes to the traffic rules in Jakarta, everything is optional except for the flow of traffic, which somehow you instinctively abide by because it is visible and it will guarantee your survival and safety on the road. A friend confessed to me he bought his car first and then drove it to the village for the driving test. In disbelief, I asked him, “is that even possible?” He said with big laughter, “anything is possible in Jakarta!”

Figure 11 Map of JABODETABEK. Source: Streetmap Directory Indonesia.

In discussing the traffic, safety is one of the key elements that underlines my interviewees’ conceptualization of “Jakarta” as a space of living, work and leisure. For Mbak Efa, Kampung
Melayu brings out bad memories. “Masih takut ya, Kampung Melayu.” (I’m still afraid of the Kampung Melayu area.) During the day, it is an area with lots of buses as a major Transjakarta Busway transfer point and a large terminal for buses travelling to all corners of JABODETABEK and major towns in Java. Under the sunlight, the area is filled with big buses, small motorcycles, cars, small buses, and people in colourful clothes trying to find the right bus shelter to wait under, to pick up shipments and just to find their way around. Mbak Efa did not mention what she was feeling during the day, but it was when night fell that the place made her feel so scared.

When Mbak Efa got her first job after returning to Indonesia, the office was located close to the Soekarno-Hatta airport in Tangerang, and she had to change buses three times to get there, including a transit stop at Kampung Melayu. She was new to Jakarta and lived in the Southern part of the city. Upon her return, her priority was to resume employment and support her mother back in Indramayu who has heart conditions but still insists on working. Mbak Efa’s siblings also relied on her income to pay for their school fees. At the time, because she did not know what other areas were like in Jakarta, rather than moving closer to work, she made a decision to carry on with the nightmarish commute. At Kampung Melayu, the buses came often, but many of them were unsafe, she said. Inside, pickpockets were common, and the bus ride was uncomfortable without air conditioning and proper cushioning on the buses, unlike the ones in Hong Kong. The buses were old and ladies clutched on to their bags, holding them tight to protect the bags and themselves. Going to and passing through Kampung Melayu, in its visualization and manifestation, reminded Mbak Efa that her life was a continuing struggle, as an extension from her life in Indramayu, despite her accomplishments including obtaining a bachelor’s degree and receiving a high salary in Hong Kong.
Her final journey home would include riding a minibus at night with a tiny light bulb lighting the entire bus and doorway without a door. Street kids would hop on or off, singing songs and begging for money by invoking zakat (Muslim’s duty to charity), with some of them taking a look around to see if there were any potential targets for pickpockets. Because of these open doorways, buses in Jakarta are never closed spaces. Anyone can get on or get off, rapidly changing the make-up of this moving city, where vendors come in to sell food and goods, street entertainers (see movie by Daniel Ziv, Jalanan) perform on board day and night, and questionable characters get a free ride with a nod to the driver. As soon as vendors and performers leave the bus, a new batch comes on. The bus is in constant motion, as people skillfully jump on to and off from moving buses and conductors, hanging on precariously to the doorway, yell out the major and final destinations to solicit potential passengers on the street.

Mbak Efa said she used to choose her angkot based on the appearance of a driver and did not get in unless there were women inside. At nighttime, it is hard to look inside a minibus, as they tend to not be too bright. A small light bulb lights the entire passenger compartment, or it could be funky disco neon lights, which may have been installed to, perhaps, cheer up the passengers or himself. (Mbak Efa would have avoided the latter.) Drivers are almost always men and the back seats offer no personal space and require people to squeeze in, with the pungent smell of each other’s sweat, cigarette smoke or laundry detergent announcing a new passenger joining the group. Mbak Efa looked for an environment in which she felt safe, which included a driver she felt she could trust and other passengers who looked trustworthy. Upon arrival in Jakarta, she became involved in the process of re-evaluating the male gender as a contributing factor to her

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26 For minibuses, there are no conductors, and the drivers collect the fare directly from the passengers.
safety, and ended up with a conclusion that men instigated and initiated the feeling of fear, especially at nighttime. In comparison, the female gender, or women, provided the feeling of protection and camaraderie. From what I can gather, Mbak Efa never managed to carve out Kampung Melayu as her place despite how frequent she accessed the area and how accustomed she felt with using the services there. She later said her career goal became getting a job with a commute that would allow her to avoid Kampung Melayu and finding a boarding house close to that new office. She succeeded, with a job in a fancy office tower in Central Jakarta and a new boarding house that was a 15 minute walk away. I know that she still does not go to the Kampung Melayu area.

Figure 12 Near Cawang station. A Bus, taxis and an angkot wait for passengers. Photo by Kilim Park.

As with other major cities around the world, Jakarta taxis have gone through growing pains recently with popular mobile apps facilitating ride sharing services. Before the era of Go-Jek and GrabBike, catching ojek (motorcycle taxi) and taxis was quite straight forward: you found them in the neighbourhood or on the street. The chance encounter was not to the level of finding jodoh
(life partner), but people looked for the right match, in terms of, at least, expected prices and services. There were choices, with dozens of taxi companies operating in Jakarta and no shortage of ojek as men who were unemployed or underemployed would go out and join ojek drivers in the neighbourhood. The supply was never an issue, but it did mean haggling was usually required before the ride began.

During my visits to Jakarta in 2014, 2015, and 2016, whenever I travelled in the city with Ibu Lana, she always insisted on taking a Blue Bird taxi. Blue Bird group is one of the major Indonesian passenger transportation companies and offers taxi fleets in different fare classes named Blue Bird, Silver Bird and Golden Bird, with Golden Bird being the most expensive. Blue Bird alone is the most expensive economy taxi in Indonesia. It is favoured by foreigners for its safety, but paradoxically for that reason, other operators benefit by imitating its logo, fleet colour and uniform and scamming the passengers. After I would go meet Ibu Lana in the Department of Labour (Depnaker) building, we always took a Blue Bird back to the shelter. When I ask why she took Blue Bird taxis, she would look at me like she was my mother and say, “aman dan jujur, Kilim.” (safe and honest, Kilim.) Originally from Malang, she is a transplant to Jakarta, and has lived here for many years. Despite the knowledge of the city that comes from decades of lived experience, Ibu Lana would choose the most expensive option because of safety. Even when I took a bajaj from the shelter in her neighbourhood to reach another part of the city, she would phone a few of her neighbours to see who was available to take me.

Ibu Lana and Mbak Efa’s geography of the city is based on gender and emotions that have direct links to safety. Safety, conjured up and re-imagined through the feelings experienced while
navigating through the city as a woman travelling alone, whether involving means of transportation or physical location, has constructed individual geographies of Jakarta for them with layers of dynamic sociopolitical information. I wish to point out here, again, that the Indonesian word, *pikir*, means both to feel and to think. Therefore, the “feeling” is more than pre-conditioned affect arising in specific areas of the city and services therein. It involves the process of thinking through their own habits and thresholds that are more or less solidified and ever changing emotionscapes based on rapid assessments, all serving as decision-making criteria.

In other words, Ibu Lana felt safer on a Blue Bird taxi or thought she would; Mbak Efa felt safer when she no longer had to go through Kampung Melayu at night or thought she would. Rather than thinking of the most affordable and effective options to travel in the city, they were more concerned about the options that made them feel safe. Neither Mbak Efa nor Ibu Lana was robbed or assaulted in minibuses, in Kampung Melayu or in taxis. The information they retained from acquaintances, friends, and media indicated that Jakarta was a highly gendered city where they needed to develop their own experiential, geographic knowledge, that would be authoritative as well as dynamic enough to guarantee them less hassle in carrying on with their days.

They knew all too well this was not something they worried about as migrant worker in Hong Kong and Taiwan or as a village girl in Malang and Indramayu. The concern for safety being linked to the geographical knowledge while navigating through the city was an entirely new conception that emerged when they moved to Jakarta. Despite the modernized and aggrandized images of Jakarta that the state is aggressively promoting and putting out, Indonesians still associate Jakarta with the side of the city that is meant to be hidden in the official narrative but is
more actively imagined and propagated. Jakarta is conceptualized as a place of trials and tribulations that requires a mindset of a go-getter, rather than a big city with an abundance of opportunity.

Figure 13 Map of Jakarta’s sub-districts. By Rochelim, CC SA 3.0.
3.5 Rain and Flood

On some days, raindrops fall softly trying to calm down Jakarta—all living and non-living things in it—but on other days, they converge into a ruthless force and flow out mercilessly. The rain marches in, flooding out the nooks that are already flooded with life’s hardships. Even in the harshest rain, Ciliwung river sits—the river rarely flows because of its drainage problem—in the canals quietly exuding the scents of life on the streets and evidencing the urban debris both emotional and physical.

Water and its flow form an important part of the daily life in Jakarta as the capital of *Tanah Air*\(^\text{27}\). The Indonesian word, *banjir*, means flood, and is a standard vocabulary during the rainy season. On the phone, whether speaking loudly or tapping in messages, the Jakartans check to see if the houses of family and friends and the roads or train stations they use are flooded. Floods in Jakarta happen fast. In a tropical climate, rain is an event in terms of its scale, amount and aftermath. *Hujan* (rain) is loud, disturbs conversations, changes meetings, and makes people immobile for hours until it calms down. As raindrops hit everything in their way, they become like a drunk guest who will not stop talking loudly. Rains in Jakarta do not clear the streets nor clear the air, but instead, they find places to which to flow. The sound of rain is deafening as it becomes a foreboding signal of things to come.

Experiencing flash floods is a way of life in the Greater Jakarta. On one summer afternoon, I was at the University of Indonesia commuter train station in Depok, where ten minutes of torrential downpour turned into a serious flood in and around the station. The sky became darker, and the

\(^{27}\) *Tanah Air* literally means land and water, and is a common expression referring to the Indonesian nation.
pool of water inside the station grew bigger and deeper by the minute. People started to gather under the shelter outside ticketing counters, trying to squeeze in and share the space to avoid getting soaked completely. The train did not seem to be running as the tracks were under the water. As the water came up to our feet, food vendors with makeshift deep-frying equipment appeared and started making all kinds of fritters. The gas fire heating the oil in the large pot was the only thing that gave warmth, and people gathered around to buy deep-fried vegetable fritters or tempe²⁸. People, sitting and standing right next to each other without any personal space, checked their smartphones to update friends and family or to kill time. I noticed we grew accustomed to the environment we inhabited together, and we all wished for one thing: the rain to stop. Soon, more vendors appeared, selling newspapers and other types of snacks and the space got even more crowded. After staying under the shelter for an hour, I stepped into the rain to walk home, hugging my backpack. Fifteen minutes later, I arrived at my boarding house, soaked to the bones. It took an entire day to dry my clothes and shoes.

In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (2013), upon observing the January 1955 Paris Flood, writes that it added an element of surprise and a kind of excitement to Parisians (63-65). In Jakarta, this is never the case. The disturbance is threatening and the total sensation is all too distressing. *Banjir* represents more than inconveniences. It represents the government’s inability to handle a problem, and as it gets repeated on a regular basis, each time it serves as a reminder to people. The issue of polarization of wealth continues to occupy the conversations in all corners of Jakarta, and those affected by the floods are reminded of their poverty. The fact that floods usually happen only in *kampung* compounds the argument further. Dealing with floods does not

²⁸ Fermented Indonesian tofu. Also spelled as *tempeh*.
demonstrate disaster management but rather visualizes the failed governance and turns it into an experience remembered by emotions and bodily pain and scars.  

The pervasiveness of floods made it an essential question in understanding the city. In the past, it was widely expected that the floods would hit anywhere in the city. Until recently, one of the symbols of Jakarta, Bundaran HI with its Selamat Datang monument was not an exception. Neither was the presidential palace. Mbak Ani’s house in Tangerang was regularly flooded during the rainy season, and on my visits to her neighbourhood, I could see a quick rain shower of a little more than a few hours created puddles everywhere because of poor drainage. However, these days, more and more people are saying the floods are not occurring in their neighbourhoods. A friend who lived in the Glodok area experienced a flood every year for the thirty years she lived there said the floods stopped a year ago. Ibu Lana said to me repeatedly I would not have to worry about floods in her area of Rawamangun and showed me pictures of her and her husband from a few years ago going out to help neighbours whose houses were flooded. Mbak Efa who lived near Bundaran HI was not worried about it either. When my friend in Depok could not get up to Cikini because of flood, I went outside to take a peek at the river nearby and the streets were just a little wet.

Everyone, including my friends, taxi drivers and food vendors I spoke to on the street, attributed this change to Jakarta to the recently-jailed governor Ahok, also known as Basuki Tjahaja Purnama. The hardship brought on by flood means each flooding event is experienced with intense emotions and leads to the examination of political system. The absence of it is a reminder

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29 See Youtube advertisement for Wipol, floor cleaner: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9j13cxLa58](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9j13cxLa58). Retrieved 12 December 2017.
of those times when the dirt, mud, bacteria, and diseases controlled everyday life and the fact that there are less serious floods in the city gives people a sense of progress and development. Ahok, as a politician, may not have always won the hearts of the Jakarta people, but Ahok as a bureaucrat made one of the most important, life-changing transformations to the city that everyone appreciates. Many believed he changed Jakarta, and one of the first things mentioned was it was no longer getting flooded much. Jakarta, erstwhile erratic and unpredictable, became a more manageable place because of efficient governance. Nonetheless, the idea of Ahok, a non-muslim and Chinese-Indonesian, becoming a leader of the nation’s capital was short-lived, and the whole saga ended with him being charged with blasphemy and jailed for two years. His accomplishments, including reduction of corruption, pointed to the potential of Jakarta, but the voters indicated religion and identity were more important in choosing a leader. Flooding, once so pervasive that it showed up on everyone’s door, was gone with Ahok’s emergence but some say, it can return to Jakarta anytime now.

3.6 Night

Jakarta nights bring out other creatures – tired and exhausted workers, street chefs, cigarette girls, and vendors charged for their night ahead, women, men and wo-men (waria: transgender men dressed as women) seeking pleasure in the night, horny cats that roam empty corners, fat rats that get killed by motorbikes flying by. Not a moment goes by when there is not sound that fills the air. Even where the street lights barely cover the ground, creatures roam undetected as “unrecognized producers” (De Certeau 2013). It is adzan (a call to prayer), cars, motorbikes, construction, street vendors, neighbours, and children laughing, smoking, arguing, crying, and breathing. If not on the street, people fill up malls to sing at a karaoke or to chat with a group of
friends for hours, visit or call their favourite masseur or masseuse, or hang out in everyone’s favourite corner in the neighbourhood.

After late night chats with Mbak Efa, sometimes we share a ride home and she gets off first because her boarding house is close by. Her house is at the end of small gang (back alley) and no car can get in. After getting dropped off, she walks into the dark end of the alley with faint lighting at the end that is barely visible. I usually send her a message to make sure she got home okay and she does the same. In the backstreets of Grand Indonesia, the workers who work in the restaurants and clean the offices come out and fill the warung (small restaurant). They do not spend their free time and disposable income in Grand Indonesia. Those who spend their money and time in Grand Indonesia do not come out here. During the day, it gets busy here, again with the workers, but at night, it takes on a different persona. The pompous, luxurious feel of the surrounding buildings, despite their lighting, blend into the sharper and harsher light bulbs everywhere that light up the plastic sheets covering the food stands and the shiny exterior of motorbikes. The serious front that this area puts on during the day is gone at night. It becomes cheekier. Mbak Efa, who has a desk job at an office, does not come out here to hang out. We stay inside Grand Indonesia, completely blocking the view of the nighttime activities of the neighbourhood. The segregation is incredibly well managed; the crowds from the inside and outside the buildings do not mix. Mbak Efa has made it clear to me many times that she feels safe in the area, unlike in Kampung Melayu. She has found, in Jakarta, everything is out in the open at night and what this area has offered her was the feeling of a community. It may have been the confidence and pride that she has grown over the years with her office job and comfortable salary. She is sure of herself and that has allowed her to carve out her own space in
one of the most hectic areas in the city. Knowing her ability and having been validated of it, she navigates the nighttime scenery of her area with ease.

In Cikini, outdoor restaurants start setting up around 5pm with big tents and obligatory banners which include their names and menu. Using “borrowed” electricity from the nearby buildings that spreads like a net, the lights are turned on when the night falls. It is as if the sun has never set and the day has never ended. The streets around the train station are busier than daytime. As people pour over their dinner or nighttime snack choices, soon the cigarette girls emerge, walking by in their bright coloured, tight tops and skirts and carrying cases filled with cigarettes on a shoulder. A constant stream of street musicians – some of them are absolutely terrible – walk into the tents. They begin their song with assalamalaikum\(^{30}\) and end with thanks for the patrons’ generosity and God’s blessing regardless of how much they made from the performance. The night seems to go on. Only when the dawn breaks does the city take a quick pause until the morning commute begins for those who start taking the 4am train from the surrounding suburbs of Depok, Bogor, Bekasi and Tangerang.

Ibu Lana’s entire neighbourhood used to sit in a corner and wash dishes, feed babies, eat nighttime snacks and chat about everything. The corner became everyone’s living room after a long day at work. The ladies at the shelter always stayed inside at night, playing with their smartphones, calling someone and watching sinetron (Indonesian soap opera) and game shows. When I visited the shelter again in 2017, Ibu Lana had opened two new ventures, a warung and a hole-in-the wall type restaurant, and both only open at night. In 2017, new people moved in to the shelter and everyone worked at these restaurants. They filled catering orders in the morning.

\(^{30}\) An Arabic greeting commonly used among Muslims.
had lunch and after a quick nap around 3-4pm, they all got up and started preparing for the restaurants. Ibu had hired them, all migrant worker returnees, to teach them how to run restaurants on their own. More and more people would return home from work after the sun is set, and the streets the restaurants open to would get busier. This was where I realized Jakarta’s night brought out the melancholy. One night, one of the shelter residents, a former domestic worker in Singapore, showed me pictures of her children. She said she couldn’t see them any longer after the divorce. She looked at the chicken on the grill and bit her lips. Ibu Lana’s niece, a migrant rights’ activist and a university student that I have known for years came in to the restaurant and started singing a song about looking for love. I said, “it is Valentine Day tomorrow,” and she replied, “everyday is a Valentine Day for me, Mbak Kilim!”

![Figure 14 Ibu Lana’s kampung. Photo by Kilim Park.](image)

### 3.7 Place-making in Jakarta: Resisting and Manipulating Capitalism

Mbak Yani, one of my housemates at the shelter for female migrant worker returnees, once asked me who does my laundry at the boarding house with a quizzing look, and when I told her I
did my own, asked me again how exactly I did it. She became even more suspicious when I
could not operate an old washing machine at the shelter that required an assembly of hoses and
cords. After watching me struggle for a few seconds, she simply asked if she could just do my
laundry and even gave me some soap. After finding out I lived in a boarding house, Mbak Ani
and Ibu Dewi, with worrying facial expressions, asked what kind of amenities the place offered,
which neighbourhood it was located in and whether I had an air conditioner in my room. I felt as
if I had done something wrong, although they were asking the right questions. The answers they
were looking for are determining factors for the price of any kos, but I wondered whether I got
cheated in Jakarta despite having lived in three different kos. After all, everyone has a story
about being cheated in Jakarta.

My interviewees asked me about the way in which I was making my place my own. They asked
where I got my groceries, where I would go for coffee, how I got to my meetings, and who my
new friends were. In the process, we have come to know each other’s routines more, and I
learned that making sure my living situation was adequate and safe made my friends feel better.
It was not mere curiosity either, because the information I shared would often lead to helpful tips
and suggestions, making us a part of the community in Jakarta. All my friends had a smartphone
and were avid users of WhatsApp, just like the majority of the urban Indonesians. Nonetheless,
the social media did not make us hide behind it, but instead it made us connect and meet in
person more often. Social media serves as a tool to create the atmosphere and environment of
rame-rame (roughly translates to get-together, gather, crowded) but it was not expected to
replace the in-person encounters. When the riot against Go-Jek and Grabbike happened in March
2016, I had two of my interviewees and two other friends send me messages on WhatsApp to
make sure I would avoid the area mentioned in the police protest permit and beyond, namely the part of Jalan Sudirman from Bundaran HI and ending at Bank Indonesia. Although the police had released information about the protest which was covered in some media outlets, most people I knew learned about this through friends, just like I did. It was clear to me that part of the place-making in Jakarta is to build a network of people who can share privileged information about the city, so as not to rely on the government or any other public office. A Jakarta resident’s geography of the city is not limited to the commuting routes, home neighbourhoods, or any other areas s/he may frequent, but includes the areas that are mentioned and communicated by people they know and share information with.

The discussion I had with my interviewees of different neighbourhoods in Jakarta led to other opportunities to appreciate and explore the city and to really observe the ways in which they were making the places their own. Every time Mbak Efa and I met, she insisted that we would go for a coffee at Starbucks at Grand Indonesia (GI), so this was the setting for our initial meeting. (This was about a month after the bombing at the Starbucks near the Sarinah department store in January 2016. Just as the customers who began to pour into that Starbucks as they normally did, we had no qualms about meeting there.) Mbak Efa was fluent in the Starbucks language, and confident at the order counter coming from the familiarity of its offerings. As we sipped away the drinks that I could purchase back home in Vancouver at the same price, with the exact same taste, we used to chat away until all the stores were closed and the Starbucks employees started sweeping the floors around us. The drinks were there to wet our throats so we could continue to talk and Starbucks was just a convenient spot for us to meet. We were not there to indulge in the Starbucks experience but to be in the GI neighbourhood.
In fact, we went batik shopping at the Thamrin City mall just around the corner and laughed at the foreigners who went to Sarinah to pay so much more. GI, in and of itself, is considered a neighbourhood of its own, with its enormous size and “residents” who spend most of their time inside a clean and air-conditioned space that has everything from food courts, stores, children’s play area and most importantly, security guards at the entrances. Grand Indonesia symbolizes “Jakarta” to many people with its fancy malls and stores and location right next to Selamat Datang (welcome) monument and Bundaran Hotel Indonesia (HI). Unlike its beginning when the city planning sought to mark the area as a dynamic icon of economic growth and prosperity—hence Bundaran HI, the roundabout—GI these days is a place of consumption as a capitalistic venture, not creation and vigour. The monorail construction moved the overpass that blocks the view to the monument from the north side of the roundabout and ironically, the construction itself does not seem to have an end in sight. The construction has a permanent presence, a stalled movement, just like the roundabout is during the day because of traffic. However the place is still very popular and frequented by friends and families. I ended up gathering enough secrets about the GI area and the information learned from the experience
living in the city meant I could impress fellow Jakartans. Mbak Efa told me it was easier to find a GrabBike than a Go-Jek in the GI area. I soon discovered an express bus to the airport leaving from Thamrin City, which presented an alternative to the one leaving from the Gambir Station, another level of chaos on its own. To some, I unlocked knowledge to a place that still is laden with symbolic importance in a city where a lot of information sharing is done through personal networks.

My interviewees were measuring my struggle as a single girl in pursuit of place-making in Jakarta against their own, finding and building common ground out of what De Certeau (2013) called “marginality out of majority” (xviii). The visible and growing wealth in Jakarta is an experience of a very small minority. The majority of the Jakarta people live in so-called margins, and survive day-by-day, as demonstrated in a typical scene in kampung where residents purchase very small quantities of household products (usually in small packets) in a corner store as opposed to buying in bulk. As the hierarchy of the malls becomes palpable and brand new cars contribute to the city’s gridlock, capitalist urges in Jakarta seem to dictate a clear division of class, spaces, and boundaries and render those in the margins “non-producers”.

However, while De Certeau (2013) argued marginality is conceptualized around cultural production of the “non-producers” in the margins, I feel that the case of Jakarta contradicts the idea. On the contrary, on a daily basis, I saw them blurring and giving into the force that sought to resist those urges. In the rhythm where most Jakarta people live through—shouting matches during the day in city centres versus gentler, softer and yet still exciting murmurs of night in kampung—the idea of living space extended onto the streets. In the musical, culinary, and kinetic
performances of everyday, it seemed impossible to call them “non-producers.” Marginality exists comparatively in Jakarta within an indefatigable desire for life that is connected. Street cooks illegally tap into electricity from the closest building because none would be provided to them, and no one asks whether they have a licence because regulations mean little in this business. Navigating through metropolitan debris (Tadiar 2009) and controlled entries and exits, and constantly fighting in the spectacle to produce (DeBord 2010), everyday people of Jakarta contest the pressure to make them invisible. Their place-making is an unexpected, rule-defying response of solidarity to a unifying force of capitalism.

3.8 Understanding Jakarta

My own experience of returning to Canada after 3.5 months of fieldwork seeped through the puzzle I have been trying to put together in the areas of migration and Indonesian women. Being in Jakarta means staying true to the conversations that took place in the unforgiving heat and pollution and in a kind of rhythm that unravels entirely regardless of my ability to understand or follow it (Lefebvre 2013). The drastic changes in my own surroundings upon return to Vancouver have allowed me to go back to my arrival in Canada as an 18-year-old and to look into the folds that become noticeable in my day-to-day interactions as a seasoned immigrant, a 35-year-old. In fact, Jakarta is a fitting backdrop for my interviewees and I to work through some of the questions about what “Jakarta” symbolizes and to provide perplexity adequate for my exploration of labour migration as a cultural and social experience of Indonesian women. It troubles and disrupts the notion of home as a stabilizing existence and force. The city that always changes, challenges, transforms and most importantly, defies all conventions, does two things in the narratives of the migrant women. As Ibu Dewi said to me, “Jakarta is Jakarta,” a place of
purpose. Here, together we begin our exploration of the question of home in its inevitability, the question of affect, and the lived experience of locality.\textsuperscript{31}

With its many exciting and extreme reputations, I am often asked what Jakarta is like. Although tourism is an important industry to the Indonesian economy, Jakarta is hardly a tourist destination and it is a city that offers completely different experiences to visitors, depending on where they and who they are. Every time I visit, I discover a whole new area I never knew before, and the city changes too fast for me to catch up. Jakarta as a nation’s capital and a global mega city is beginning to earn curiosity and interests around the world, as Indonesia has become a tourist destination and an important emerging market. I have been going to Jakarta regularly since 2007, and at the time of writing, I have spent more than twelve months in the city known for pollution and traffic. While I do not think these two words should limit our imaginations of Jakarta, I do feel I still fail to understand the city. The mystery has not been revealed, and I am not sure if it ever will.

\textsuperscript{31} See Sara Ahmed (1999).
Chapter 4: *Pulang (To Return Home)*

Home is here, not a particular place that one simply inhabits, but more than one place: there are too many homes to allow place to secure the roots or routes of one’s destination. It is not simply that the subject does not belong anywhere.

- Sara Ahmed (1999, 330)

All journeys begin at home, and end at a place called “home” that may not always be the same as the place of origin. For migrant workers, many journeys end in a new, more prosperous country, where they find a better living environment and better economic opportunities. However, almost all Indonesian migrant workers know for certain that they are going home at the end of their contract—even if it means that a new contract will begin in the future. When I asked the returnees in Jakarta why they returned home instead of living overseas, I became a subject of enquiry for them, sometimes beginning with a firm statement, “*Mbak Kilim, karena aku harus pulang.*” (Miss Kilim, because I have to return home.) Our conversation about returning, triggered by my questioning of their reasons, raised the question: why does a Western-educated researcher not understand that a migrant woman would want to return home (*pulang*) after her contract is completed, but instead assume that a migrant might want to settle in a community without any family or connections? Their initial response—with a wide-eyed expression that showed wonder for why I might ask the question—was often, “*nggak tahu*” (don’t know) or “*kurang tahu*” (not sure).

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32 Parts of this chapter were presented at Imagining the Future: Community Innovation and Social Resilience in Asia conference at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in February 2017. I thank Dr. Wyman Tang for inviting me to present.
My question reflected the common perception that workers from lower-income, less-developed or developing countries working in more developed countries wish to stay permanently in their destination countries, which are considered more economically developed, prosperous, and advanced. For the Indonesian women I interviewed, those places were not “better” for them. They did not view the countries as their home, and therefore, the women had no real desire to stay there. Thus, my question supported the homogenizing assumptions around labour migration; that those with fewer capitalist privileges are automatically driven to places that promise economic gain. “Myths” (Barthes 2013) that had been created around domestic workers (i.e., the linear conceptualization of the female domestic worker), led me to think that migrant women’s sole focus in terms of capitalism, must be for economic gain.

The women’s apparent nonchalant or vague response, in fact, did not indicate uncertainty or an inability to answer the question, but their reaction to my disruption of their line of thinking. To them, returning home was the most natural part of their migration plan. From the moment they decide to migrate overseas, migrant workers speak of the minimal effect that their own wishes and preferences might have in the process of migration. Returning is the most certain part of the journey, whether it occurs two or three years after their contract ends (two years for Malaysia and Hong Kong bound workers and three years for Singapore bound workers) or ten years after. Instead of imagining their life overseas as a worker, many migrant workers imagine their life when they return and the changes that will be brought to their lives and their families. For an Indonesian domestic worker headed overseas, the return is conceived, even before the departure occurs.
Another assumption is that, due to the time-limited nature of the contracts, the women simply do not think about staying permanently. Nevertheless, as Bu Dewi revealed, it is possible to continue renewing the contracts and prolong the stay. Mbak Efa, during one of our Starbucks chats, named three friends who worked in Hong Kong for ten years and are still there. The reality is that many workers do switch employers and positions in the middle of their contracts for a whole host of reasons, including employer abuse as portrayed widely in the media. It is true that many make these changes simply because the positions and employers are not a good fit, but it is also not uncommon to find people who worked for a single employer for many years. Belonging to the earlier generation of Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong, Ibu Dewi worked for the same employer for 10 years:

Kilim: *saya tahu ibu lahir di malang... Ibu selasai SD [sekolah dasar], nanti ke hong kong. Kapan ibu ke hong kong?*

Ibu Dewi: *Saya berangkat ke Hong Kong itu tanggal 15 Agustus 1990.*

Kilim: *Oh ibu ingat.*


Kilim: I know you were born in Malang. You finished elementary school and went to Hong Kong. When did you go to Hong Kong?

Ibu Dewi: I went to Hong Kong on August 15, 1990.

Kilim: Oh, you remember.
Ibu Dewi: Yes, 10 years there. Every 2 years I went home. I renew my contract, go through the visa process again, too. When the work is done, I go back to Indonesia. Then I go to Hong Kong and return to Indonesia again.

When her contract was being renewed for the second or third time, her employer trusted her enough to give major responsibilities at the Chinese medicine store that the family owned and operated. Her employer trusted her with tasks outside her job description of a live-in caretaker, her roles now included receiving goods and measuring ingredients for treatment. Her pay increased and her responsibilities became more interesting, according to Ibu Dewi. Nonetheless, she never contemplated staying in Hong Kong.

The idea of return, described by Ibu Tuti in the Hati chapter, not only invokes an emotional response but also offers a glimpse into contemporary labour migration. Efa Dawnia, in her novel 3.000 Impian Kilometer (n.d.), expresses her ideas during her departure:

*Karena kuliahku belum selesai dan aku masih butuh biaya untuk kelangsungan hidupku dan keluargaku, sebelum pulang aku sudah menandatangi kontrak kerja baru dengan bosku sehingga aku harus kembali ke Hong Kong. Nanti, ketika pulang lagi ke Indonesia, aku akan meminjam baling-baling bambu pada kucing ajaib dari Jepang dan akan mendarat tepat di depan rumahku agar tak harus berurusan lagi dengan kucing-kucing yang mencuri makan di bandara* (28, emphasis added).

Because my degree isn’t completed yet, and I still need money for my family and me, before coming home I will sign a new contract for when I must come back to Hong Kong.
Later, when I return to Indonesia, I will borrow blades of bamboo from the magical Japanese cat, and place them right in front of my house so as not to have to deal with the cats stealing food at the airport.

Mbak Efa’s voice shares so much about what Indonesian migrant women go through. She processes her departure while reassessing her decision to leave Indonesia and, by doing so, validates the needs of whom she will be taking care. Moreover, she intends to fulfill her dream of a university education, while also providing for her family and configuring in advance her labour migration to be temporary so as not to go beyond what she needs. She also paints a clear and humorous picture of her return. Elsewhere in the novel, she writes about stray cats stealing food aggressively at the airport, which reminds her of the characters she will likely see at the airport: the unscrupulous brokers, unkind immigration officers, and the others who treat the workers unfairly. The kind of return that she constructs addresses these individuals and their behaviors with a transnational element of surprise, Maneki Neko,\textsuperscript{33} that she probably saw in Hong Kong. To Mbak Efa, her return is comprised of fortune and happiness, and she leaves no room for suffering or misery.

BNP2TKI’s slogan, Tenaga Kerja di Luar Negeri Adalah Pahlawan Devisa (migrant workers overseas are foreign exchange heroes), explains the political context in which the workers are placed. It confirms the Indonesian government’s reliance on remittances in foreign currencies and the positive impact on the economy, as the money sent to the villages across the country makes up 1% of the GDP (World Bank 2016). The “hero” trope is also present in the Philippines.

\textsuperscript{33} Translated as “Beckoning Cat” in Japanese (招き猫). Usually found at the entrance of businesses and made into a plastic or porcelain figurine of a white cat with ears coloured red on the inside and one of its paws raised to wave in good fortune. It is believed to bring good luck.
and the Commission on Overseas Filipinos (2013) has called migrant workers “modern day heroes.” Robyn M. Rodriguez (2002) has observed that the Philippine state has popularized the idea of Filipino migrants as the “new national heroes,” which has transformed the idea of Filipino citizenship. In his visit to Hong Kong in April 2017, President Joko Widodo (more popularly known as Jokowi) held a town-hall meeting with Indonesians living there (the local media reported that he received a rock star treatment). He invited many migrant workers to come up on the stage to celebrate them. The workers answered simple questions about their home in Indonesia, and were given bicycles as gifts. While Jokowi holds the view that the strong Indonesian economy could lead to fewer domestic workers going overseas (Siu 2017), he made no mention of migrant workers in the speech, while hundreds of them were watching him in the AsiaWorld Expo stadium and the meeting took place on a Sunday, a day-off for many domestic workers.

Government materials often refer to “protection” in the migrant worker program. Kemnaker (2017) promised to take care of even those who did not follow the legal procedure for becoming a migrant worker. BNP2TKI (2017b) lists, “to improve the quality of protection and empowerment of Indonesian Workers” as part of their mission statement. Furthermore, foreign missions in countries that are officially designated as destinations have identified labour relations (bidang ketenagakerjaan) as a key area of work. The consulate in Hong Kong holds an orientation for all arriving workers and has emphasized the role of the Indonesian government to help and protect (melindungi) them. President Joko Widodo’s visit to Hong Kong demonstrated
this well. In a discussion, a migrant worker named Ida from Pekalongan was invited to come on stage where she asked a question about *Kartu Tenaga Kerja Luar Negeri* (KTKLN):

Ida: *Saya banyak dengar dari teman-teman kalau mau pulang ditanyain KTKLN, itu katanya.*

(The audience erupts in cheers)

*Presiden:* *Memang KTKLN itu masih ada?*

Ida: *Ada Pak, masih ada oknum di bandara yang mengharuskan kita tunjukkan KTKLN.*

Ida: Many times I have heard from friends that when returning home, KTKLN is still asked for.

President: Really? KTKLN still exists?

Ida: Yes, sir, there are still people at the airport demanding we produce KTKLN.

Hearing this, Jokowi looked slightly in disbelief and waved at Nusron Wahid, the head of BNP2TKI who was part of the delegation on the stage, and they conferred for a while. Jokowi then said to the audience, who were all wearing red and white:

*Saya sudah perintahkan agar tidak ada yang menghambat TKI kita! Sudah saya perintahkan, ini akan saya cek di lapangan bener? Ini biar dijawab langsung oleh Kepala BNP2TKI, Ini langsung yang bertanggung jawab.*

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34 Overseas workers card. KTKLN has been identified as a source of problems that the Indonesian migrant workers encounter at Indonesian airports upon arrival. As Ida explains to the President as well, it is known that immigration officers routinely as for KTKLN and when presented, intimidate workers or treat them unfairly.
I have already ordered that no one should hinder our migrant workers! I have already ordered this to be done and I will check if it’s still happening on the ground. I will let the head of BNP2TKI answer this directly. Directly from the one who is responsible.

Nusron got a microphone and clarified the remarks, pronouncing each word carefully and slowly, stating that KTKLN is not mandatory for those who have enough documentation, such as work visas and employment contracts, and they do not need to provide anything else when being examined by immigration officers upon their return to Indonesia. Wild and loud cheering followed and Jokowi offered his apology for the process not being improved. Despite the intention for the key element of the operation of the migrant worker program, the workers did not feel protected or cared for. Mbak Ani even made a comparison, “Presidennya [Filipina] sangat perhatian, kalau ada TKW Filipina yang meninggal pasti presidennya datang ke HK.” (The Philippines president really cared. If a Filipina migrant worker dies, the president always comes to Hong Kong.)

I began seeing the return to be more complicated, but as my field interviews continued, the return also seemed to be a definite reality. At the same time, it was difficult to get an answer to why these women returned to Indonesia. Was something more profound buried beneath my question, like in my own case of systematic labour migration? My view of labour migration in Southeast Asia was couched with assumptions that Indonesian workers, as citizens of a developing country, would aspire to live in a more developed country. The interviewees dispelled such notions, not with elaborate and lengthy explanations, but by challenging my act of questioning. The interviewees had revealed a new group of values and beliefs that were previously hidden.

35 The recording of the entire meeting (2h 48m 07s) is available on President Jokowi’s official Youtube Channel. The conversation begins at 1:51:45.
Foucault (1980) called this subjugated knowledge, and identified it at a low position in the hierarchy, “beneath the required level of cognition.” (81-82) Perhaps Foucault’s straight-forward, hierarchical placement of the knowledge and experience shared by women can be easily criticized, but it would be difficult to ignore the constant movement between the schemes of knowledge and subjugation and the nature of power as relational and unrestricted by structural categories, like individuals or elements (Pratt 2004). The “soft voices” and silence of migrants are inseparable from the ideas in transit, allowing us to understand the different beats and rhythms that flow in and out of migratory networks (Yu 2011, 392). Thus, my inquiry required an adjustment in its focus, using the discursive approach as originally intended in the research design. I began exploring how the idea and reality of return was manifested in the lives of returnees and how they expressed the idea as a “rhythm,” to borrow from Lefebvre (2013).

Because the idea of return is so deeply entrenched, I needed to go beyond “rhythms” and introduce disturbance in our conversations (88-89). To unpack the meaning of pulang, I paid more attention to what was being repeated, missing, emphasized, or sustained in the lives of returnee women.

_Pulang_ came to be a repeated, emphasized, and sustained fact of life declared by the returnee women, as opposed to an option among the many choices in life. This prompted me to explore what return was and what it meant to the women as a process through which Indonesian women workers stood out from the rest of the mobile labour, while also contributing to the understanding of contemporary transnational labour migration. In many ways, the rhythm of _pulang_ is unique to the Indonesian experience, but simultaneously relatable to other groups of
migrant workers, who may be from different ethnic origins, work environments, and occupations. If the temporariness of labour migration is marked by the return to the country of origin, the Indonesian experience seems to offer a glimpse into the relationship between state and labour market and the notion of economy as both subjugated and privileged knowledges. The Indonesian migrant workers’ act of return constitutes an exception to the labour migration seen as an economic project and instead, liberates and complicates migrant workers’ subjectivity of the women. *Pulang* reveals a number of layers for the meaning of the return migration.

### 4.1 Air/Ports as the Sites of Return

Indonesia’s geography allows for international arrival only by sea or air, except in Kalimantan, and until recently, the government had operated special terminals for returning migrant workers. Two major ports of entry serve Jakarta: Soekarno-Hatta International Airport in Tangerang and Tanjung Priok Ferry Terminal in North Jakarta (Figure 1), which both house special terminals for processing the workers. All of my interviewees had returned to Indonesia by air and had no experience with Tanjung Priok, except Ibu Lana, who as an activist and had been there to receive migrant workers deported from Malaysia. The deportation from Malaysia continues to be a contentious diplomatic issue and a sticky point between the two neighbouring countries. Deportation takes place on a regular basis and the Indonesian media covers it as a major news item. In Ibu Lana’s words, *sudah biasa*, it has become something of a routine. Workers who are deported report employer abuse, and poor conditions and treatment while in Malaysian detention centres, and in fact, many return as corpses. Situated in the northern part of the city, Tanjung Priok carries with it, a rich history of merchants who visited Batavia and it is a bustling and chaotic corner of the city with large ships, serving as a major port of the archipelagic nation’s
capital. The ferry terminal brings people from far corners of the country, such as Flores and Papua, and especially those who cannot afford to fly. The sounds, heat, and crowd overwhelms the visitor, but for Ibu Lana, the place triggers her anger and sadness.

![Map of Greater Jakarta showing Soekarno-Hatta Airport and Tanjung Priok Port](image)

Figure 16. Map of Greater Jakarta showing Soekarno-Hatta Airport and Tanjung Priok Port. By Erwin FCG. CC BY-SA 4.0.

At Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, until 2014, those who arrived by plane were processed through the infamous Terminal 3, which had been designated a special terminal to facilitate the arrival and departure of Indonesian migrant workers. Rachel Silvey (2007) detailed the experience and highlighted the operation of the state apparatus to manage the personhood of the migrant workers. Mbak Efa told me that in her plans to return to Indonesia, she tried to avoid Terminal 3 because of the abuse and frauds that occur there. When she entered Indonesia it was through the Bandung Airport. In fact, after Terminal 3, known as the *Terminal Khusus TKI* (Special Terminal for Migrant Workers) was shut down, Terminal 4 opened up, which was often
called “Terminal 4: Hantu TKI Sejagat” (Terminal 4: Worldwide Migrant Worker Ghosts), because of its remote location and ghost-like presence. Ida Raihan (2012) writes about Terminal 4, as “Pengganti terminal 3, terminal yang hampir semua TKI tidak ingin menjenguknya.” (A substitute for Terminal 3, which almost every migrant worker does not want to see again.) (266) Terminal 3 is now used to divert domestic traffic, and has a brand new, bright and modern appearance, hosting several international airlines and spilling out foreign tourists. The number of gift shops and eateries inside suggests that space is no longer needed to remember the past.

Terminal 3 and Tanjung Priok’s special terminals were structural devices for pulang to become an opportunity to reinforce the migrants’ categorization upon return. While working overseas, domestic workers were constantly reminded of their economic and social status (Constable 2004) and when they returned they were hopeful of resuming where they had left off. Nevertheless, the Indonesian state instituted a “welcoming” and processing of the workers whereby their existence was immediately placed outside their individual experiences and they were automatically lumped into the TKW categories. The existence of these terminals reflected the state’s desire to assert control over the migrant women and to orchestrate their return as part of the state-facilitated migration process. Returnees could use government-sanctioned services but the transportation operators were to be watched out for. Many women found themselves paying fees that they were unaware of. Mbak Efa said she had to pay her “official” driver twice because he claimed she had never paid, even though she had a receipt. Kloppenburg and Peters (2012) found this institutionalized return process to demonstrate “confined mobilities,” particularly in the airport arrival and bus ride back to the villages. The current return process requires inspection and approval from several authorities (See Appendix A) and tends to create more issues. It also
means that the returnees do not experience a sovereign power, but a disciplinary power as that which existed in the constitution of industrial capitalism (Foucault 1980).

The overseas airport as a place of departure also creates a space of liminality and struggle for the migrant workers as Ida Raihan (2012) describes of Azura’s check-in at the Hong Kong International Airport:

“Tuker rupiahe, Mbak’e.” Seorang wanita berbadan agak gemuk, dengan suara logat Jawa muncul di sampingku menawarkan penukaran rupiah.

“Nggak, Mbak, udah tuker.”

“Mau ke mana?”

“Lampung.”

“Transit Jakarta?”

“Iya.”

“Bawaannya berapa koper, Mbak?”

“Satu saja.”


“Nanti tak anter ya, Mbak?”


Karena aku tahu tujuannya. Hal seperti ini sudah sangat sering terjadi di bandara ini. Mereka para penjual nasi, kartu telepon, dan rupiah selalu mendekati para BMI yang akan mudik ke tanah air untuk menawarkan dagangannya. Dan tidak sedikit di antara
“Have you exchanged rupiah, miss?” A rather large woman with a Javanese accent appeared next to me to sell rupiah.

“No Miss, I already have.”

“Where are you going?”

“Lampung.”

“Transit in Jakarta?”

“Yes.”

“How many luggage, Miss?”

“Just one.”

“This one?” She pointed to a small bag in front of me. Very small because it is just 9 kilos. I nod.

“Later I will accompany you, Miss?”

“There is no need, Miss. I can manage by myself. I am used to it.” I did not want to be fooled.

I knew what she was trying to do. Something like this happens often at the airport here. People like her sell rice, telephone card, and rupiah and get close to migrant workers who are returning to Indonesia to sell things. Many of them approach migrant workers when they check in, and add their own things to the workers’ check-in luggage.

Azura points out that the woman who approached her was Javanese, making it clear that fraud was about to be committed by a fellow Indonesian, not a Hong Konger. Azura later depicted a
harrowing scene at the airport, where Indonesian girls filling the terminal were carrying large pieces of luggage filled with things to give to their families and friends back home, also making them an easy target during the check-in process. The lady in question emerged again when Azura was checking her luggage:

“Berapa jumlah barangmu?” Petugas bertanya.

“Tiga.” Pedagang yang tadi mendekatiku menjawab. Aku dan petugas menoleh kepadanya. (264)

“How many pieces of luggage do you have?” The clerk asked.

“Three.” The one who was trying to sell me something came beside me and answered.

The clerk and I refuted her.

The Hong Kong Airport is a site that targets migrant workers, confirming that the site uses a disciplinary power that is not limited to state boundaries or confined to Indonesia itself. The presence of Indonesian calo (brokers) at the overseas airport reveals that the act of return opens up a transnational space, with some looking for opportunities to use the returnee women for their personal gain. Looking at transnational migration, the familiar structural governmentality can be seen by the practices of state officials, which illustrates the limits of state rule (Silvey 2007). It puts the workers right back into modern statecraft where persons remain abstract. Nonetheless, it also allows private individuals to play a role in the state-facilitated labour export and operate in areas that are traditionally governed by the state. They can use private resources and have intimate knowledge of the process from the street level (Lindquist 2010). Given the fact that pulang also requires the act of leaving home, Hong Kong airport is a place where affect and
reason intersect. Many Indonesians commented to me about how brave these women were. I often heard comments like, “berani, mereka, gitu ke luar negeri sendirian.” (They are brave to go overseas by themselves.) Even though they travel as a group on their plane ride and at airport pick ups, the idea of women travelling alone in a foreign country seems inconceivable to many. Upon arriving in Hong Kong, Mbak Heni said:

Ketika turun dari pesawat, tiba di Hong Kong, baru bingung, I feel takut. Terus di sana, saya sendirian dan tidak ada keluarga. I have no money, I have no mobile phone, so I do not if something bad happen to me, mau minta tolong sama siapa. So ketika sampai di Hong Kong, tapi itu sudah satu pilihan. I choose apa untuk berkerja di Hong Kong, dengan tujuan ingin mengumpulkan uang, supaya nanti saya bisa kuliah. Cuma memang, jadi saya takut itu tidak lebih besar dari tekap untuk meraih cita-cita. So… lanjutkan.

Meskipun, masih shock ya, saya dari kampung, nggak pernah naik pesawat, terus nggak pernah... Saya tidak bisa kembali. Saya harus pilih untuk maju terus.

When I was getting off the airplane, I immediately felt confused. I felt afraid. Over there, I am alone and don’t have family. I have no money, I have no mobile phone, so I do not [know] if something bad happen to me, who do I ask for help? So when I arrived in Hong Kong, with the goal to make money, so that I can go to university later. Really I was afraid that I wouldn’t be able to achieve this dream. So I continued. However, I was still in shock. I am from a small village, and have never been on an airplane… But I can’t go back now, I had to choose to continue ahead.

Identifying airports and ports as the sites of return expands the boundaries of the TKI experience from between worker and employer to between worker and state as well as between worker and
I suggest the agent, *calo*, who operates at the airports to deceive the workers is ultimately an individual that operates under his/her own “agency” and manipulates the market and seeks opportunities, while interpreting economy as a set of conditioned social interactions marked by obtainability and achievability of desires for upward mobility of their own. The state, in operating these sites, treats the workers as subjects of labour market and capitalism, and engages in the bureaucratic practice to minimize their subjectivity and personhood. Instead, it rigorously categorizes and disciplines them. In other words, this adds a site to the geographies and spaces where a female domestic worker can be written into: life before becoming TKW, life in the employer’s home, and finally subjection to administration and market in a transnational field.

The struggles at the air/ports seem to heighten the vulnerability of the workers by exposing the risks and dangers that exist even at the point of return. Nevertheless, Azura, under the pressure to become a distressed worker, scolds the individuals, and takes control. The agency of these workers are juxtaposed against the treatment of those who—ironically—provide services to them, using the stereotype of *bodoh*, unintelligent village girls who seem lost in the “international” and cosmopolitan space. As Ida Raihan demonstrated, her own experience dealing with shady characters at the airport became her first major published work of fiction. Resisting the popular categorization of *TKW*, she detailed Azura’s thinking process to show she was acting on her own instinct, assessing the situation and expressing herself while recognizing the intent of those around her. Although many migrant workers still fall prey to similar schemes in various sites of return and departure, they do not exist in isolation, as demonstrated by both Efa and Azura. The information network of Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong is vibrant and it continues to
feed those who tap into its wealth of information and misinformation. Therefore, *pulang* when taking place at sites of arrival and departure is influenced by the transnational configuration of capitalist interactions in labour migration.

### 4.2 Pulang: Dreaming of a Return Home to a Family

For many migrant workers, their journey begins with the realization of what they do not have. Mbak Ani explained how she decided to become a migrant worker:


My reason for going to Hong Kong is the same as many [migrant worker] friends, because economic difficulties. When I was finishing up high school, my father was a merchant. At the time, he took out a loan from the bank. His credit became stuck, and we

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\(^{36}\) Sekolah Menengah Atas: High School. Sekolah Dasar (SD) is elementary school and Sekolah Menengah Pertama (SMP) is middle school.

\(^{37}\) PHK stands for *pemutusan hubungan kerja*, and means that the work was terminated.
were not able to repay the money borrowed from the bank. My dad was not able to work [as a merchant], so he became a farmer. When he became a farmer, that’s when life became really difficult. At that time, just eating was a challenge. My grandmother helped us with food daily. Finally, we were afraid that our house and land papers would be seized, so I went to Surabaya to look for work but didn’t get anything. If I get anything, it would only be only 3 months and my job would get terminated. So I went to a job fair and registered to become a migrant worker.

Mbak Ani’s story is almost identical to all of the 20 interviewees. The specific education level, place of origin, religious background, and marriage status differ, but *kesulitan ekonomi*, the economic difficulties, prompted them to move overseas. Mbak Heni and Mbak Efa left their village because they wanted to be a teacher but their family could not pay for them to go to school beyond SMA. All of the interviewees spoke about their families’ economic difficulties as the primary reason for choosing this work. The migrant workers also imagined what their homes could be, when they began their journeys. Instead of expressing strong desires for the accumulation of wealth, many of them circled back to the unmet needs of their families that was closely linked to their own “dream.” Mbak Heni and Mbak Efa both spoke about wanting to go to university, *mau kuliah*, and Mbak Ani also pointed out that she always wanted to get further education. For some of them, the dream was so grand that it sounded like a mocking of the actual situation. In Jaladara (2014)’s *A Bloodstained Letter to the President*, Rosminah writes in her letter, “I dreamt of being president but instead my lot in life turned out to be awful, and I ended up becoming a servant.” (1-2)
The crucial point is that “dream” becomes a strong motivator for return. In a “spectacle where it presents itself as something positive, indisputable and inaccessible,” (Debord 2010, #12) the workers shape “the image of the ruling economy” (#14), and to achieve it, they demand an approach and attitude that allows engagement, participation, and manipulation of the capitalist economy. As Melani Budianta (2016) writes, the concept of “Dream House” culminates the capitalist desires of Indonesian migrant workers of rural-origin (See Hati chapter for the story of Ibu Tuti). Simultaneously, the image of a “dream house” is born from the conviction that having it guarantees a better life. Thus, what triggers the departure is the interpretation of displacement as a necessary capitalist discipline, with a process containing the re-beginning and replanting of identities.

By being away from home, outside of a home that is defined in the abstract, gives the workers an opportunity to seek the meaning of home during their period of heightened mobility. Ahmed et al’s (2003) formulation that, “being grounded is not necessarily about being fixed; being mobile is not necessarily about being detached” (1) is true for the Indonesian migrant workers. Moreover, the return home absolves this suspension and creates a moment when a person turns from the abstract to the particular, couched in unique identifiers that are also common with the community. A return home then signifies a future, defined by a perpetual dilemma conditioned by the past. Return remains unknown, scattered with notions of “dream,” even though the interviewees’ stories of the past are not “nostalgic” in the sense that they seek to restore the past (Boym 2007, 14-15).
The context of their return resides in a binary; as the stories of the winners are celebrated, the Indonesian media report heavily on the stories of “losers” and “victims” among the migrant workers. Migrant workers return with a somewhat politically valorized subjectivity, with their remittances being labelled as valuable contributions to the national economy, while their difficulties after returning home means confusion. Overall, their experience becomes inherently collective and subjective (Tadiar 2009). As their experiences involve representation and a site of struggle (hooks 1995), their return becomes a strategic moment for visualizing the relationship between state and transnational mobility (Xiang 2013), and labour suddenly becomes a legitimate representation of human experience. The women’s suffering and inability to deal with the complicated capitalist process that parcels out domestic work are part of their subjectivity as TKW. Immediately, they face the public perception of TKW:

Mbak Ani: ... saya itu masih merasa minder. Soalnya saya melihat kalo beberapa teman yang BMI, TKW, sangat PD38 itu... Karena masih malu itu dengan apa ya, label berkas TKW nya itu. Karena beda ya antara stigma yang sekarang orang lihat TKW persepsinya sekarang lebih positif dari pada yang dulu. Kalo dulu itu orang yang jadi TKW itu terus kemudian pulang udah pasti diantaranya berubah kebiasanya berubah. Kalo memenikahpun akhirnya cerai. Udah lupa anak. Kayak itu, hal hal yang negatif. Dan itu stigmanya kayak atau nggak tahu, karena saya orang yang pendiem, kayak saya itu perendah kiri itu. Untuk bikin saya diri saya PD, bikin saya untuk maju lebih baik... itu.

I felt inferior. When I looked at other migrant worker friends, they had a high self-esteem, but I still felt embarrassed about, what do you call it, the migrant worker label. Because

38 PD is short for percaya diri, which means self-esteem or self-confidence.
the stigma now against migrant worker is different, it is more positive now, compared to before. Before, [people thought] somebody becomes a migrant worker, return home as a changed person. If [she was] married before, [she] would then get a divorce. Forget about children. Like this, many negative ideas [about female migrant workers.] And this stigma, I don’t know, because I’m a quiet person, I just felt inferior. To become more self-confident, I needed to make myself better.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, Mbak Ani’s story does not end here. Upon her return to Indonesia, at a historically specific and important moment of the year 2003, she finds herself struggle with the “will to appear” (Arendt in Feldman, 6). She explains that the stigma against female migrant workers was quite negative, and it had a significant impact on her own self-perception. She notes the immediate and intense realization of the TKW label for herself and acknowledges its multiple meanings. The process of giving into the “migrant” label happens in a homogenized fashion, and she asks how she can “appear” only in a limited, performative way. The political project behind labour migration in Indonesia rendered “migration” punitive, as the capitalist logic was blindly applied to a group of people. The dominant voices made the women bad mothers and “free” women, without having any visible trace and origin to use in the counter-argument. Any kind of “archaeological” work into the knowledge (Foucault 1980) that propagates migrant workers as victims and places them into a negative stereotype is difficult. Nevertheless, the grand narrative offered turned these women into a suku[^39] (ethnic group), or ethnized their experience, ultimately, turning them into the “Other.”

[^39]: There are hundreds of ethnic groups, suku, in Indonesia and with each group comes a very specific set of stereotypes and characteristics. My usage of suku is to emphasize the parallel mechanism of discrimination against TKI, as a group of people with specific sets of expected behaviour.
When they return home to Indonesia, after living in Asian cities that serve as the “site of cosmopolitan memory” (Budianta 2016, 273), the returnees are immediately faced with capitalism and the continuing discourse of status, gender, and class (Ong 1999). Their intimate knowledge of their employer’s lifestyle verifies the economic distance between the families to which they now belong. As Mbak Ani puts it, “Kalau beberapa teman gitu ketika di Hong Kong dapat majikan yang susah banget, yang dimarah-marahan, atau gimana, disiksa... Jadinya kehidupannya udah terpakuk ke situ aja kan. (A number of friends in Hong Kong have a really difficult employer who gets very mad, or tortures the workers. So it just becomes like the life in Hong Kong is already just fixed there.)” Such behaviour is part of the effort to ensure that the “helpers” remain “helpers,” and do not become members of the family, though they may still perform the role of a typical family member, such as parenting for a young child or caretaking for an aging parent. At the same time, the workers are acutely aware that they should be fulfilling these roles back home. Parreñas (2001), Pratt (2012), and Constable (1999) have all alluded to this point in their research on domestic workers working overseas. In fact, with the unprecedented access to their employer’s family life, and even to key information on their business affairs such as vendors, finances, and clients, the workers never demand for a increased status from their majikan (master). The workers have no desire to have upward social and economic mobility in the foreign land, as the pull of pulang is far stronger. The competing forces as they weigh such opportunities result in their aspiration to re-create them back home in their own terms. Mbak Ani explains:

*Saya masih dari keluarga miskin. Bapak, ibu saya lulusan SD. Sekolah dasar. Terus kok saya punya pemikiran untuk kuliah gitu... Tapi kemudian saat di Hong Kong, kenapa kok masih pingin pulang lagi. Karena disana kan gajinya udah gede untuk ukuran anak*
I am from a poor family. My father and mother have [just] elementary school education. So I had this inkling for university. When I was in Hong Kong, well, why want to return to Indonesia again? The wages are higher there for someone who only have high school diploma. When I was in Hong Kong, my employer happened to be very educated so I became hopeful to have university education – the idea was planted in me. At home they would talk about education and that was nice. So I found a family that I wanted to model after in the future. Wanted to have a family like this. I wanted to bring this education for myself to have this great life in Indonesia.

*Pulang* is a process where the forces of nation-building are forged overseas with a clear intent to create change. In Mbak Ani’s case, it was not that she had not met anyone in Indonesia that she wanted to emulate. Years ago when she was a youngster, a university student came to her school as a guest speaker. The student had majored in psychology, and this chance event had a profound impact on Mbak Ani. Later, Mbak Ani also majored in psychology and enjoyed it thoroughly. She said it even helped her in her storytelling, as a filmmaker and a writer. Nevertheless, what her employer’s family had, was lacking from her family in Jombang, East Java. The employer’s

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SMA stands for *Sekolah Menengah Atas*. Equivalent to high school in the Canadian education system.
family discussed “education” and invested heavily in it. Both of the employer’s children had master’s degrees and the employer taught at a university in Hong Kong. Mbak Ani realized that gender was not an issue in terms of education opportunities, which was contrary to her own experience:

Pokoknya di ikutin aja. Masih belum tahu apa kedepannya terang atau gimana.
Pokoknya, jalan aja gitu.*

I lived in a Javanese community. Not a backward community though. So my grandparents had enough to live on, so my mother’s brother has a bachelor’s degree. But he’s a boy. They’d like to distinguish the education for boys versus girls. So this about my family opened my eyes when I entered high school. What I mean is, what is a girl doing here? School is very far, even on bicycle, it’s far… [but] the schools in my area gave me motivation that poverty can be overcome through education. So I felt, if we have education, we will have more opportunities. So when I was coming home, I was sure of this thought. Just do it [and get education].
The idea of pursuing education is tied to the notion of a dream. The Indonesian workers, in talking about their reasons for migrating, say that they decided to work abroad for their family. At least in the media or in the general perception, becoming TKW is rarely described as a stepping stone for a woman’s opportunity to chase her own dream. The lived reality of TKWs and the public perception often collide after the women migrants return home. The taste of independence and experience in more developed urban centres exposes them to the idea that they can make the connections to pursue their own passion. Mbak Ida tried living in her hometown of Lampung for a few months before settling in Jakarta. In her village, she could not use her laptop because of the regular power outages, which made it impossible for her to continue writing. She realized that if she were to become a writer, it would be difficult to do it while living in her hometown and she began looking for opportunities in Jakarta through friends.

In fact, pulang is a process of adapting for the returnees with the dramatic change in environment, and many women realize that it requires the time and effort to be reacquainted with the environment. Ibu Lana emphasized that the environment also responds to changes introduced by the migrant workers:

Maybe the change [in the future] will happen with many people having migrated overseas. In the villages, things are already different compared to old times. Because many migrant workers have returned from working overseas. To the villages, they have brought the changes towards modernization. The feeling is that the modernization has already begun, [people are questioning] why women must stay at home…

Going home to the family is another layer in the idea of return. Ibu Lana said:


The majority have a big family in the village, so automatically they return [to the village]. Before they leave, their life is in their community in the village. But there are also people who cannot live in the village any more. Because they choose to run a business in the city. But this is only a small number.

I asked a number of interviewees about any objects or items they brought back from their places of work. Instead of answering my question, many of them instead talked about things they bought for their family and friends. The certainty of the return means that the workers maintain their ties to home and minimize place-making in their places of work. Being overseas as a TKI creates a unique sense of community, which becomes a version of their home that they identify as a replacement, and not one they create as the place of their residence. Tied to the real unity of
the capitalist mode of production, the women workers participate in the “construction of the world” by identifying what separates them, and the boundaries that simultaneously make them free and pull them apart (Debord 2010). The collision that occurs upon return can be a traumatic experience, especially for those who were unaware of their dreams, their original intention to become a migrant worker. As with the case of Mbak Ayu, without sizeable remittances, some workers are not able to return home at all. Ibu Lana’s career choice in activism, for example, meant a damaged relationship with her family.\(^{41}\)

In the urban context, as Ibu Dewi put it, the returnees “harus adaptasi lagi (have to adapt again).” Ibu Dewi spoke about returning to Indonesia as a scary process: “I was afraid to cross the street! So many cars and no one following the traffic signal. My children had to hold my hand.” Many spoke about how “developed” countries offered order and stability in their urban centres, in contrast to what they encountered upon returning to Indonesia, especially Jakarta.

4.3 *Pulang, Temporality and Filipina Domestic Workers*

The idea of *pulang* also ensures that Indonesian migrant workers consider their overseas work experience to be temporally limited, and therefore, treating it to be clearly demarcated in phases. The information network they had, particularly with the Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong, allowed them to access information about immigrating to other countries. Nonetheless, their return home as a certainty and as part of the natural course of actions meant they did not take any action towards permanently settling overseas.

\(^{41}\) See the interview in Methodology chapter.
Ibu Dewi, who worked in Hong Kong in the 1990s as part of the earlier generation of Indonesian domestic workers abroad, befriended mostly Filipina workers:

*Jadi kita lihat sama sama kulit kaya orang Indonesia, kita tanya, orang Philippine*42?


So if we see the skin colour is like an Indonesian person, we would ask, are you Filipino? Because they look like us. The face is the same. We ask, are you Indonesian? No, I’m Thai, like that. So the place we gathered before had to be the Indonesian consulate in Hong Kong.

Besides the glimpse into the interactions of Indonesian workers with Filipina workers in the 1990s, Ibu Dewi’s experience points to the genesis of Causeway Bay as a gathering place for Indonesian workers, with the Indonesian consulate being located in the same area. At any rate, Ibu Dewi observed that many of the Filipina workers wanted to obtain permanent residency in Hong Kong or Canada. She said that they told her that it was possible and she should apply as well. Bu Dewi said she was not interested, but had sufficient information about the path to permanent residency or other kinds of “legal” long-term stay. “Yes, my Filipina friends [in Hong Kong] told me about how they were trying to immigrate to Canada. They told me about the agents and employers who could help. I was never interested. My children were still in Indonesia.” In fact, she is the only interviewee who managed to not use agents except in her initial contract. Despite having just an elementary school education, she proved herself by successfully navigating through the complicated paperwork that is required of migrant workers.

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42 This should have been *orang Filipina*, as the Philippines in Indonesian is *Filipina*. Because Ibu Dewi speaks English, she appears to have used the expression Philippine instead.
43 Stands for *Konsulat Jenderal Republik Indonesia* or Indonesian Consulate.
Bu Dewi applied for passports and other documents on her own without any help from agents. She was extremely resourceful and a well-connected worker with the means to find how she could stay in Hong Kong. In addition, she could also earn a much larger income in Hong Kong and had the ability, networks, and information to obtain it. In any case, she was not interested in staying in Hong Kong.

Mbak Efa was also aware of such paths to immigration. She said that many of her Filipina friends hired agents to immigrate to Canada. In fact, when I mentioned that I was from Vancouver, she said that she had a Filipina friend who had moved there from Hong Kong. She then shook her head and said that her friend sponsored her husband who kept a string of mistresses in the Philippines. She let out a big sigh and said, “nggak ngerti” (I don’t understand). The process had been explained to her in detail and the fees ran up to US$2,000.

Given my methodology for interviewing the returnees in Indonesia, the general conclusion among most of them was that they chose to return home. Nonetheless, since the Minimum Allowable Wage in Hong Kong was HK$4,310 (C$683) per month (Government of Hong Kong 2017), coming up with the fees would be a significant financial barrier. Structural obstacles like cost and the immigration regulations have also prevented some prospective migrants due to a lack of funds, connections, knowledge, and networks from getting to their preferred destination countries (Hatton and Williamson 2002; Castles and Miller 2003; Ratha and Shaw 2007). In contrast, in a study of 95 Filipina domestic workers, Anju Paul (2011) argued that it was not the state of a migrant’s resources and capital that permitted migration to a “preferred destination, often in the West,” since the workers could use a “stepwise international migration” from the developing world to overcome the structural barriers in stages (1843). Mbak Ani also suggested
that Indonesian domestic workers can quickly pick up Cantonese for easier communication with the locals, but to stay in Hong Kong, they had to speak English. Furthermore, my interviewees indicated that they wanted to return for a different reason:

_Ya saya dulu tetangga di villa tempat saya kerja banyak Filipina. Sekomplek yang Indonesia hanya saya dan sebelah rumah. Mereka cerita-cerita kalo ke Hong Kong bahasa yang dipakai bahasa Inggris... Mereka tidak mau menggunakan bahasa Kanton sebagai bahasa sehari-hari di HK, karena menurut mereka keistimewaan mereka menggunakan bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa ibu di negara mereka. Beda dengan orang Indonesia, kebanyakan tidak mengerti bahasa Inggris, di awal-awal pasti terkendala bahasa dalam komunikasi. Tapi kemudian orang Indonesia banyak yang fasih bahasa Kanton... Saya dengernya ke Amerika bilangnya katanya, kami percaya karena keunggulan mereka yg jago bahasa Inggris. Kalau saya, karena ingin membuktikan bahwa saya bisa kuliah sampai selesai dan berkarir di Indonesia. Itu seperti breaking the curse... Semua TKI selama-selamanya akan jadi TKI._

Yes, there were a lot of Filipinas at the villa I worked at before [in Hong Kong]. The only Indonesians in the area were me and another person in the next house. They [Filipinas] said if [we] want to go to (stay in) Hong Kong, [we] have to use English… They did not want to use Cantonese as their daily language because in their opinion using English as their mother tongue made them special. That was different from Indonesians, [because] most Indonesians do not understand English, and in the beginning communication can be difficult. But soon after, many Indonesians become fluent in Cantonese… I heard [Filipina] people talking about going to America, and we [Indonesian workers] believed
[they could do that] because their English was excellent… For me, I wanted to prove that I can go to university and establish a career in Indonesia, like breaking the curse [to say] not all TKI will be forever TKI.

Mbak Ani became somewhat of an activist when hoping that her decision to return would “break the curse,” and change the Indonesian society’s perception of migrant workers. This sentiment was evident in the lives of the interviewees: Ida Raihan’s portrayal of Azura at the airport as a discerning, alert and well-articulated girl was another effort to “break the curse.” Mbak Heni’s displays a confident attitude in media interviews and Ibu Lana’s expertise was demonstrated by her ability to consult with government officials. Thus, their return may have appeared as an abstract and blurry image, with a sense of eventuality, but it was defined by a purpose that would structure their lives in Jakarta.

The Indonesian returnees do not identify labour migration as a way to elongate their residence in the destination country, even though they are more economically developed countries. Instead, labour migration serves as a punctuated memory of their past. In other words, the temporalizing begins before their departure, to clearly demarcate the future from the past. Nonetheless, while they do not seek permanent residency in the foreign place, their uprooting from the overseas urban centres demonstrates that they intend to establish elements of the experience back in Indonesia. What appears to be discontinuity is actually their ongoing migration.

### 4.4 Why Urban

When I asked Mbak Efa and Ibu Dewi why they returned to Indonesia, they both stated that it was because of their family. When I pointed out that they do not live with their families but live
in Jakarta instead, they said that their work brought them to the city. Returning to their villages was thought to be a natural, automatic progression for returning workers, as Ibu Lana pointed out. Therefore, those who live in the city are “hanya sebagian kecil” (only a small group). None of the interviewees had lived in Jakarta before, and had only experienced it as representing “Indonesia.” Their initial plans for returning home did not include working and living in Jakarta. Therefore, their choice to live in Jakarta shows inconsistencies and contradictions, mixed with an off-beat affirmation that Jakarta is a national allegory and a viable space to pursue their dreams.

The life of returnee women in Jakarta adds a layer of urbanism to the idea of pulang. Their life and work experience in the Asian urban centres meant that they brought a particular brand of Asian globalization to redefine what a “home” should be. Because they returned to a kind of home they had not previously envisioned, their space-making in Jakarta was to replicate how they created privileged locations of class in the city. The urban situation therefore serves as a site of creativity, where they can pursue their own ideas and dreams, while holding onto the core values they held as departing migrant workers. In other words, living in Jakarta required that they perform the duties as family members, providing financial and emotional support to their parents and siblings back at their villages, while developing a new career or growing their own family. The city acts as an enabling place for the returnees, allowing Mbak Ida to continue to work as a writer, Mbak Ani to shoot her films, Mbak Heni to work as a social entrepreneur, and Ibu Lana to operate her shelter. Their lives and exposure to urban culture would allow their imagination and political and social involvement to rapidly expand. In particular, the notion of ibu kota had previously left the workers to be observers outside the city, but after returning to Jakarta, the returnees became participants within the city (Budiman 2011).
Living in the city opens up a space for the returnees to emerge as “persons in particular” in modern nation-building (Feldman 2015, 27). The label of “migrant worker” encompasses the workers returning to the village and struggling to manage the finances and family life. The decision to partake in urban life disrupts the norm and challenges the very authenticity of the migrant workers’ experience. In addition, many returnees living in the city are not “silent,” and are active social and political participants. Most of my interviewees have made it publicly known that they were migrant workers, and a number of them continue to give media interviews about their experiences and struggles. The fact that they did not return home to their villages may raise a concern that they are not fulfilling their family obligations, but by asserting their identities and place in Indonesian society, they are challenging the conventional stereotypes of migrant workers and Indonesian women. Their articulate voices and public engagements are refusals to be lumped under the label of “migrant worker,” challenging the validity of the category.

4.5 Mudik and Merantau: the Tradition of Indonesian Sojourn

Because the idea of pulang was considered as a natural progression, I wondered if it was linked to the cultural practices in Indonesia. Given the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups in the country, I am not able to investigate all of them here, but I would like to identify two concepts that became apparent in my fieldwork. First is the one identified by the interviewee, Mbak Heni. As we were travelling to a small pesantren (Islamic boarding school) just outside Bogor city, I asked her why almost all Indonesian workers return home despite the opportunities to stay overseas. She tilted her head to the side and pondered for a moment, and then responded clearly, “It is like mudik.”
As mentioned in the Jakarta chapter, *mudik* refers to the annual homecoming of Indonesians after the fasting month of Ramadan. *Mudik* means *mulih-udik* (to heal in the village), and in present day, it is a national event that happens during the Idul Fitri holiday, where all routes lead to *kampung*, completely filled with cars and motorcycles. The train tickets are booked months in advance. In preparation for their return home, people typically wait for hours at the train station just to purchase tickets. Travellers bring children and gifts through congested roads. An extreme level of patience, resilience, and tenacity is required for anyone travelling to their home village. It also provides a stark contrast to the empty streets of Jakarta. The lives of many Indonesians move from the city to the rural areas during this period, and *mudik* facilitates the shift. In the earlier quotation, Ida Raihan (2012) uses the word *mudik* to describe the return of a migrant worker Azura, “*BMI yang akan mudik ke tanah air*” (a migrant worker who will return to Indonesia). *Mudik*, if interpreted as a process that requires navigating through modern-day traffic congestion, would not be a pleasant experience for most people, but there is a much celebrated desire behind it to reconnect with family and friends, and to return to one’s place of origin to experience the environment and one’s roots in the structures and networks. As a friend once put it to me, being reminded of where you come from rejuvenates your mind and soul so that you may recharge yourself for the city. The word itself indicates that if the city is the battleground, one would return to the village for recovery and consequently, *mudik* becomes a spiritual experience (Abidin Kusno, e-mail message to author’s research committee, 11 Sept 2017).

Mbak Heni’s hint reminded me of the second concept, another Indonesian tradition of *rantau*. *Merantau* (its verb form) is often used in Sumatran cultures to describe the tradition of leaving

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44 *Tanah Air* literally means land and water, and it is an endearing term used to refer to Indonesia.
one’s hometown upon turning the age of the majority and later returning with experience and education. In her work of translating two memoirs of Sumatran intellectuals, Susan Rodgers (1995) defines the notion of rantau as “the social and moral precincts outside the Sumatran rural ethnic home regions” (5) to explain the social and political mobility occurring during colonization. Rantau is strengthened by a sense of longing, imagining, and moving, and it has been supported by community members engaged in the same practice for generations. It also involves a different kind of migration, as its itinerary involves a domestic move and cognitive boundary crossing, such as from Sumatra to Java or from a home community to the outside. While encompassing minor journeys taken by the two Sumatran boys as part of their rites of passage, rantau also means the navigation into larger realms of adulthood. Their vision “toward the rantau and toward critical forms of consciousness goes far beyond simple political or military resistance to Dutch oppression” (7). Rantau in the memoir allows the migrants to describe the practice they owned and unravelled. Rantau is also a gendered and personal experience. In recent research with Minangkabau women who had migrated to the Jakarta area, Iman and Mani (2013) found that the decision to leave home was personal and that the Minang women had a vivid picture of rantau and what they could do in the Jakarta area. They also noted a strong sense of sisterhood and togetherness among the Minang women in rantau through their reinforced gendered networks.

Coming home, therefore, is a notion rich with personal experiences and encounters, and cultural and historical implications. Coming home is a continuation of what people had done in the past and are doing today, as they leave their home town and return both temporarily and permanently. The act of leaving is preconditioned on the act of returning, which are both culturally familiar
and decidedly temporal. In fact, the continuation of such traditions is comforting and assuring, even with a sudden and disruptive interjection of capitalism and neoliberalism into the movement of people. The site of return can become transnational or institutional, but return is a dream intertwined with the desire to create a better living environment for family. The reality links them to home and holds the workers together. Individually, they desire the conventions that shaped their return experience and inadvertently changed the course of their future.
Chapter 5: *Hati*: Migration in the Memory of Indonesian Migrant Worker Returnees as the “Evidence of Experience”

Susah jadi orang kecil, Mbak. *(It is hard to be a little person, Miss.)*

- *Ibu Tuti*

> Experience is not a word we can do without, although, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, it is tempting to abandon it altogether. – Joan Scott (1991, 797)

One thing that stood out the most from my fieldwork of interviewing twenty returned Indonesian female migrant workers was the emotions, the pure and unfiltered expressions, found in every moment we shared together. In some moments, it was just an intense stare at my face caused by the questions I asked; but in others, it was a fist made with wornout fingers bursting with frustration and determination, and words that were not carefully chosen but that felt raw and brutally honest. Migration was and continues to be an emotional experience for these migrants, who told me in different ways that every migrant worker’s experience is unique. They refuse to be dissolved into faceless statistics. And as one activist declared at an event held at Taman Izmail Marzuki in Jakarta: “Stop treating female migrant workers as numbers.”

In my conversations with returnee women, I felt that their emotions were directed at me, an interviewer from the “West” who represents political and economic hegemony, and at Indonesian society in general, which has shut its ears to their story. Their expressions, therefore, were meant to be personal and political, and occupied both individual and structural spaces. This

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45 I presented an early version of this paper at Migration With(Out) Boundaries conference at Michigan State University in October 2016. I’m grateful for the comments and feedback from Dr. Anna Pegler-Gordon, Dr. Leslie Page Moch, Ju-Young Lee, and Jessica Tjiu.

46 The term the activist used was “TKW,” which stands for *tenaga kerja wanita*. See glossary.
chapter follows the cue from my interviewees, who seek to bridge the two realms of expression, personal and political, through spoken and written words and film, and in everyday life. Grounded in the past and the present, the stories of migrant returnee women explore ways in which labour migration can be conceptualized through different formats and articulations, and reinject the uncomfortable reality that these stories are not be counted but to be recounted. The discussion here is aided by the video project of Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett, *Salting the Sea* (2015), which captures the raw emotions of Indonesian migrant workers and their families.

So much of the dominant narrative around Indonesian migrant workers traps us into thinking that the prevalent theme should be the economy. At first glance, the movement of people between places appeared to be completely organized by capital, as the decision-making process involved in outmigration of Indonesian domestic workers is heavily conditioned by the discourse of unmet needs of the family. Many workers cite financial difficulties as the top reason to work overseas. Mothers start working overseas because they cannot pay their children’s school fees and want to earn enough for middle school, high school and even a university education. More and more villagers prefer to build a house in place of their bamboo hut and, when a returned migrant worker builds a grand structure, express envy and admiration (Chan 2014). Some women also talk about simply not having enough on a day-to-day basis and experiencing poverty, which puts the family through suffering. Thus, on the surface, the process follows capitalist logic: an opportunity to make money becomes available, an unemployed or less-employed worker moves to a more developed country and then sends money home, and then eventually returns to enjoy the fruits of her labour.
While the migration decision appears to have been made after an evaluation of their economic circumstances, my interviewees recounted their experience from a point of view that disrupts the official, dominant narrative surrounding migrant workers. Rather than seeing themselves as workers dispatched to contribute to the economy back home or reconstructing themselves within the confines of labour migrant subjectivity, these women and their stories demand a recognition of the individuality and diversity in each one, and thus their critical voices serve as a basic foundation for reshaping and reconfiguring the narrative. Their stories are also an attempt to blur temporal and spatial boundaries by bringing their past, present and future together and hinting at the influences on them from different stops on their journey. A focus on the wholeness of their perspectives results in a new framework based on two keywords: experience and hati (heart).

Particularly in the discourse on labour migration, if class division—which is facilitated by the relationship of economic strength, accomplishments and status to the ability to exercise social and political power—is the determining factor in the experience of capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2009; Park 2015) the question then becomes whether it would be possible to comprehend the extent and depth of experience of “the other” without economic categories. The migrant worker narrative usually begins with some manifestations of poverty, unmet needs and a feeling of paralysis, such that without pursuing the employment opportunity presented, the worker’s life would be in jeopardy. Nonetheless, in recreating and remaking the experiences, the returnee women I interviewed sought to reorganize and disrupt the unity seen in “migrant workers,” in which the spectacle around them paints a society driven by the accumulation and consumption of wealth. The reproduction of the returnee women’s experience gives what Joan W. Scott (1991) called “evidence for a world of alternative values and practices whose existence gives the lie to
the hegemonic construction of social worlds” (776). The notion of “experience” here supports a refusal of a unilaterally coherent articulation of the lives lived and opens up the possibility of diversifying the discourse concerning migrant workers.

However, as Brenda Yeoh (2006) cautions, I do not intend to surrender into the “emancipatory impulse” to place migrants outside oppressive nationalism and repressive state structures. Rather, I seek to develop the kind of notion that Neferti Tadiar (2009) explains as an “assemblage of heterogeneous practices and matters” (38) that exists as an articulation of subjective activity and social economic structure. While examining transnational labour flows and urban disorder in the Philippines, Tadiar argued that “experience” cannot be situated independent of social reality, self and environment, and that therefore, when it is placed beyond the objectification of capital and the production of masculine values, it becomes an “event” that reveals the making of historical moments. In other words, the migrant worker experience is symptomatic of and essential to the narrative of nationhood in the making, and it is multidimensional and reflective of the histories and memories of migrant workers themselves. As Ahmed et al (2003) pointed out, the “differentiated histories of movement that were central to the imperial process are still lived and negotiated” and the “circulation of bodies, objects and images in globality…re-enacts colonization of peoples and cultures” (7). The inbound and outbound movements of Indonesian domestic workers and their experiences put the normative notion of culture in question. The notion of “experience,” then, disrupts the unity that capitalism seeks to achieve in its projects.

Scott (1991) cautioned that “[e]xperience is not a word we can do without, although, given its usage to essentialize identity and reify the subject, it is tempting to abandon it altogether” (797).
Experience is not an absolute reality but a historical reality, as noted by Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1996) in “My Apologies, in the Name of Experience.” In a personal exploration of the notion of experience (pengalaman), he wrote:

As individuals, who are armed only with their own selves, writers are naturally under the greatest pressure. Still, whatever befalls them, their personal experience is also the experience of their people, and the experience of their people is also their personal experience. A part of this experience, small or large or the whole lot, will erupt in their writings, and will return to their people in the form of new realities, literary realities. That is why the truth of fiction is also the truth of history (8–9).

Pramoedya points out that “experience” cannot exist in a vacuum and emphasizes that as much as it is personal, it is also collective. When experience is re-created—here he is interested mainly in fiction—as a literary reality, new realities emerge to be lived by readers, whose experience then becomes part of their personal experience. Writing as a way to record and recreate experience is cyclical, and therefore experience, by definition, is shared and marked by the realities individually and collectively observed in each historical moment.

Thus labour migration, when expressed in terms of experience, is a contemporary tale of interactions or “transactions” (Spivak 2012) between systems that exposes the forces driving human individuality, connectivity and collectivity. As much as it is valuable to look at the structural makings of labour migration, understanding the notion of experience as realities demands a focus on the agency of migrants. From where do migrants tell their stories? How are structures and systems labelled, named and articulated in the perspectives of a returnee? While the structures created through capitalism and governmentality envelop the stories of the returnees,
the stories also problematize and challenge the stability of those very structures so firmly placed in the dominant narrative. Taking this further, to validate human experience is to validate the existence of the structures and to acknowledge that history could not be narrated by a single voice, as multiple voices in “small or large or the whole lot” could not be flattened and live in a single dimension.

The question then becomes how one could or should write about experience. Working with the notion of agency is a helpful endeavour for identifying and tracing the location of power, and is often involved in producing knowledge that seeks to establish a counter-narrative. Any attempt to reorganize migration as human experience should therefore be a deep, profound exploration of the humanity of migrant women that begins with uncertainties and hope, and then allows life with its contradictions and emotions to creep in. In transnational domains, “migrant workers” should exist in whole, and meanings and implications of “migrant workers” should be reimagined through reworking what their experience should be like, so as to allow new questions to emerge.

I suggest a keyword here to understand the Indonesian migrant workers’ experience of labour migration: hati. As suggested to me by a migrant worker broker, the business of sending migrant workers overseas is ultimately the business of hati, a theme that emerged strongly in all my interviews, taking different shapes and forms and manifesting in spoken and written words. Hati puts human dignity back into a process that has been characterized by capitalist terms and is located at the centre of the “spectacle” of labour migrants, resting in a systematic and structural interpretation of their experience (Debord 2010), and existing as a rhythm in everyday life with
its changing dynamics (Lefebvre 2013). *Hati* is an aching heart that makes the core of these women so visible in the way they tell their stories—or a warm and inviting spirit of restoration, resilience and hope found in both their past and present, despite the challenges they experience. I wish to show how their very act of storytelling and the stories that get unfolded in the process is a form of resistance to state-organized and -led economic development and the neoliberal manipulation of labour flows, triggered by capitalism and organized and executed by various actors.

5.1 A Writer’s/Worker’s Heart

When I interviewed Mbak Efa Dawnia about her unpublished novel, *3,000 Impian Kilometer*, she did not spend much time talking about the regret and disappointment of not publishing her manuscript, which was fully edited and typeset. Her publisher’s bankruptcy was the only reason why she did not get to become a published author, but she was not bitter. She was happy to explain to me the genesis and development of her book, saying that all the stories are based on real people. The names have been changed along with a few other personal details, but the basic storyline reminds her of fellow BMIs (*Buruh Migran Indonesia*: Indonesian migrant workers) in Hong Kong. Efa Dawnia is not her real name but pen name. She chose to use it for the name of the main character of the book as well. She wrote her book while working as a caretaker assigned to an elderly man with severe physical disabilities. Although I could only imagine what it was like to spend a whole day taking care of a person who was unable to take care of himself, she smiled and declared that her job was easy compared to others. The old man never complained, the family did not want to see him often, and she unexpectedly found the time and freedom to start something that was *dalam hati* (in her heart). So she was a writer and a worker.
Without any formal training in creative writing, her novel engages with readers in an
wonderfully effective way. It is funny and moving, and each character comes alive with each
story. There are many characters (more than 20) in this single-spaced 150-page book, but
anticipation builds with each person’s predicament. When I met Mbak Efa in person, it took me
only a few minutes to realize she was a natural, captivating storyteller who spends hours telling
the most interesting stories and also makes astute observations about her listener. In our chats,
she made a habit of reacting to my reactions. To my uncontrollable laughter, she used to say,
“lucu, ya?” (It’s funny, right?) with a twinkle in her eyes. To my tightly closed lips, clenched
teeth and concerned facial expression, she would gently tap my arm and say, “sudahlah” (Well,
it’s over) or “gak apa-apa” (It’s not a problem). To me, she was the writer Pramoedya (1996)
constructed: she wrote about historical realities and continued to communicate those experiences
in a reality where new realities are created in moments shared together.

In one of the pre-departure stories, Mbak Efa (n.d.) writes:

_setiap hari aku mengendarai sepeda di jalanan Jakarta, dengan potongan rambut pendek
seperti laki-laki, memakai kaus oblong dan celana kolor. Aku yakin seandainya aku
bertemu teman-teman sekolah dulu, pasti mereka tak akan mengenaliku._

(45)

Everyday when I rode a bicycle in the streets of Jakarta, in a boy’s haircut wearing a T-
shirt and pants in the same colour, I was sure that my friends from school would never
recognize me.

Cutting her hair short emerges as one of the key episodes in the book, and she adds “like a boy”
to explain how short it was and to emphasize how she viewed the haircut and how she felt. Long
hair was something she associated with a woman, and as such it belonged to a gendered category. In this moment, she asks what would have happened if her school friends saw her. At a time when her body is under discipline as part of the process of becoming a worker, she does not talk about a feeling of humiliation or angst; Mbak Efa does not describe her time in Jakarta in terms of powerlessness. Instead, she becomes an imaginative writer who is not afraid of asking about the “what-ifs.” She brings up a group of people who could not possibly imagine her with a short haircut, and cheerfully and sadly puts that reality into a conditional sentence. The process of becoming a state-sanctioned worker involved so much of how she would look to others in terms of her appearance and behaviour. It did not ask for her qualifications and life skills. Mbak Efa gives us more reason to undermine the power within the systems and processes in place for sending migrant workers abroad.

In my reading of her book and our conversations about life, Mbak Efa revealed that she found her stay in Jakarta before leaving for Hong Kong to be one of the critical moments in life. She was preparing herself to become a worker, dispatched by the meticulously worked out and yet loosely applied state apparatus, but she was becoming a writer, observing emotions of her own and perceptions of others around her. When she signed up to go overseas, she did not intend to become a writer, but the journey ahead provided her with the materials and space to think through the realities that were unfolding. “Jakarta” as a transitory site had a decisive impact on that journey. She explained that she did not freely explore the city but only stuck to the areas where she was supposed to go: the trainees’ residence and training centre defined the boundaries of her movement. In her first contact with the capital of her own country, she decided that
Jakarta was not a friendly place. Just as I was told by others, she was told that Jakarta is bahaya (dangerous).

In a passage I quoted in the Jakarta chapter, Mbak Efa describes what she felt while looking at Jakarta at night time few days before departing to Hong Kong. She does not describe Jakarta itself; instead, the city makes its appearance in a narrative that contradicts the chaos and noise it is known for. In relative stillness and silence, she stares into the bustling capital that symbolizes power, wealth and, most importantly, “Indonesia.” Facing her own country in the full display of its power, Mbak Efa wonders why she is not able to make ends meet there. Deeply breathing in the polluted and calmer air of a Jakarta night and observing cars speeding along the roads, compensating for the gridlock during the day, Mbak Efa’s heart, or hati, is not fixed on what the state has failed to do for her, but is focused on what she can do to change her own circumstances. She is willing to let go of her frustration as she recalls faraway places known for their wilderness and green tropical forests—their names and what they represent only, because she has not been there—into her memory. She consciously makes the grandeur and richness of her nation and its power irrelevant to her reality, the reality of TKI.

47 Malam terakhir aku berada di tempat itu, aku naik ke lantai tiga dan berdiri memandangi area Jakarta yang terlihat dari tempat itu. Sebelumnya, aku tak pernah menginjakkan kaki di Jakarta. Hanya saat itu, ketika aku akan berangkat ke luar negeri. Aku menatap langit, sebentar lagi aku akan meninggalkan Indonesia, memulai perjuangan untuk kehidupan baru. Negeriku begitu kaya-raja, dari Sabang sampai Merauke tersimpan kekayaan alam yang tak terhingga, tapi kenapa kami harus mencari penghidupan di negeri lain? Ah, sudahlah....

Last night when I was in that place, I climbed to the third floor and stood looking at the Jakarta area that was visible from there. I had never set foot in Jakarta before. Only at that moment, when I was about to go abroad, I would get to be here. I looked at the sky. I'll soon be leaving Indonesia and will begin the struggle for a new life. My country is so wealthy, from Sabang to Merauke, storing infinite natural resources, but why do we have to make a living in another country? Ah well....
Mbak Efa leaves as a worker, and she also returns as a worker. As a resourceful and resilient woman, she soon secures a job in Jakarta. In *3,000 Impian Kilometer*, Mbak Efa’s (n.d.) observation of her own country becomes sharper in the lives of others and in her own:

> Sepulang dari Hong Kong, aku mencoba mewujudkan impianku di Jakarta, ibu kota negeriku tercinta. Aku diterima bekerja di sebuah perusahaan Jepang yang berbisnis di bidang mesin-mesin dan peralatan berat untuk industri, kapal, mesin-mesin pesawat terbang, bridge suspension, turbo charges, dan power station boilers. Perusahaan kami bertempat di salah satu gedung pencakar langit di kawasan bisnis Ibu Kota.

Kunjunganku ke Singapura merupakan bagian dari salah satu pekerjaanku....

> “Kenapa, Mbak Efa?” Pak sopir mengagetkanku. Rupanya ia melihatku tersenyum senyum sendiri.

> “Oh, tidak apa-apa, Pak.”


> Indonesia adalah negara yang sangat kaya. Hasil tambang melimpah, darat dan laut menyimpan jutaan kekayaan. Buminya subur, lahannya luas.
Diperlukan kesadaran setiap individu dan para wakil rakyat untuk mewujudkan Indonesia yang maju dan mengentaskan masyarakat dari kemiskinan. Dengan begitu, para wanita Indonesia tak harus mencari nafkah ke luar negeri menjadi tenaga kerja nonformal meninggalkan keluarga. Biarkan mereka membesarkan dan mendidik anakanak mereka, generasi penerus bangsa, dan memberikan kedamaian dan kehangatan untuk keluarga mereka, untuk rumah-rumah mereka.

Semoga! (153–154)

Soon after returning from Hong Kong, I tried to pursue my dream in Jakarta, the capital of my beloved country. I accepted employment at a Japanese company that works in the field of machinery and industrial equipment for ships and airplanes, such as bridge suspension, turbo chargers and power station boilers. My company is in one of the skyscrapers in the capital business district. Visits to Singapore became one of my duties.

“What’s wrong, Miss Efa?” The driver woke me from daydreaming. He had been looking at me smiling to myself.

“Oh, nothing’s wrong…."

The car stopped at the red light. I saw several small children on the road selling newspapers and begging for money. I really felt like opening the window and telling them to come inside—I could give them some comfort, and they wouldn’t have to be on
the road. But what is a normal life in this situation? What if their parents are looking for them? What if there are crooks out there who control these children? Before having a chance to answer my own questions, the car started speeding up again.

Indonesia is a very rich country. Mines are overflowing; the land and the sea have millions in wealth in store. The earth is fertile, and the terrain is vast.

What we need is awareness of each individual and of our representatives in order to advance Indonesia and to fight poverty. Only then would Indonesian women not have to find livelihoods overseas and become workers in the informal sector, having to leave their own families behind. Let them raise and educate their own children and the future generation, and give peace and warmth to their family in their own home.

I am hopeful!

5.2 Imagining Indonesia

In the concluding paragraphs, Mbak Efa’s voice is disciplinary, prescriptive and demanding. Inside a car provided by her company and driven by a driver, she gets a different perspective of “the other’s” life on the streets. While we do not see an overlap or comparison with her time in Hong Kong, from which she just came not too long ago, she focuses on the reality she sees outside the protective boundary of a company car. Moments ago, she was greeted by a car and a driver; she now faces the life of Jakarta children up close. Their reality and the migrant workers’ reality are the literary reality, but it touches the core of the ways in which capitalism has spread in Indonesia—namely, through polarization of economic wealth, despite being a “rich country.”
The passage scolds her beloved country for not being able to provide children and the future generation with their mothers, which Mbak Efa sees as a precondition of an ideal home.

Mbak Efa’s narrative is key to understanding that migrant workers are inherently political subjects because of the reasons for and circumstances of their departure and experiences, and their treatment after they return. The narrative also shows that they are aware of their subjectivity, which serves as a way to assert the legitimacy and weight of their claims and arguments. In other words, the writer/worker voice of Mbak Efa the critic carries more credibility in her evaluation of Indonesia’s social and economic situations, because of her qualifications. She also effectively disrupts the “reality” or “experience” built around the TKI identity by introducing her current economic status and articulating a sharp, poignant critique of her country’s failure to care for the “little people,” which is echoed by Ibu Tuti in the quote that opens this chapter. Mbak Efa’s novel was never published, but as an author who writes stories based on her life, she lived “Efa” outside of the “literary reality,” and thus shared a kind of “migrant worker” experience different from the popular stereotype.

It is also notable that this story unfolds in Jakarta. In 3.000 Impian Kilometer, Jakarta is chosen as a strategic site for the pursuit of Mbak Efa’s dream, as she clearly states in the passage above. It is significant for a migrant worker returnee to choose Jakarta as a site of possibility and to see it as a viable space that she could carve out, claim and in some ways own. Initially, Mbak Efa sees Jakarta as a hostile space, where she was subject to bodily discipline—her haircut, uniform and being called a boy—and after her return, she sees it as a space in which she could dwell, influence, and participate. This begins a process for her to imagine “Indonesia” by voicing her
concerns and speaking out in a city that serves as a capital and seeks to control and manage the
country as a governable entity. Mbak Efa recognizes that, as Abidin Kusno (2000) put it, “the
nation not only exists, but is also embodied in the spaces of the city” (97). Working in Hong
Kong meant not only that she worked there but also that she learned the history and culture of
another Asian urban centre, rich with social and political dialogue around its past and future. As
she became more fluent in the Cantonese language and culture, Mbak Efa began to compare the
nation-building process of Hong Kong to that of Indonesia. In other words, the urban experience
provided her with confidence to conduct a more critical examination of the behaviour of the state,
as she became more familiar with the tools and terms of governance. Therefore, the critique of
Jakarta serves as a critique of Indonesia and a launching point to re-imagine what a state should
strive toward. What Jakarta represents, Mbak Efa feels, is now accessible, as her understanding
of “Indonesia” is enriched by her experience overseas as an “Indonesian.”

However, she does this by creating emotional links to the process, which in her subconscious is
implicitly presented as a key element in the Indonesian political process. In order to begin the re-
imagining of “Indonesia,” she first makes it known that she cares (memperhatikan) about it.
What Mbak Efa said about Indonesia—negeriku tercinta (my beloved country)—is a phrase
commonly used not only by Indonesian politicians but also in everyday conversations. Tercinta
(beloved) is therefore a complex emotion that is multi-layered and synthesized from all
socioeconomic and political classes, and invoked to imply that the feeling toward Indonesia goes
beyond patriotism. Despite policies, governments or systems failing to have a positive impact on
people’s lives—migrant workers go overseas because of this—the entity “Indonesia” is not to
blame. In the construction of Indonesianness, the sentiment toward the nation had to be an affect
grounded in colonial and Western powers (Budiman 2011), and Sukarno and others succeeded in creating a narrative that safeguarded “Indonesia” as a protected, revered entity. This provides a glimpse into the post-colonial nation-building that focused on establishing a uniform sentiment toward “Indonesia,” and the proper emotional response, whereby total control over individuals could become possible (Benedict Anderson 1990; Budiman 2011; Kusno 2013).

Mbak Efa’s hope for a more developed Indonesia is one that addresses poverty, so as to return mothers to their families. She is suggesting that the absence of mothers from their families is the key problem in the development process. While it may be seen as an extension of Kodrat Wanita (women’s destiny), which during Soeharto’s New Order was emphasized to “promote the view that women’s nature and destiny are to become a good wife and mother” (Marching 2007, 28), Mbak Efa is not articulating what an ideal mother or woman should be like. Her voice from Jakarta, where the central government disperses the budget and dispatches policy decisions to local governments, proclaims that the state’s failure to provide basic needs for families stripped away a key member of the family and thus violated the opportunity for Indonesian families to be together. If Indonesian women were indoctrinated by Kodrat Wanita and felt that much more guilty about leaving their family behind, Mbak Efa’s emphasis is not on those feelings but on the conditions under which those women had to forgo their role.

5.3 A Mother’s Heart

Although my research site is the Greater Jakarta area, I was introduced to a community group in East Java, where almost all the villages are inhabited by migrant worker returnees and the families migrant workers left behind. I decide to visit the area, knowing that almost all
Indonesian migrant workers are of rural origin. Once there, almost every female villager I meet tells me she has worked overseas at some point in her life. One afternoon, I visit a village where Ibu Tuti lives with three friends. The journey turns out to be long, and I start recounting how I have arrived here. I boarded a three-hour flight from Jakarta to an airport in the nearest major city, took an economy class train for four hours, took a taxi for an hour to my homestay, and then travelled on a motorcycle on an unpaved, bumpy, hilly road for another two hours. At the end of the journey, when I finally put my feet on the ground, I was facing the end of the road. Here the road that humans have built ends, and the forest humans have not touched yet begins.

Ibu Tuti’s house is right by the edge of a forest, and the concrete, well-polished structure almost looks out of place with its natural surroundings. Once inside, the furniture and decorations are humble and minimal. There is not much lighting either, and the rain clouds in the sky make everything darker the day I visit. She explains, while proudly and gently knocking on the concrete walls, “bikin rumah itu ya mbak” (This is a house I built) after working in Hong Kong for four years. All of this was just bamboo and dirt before. Ibu Tuti’s friends who join us for a chat point out that virtually every house in the village has been built by the remittance the migrant workers sent home. Ibu Tuti says she also bought a dozen or so goats to later sell off for her children’s education in years to come.

What her husband makes as a farmer is not enough for her family of four. This means Ibu Tuti still has to find work. She jokes that the trees and the neighbours will keep her family fed, no matter what. She is, however, nervous about not having enough for her children’s education. She says she is not sure if she can afford to pay university tuition for her two children, but hopes to
help them at least finish high school. She has tried many things to supplement the family income. Her most recent attempt is packing dirt into plastic bags at a coffee plantation nearby. This means she will work under direct sunlight from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. The day I meet her, she informs us that she has already quit because the pay was only 7,000 rupiah (70 cents US).

Ibu Tuti is part of a group of women that makes jamu, an Indonesian herbal medicinal drink. There are about 20 active members, and all of them have worked overseas before. I am meeting three of them on my visit. They want to take more orders, purchase equipment and register their group. Ibu Tuti and her friends have done the math, and they tell me the legal and administrative fees altogether will cost 2 million rupiah (US$200). No one in the village has this kind of money, and they are worried this obstacle will eventually make them give up their dreams. We run a lot of numbers during our afternoon together. Some of Ibu Tuti’s friends say they spent all of their migrant worker earnings in just two months; one of her friends says she has returned to Hong Kong three times. It feels as if we are trapped in a never-ending cycle of calculations. How much will be enough for their children’s education? “How much can I make here in my village so that I don’t have to become a migrant worker again?” All of us feel exhausted.

Ibu Tuti says it troubles her that her government is not interested in taking care of its people: “tidak diperhatikan.” ([the government] does not care) She says she went overseas not only to support her family but also to support her country. It troubles her that all kinds of laws and regulations are already in place, while all of the services that the government is launching have not reached her village. The grand promises politicians make feel empty to her. I ask if she ever thought about working in the nearest town, but she says no. She pauses for a minute and says she
had “dua hati” (two concerns) when she decided to become TKI. The first was her children—not being there for them when they were still young—and the second was her family’s desperate economic situation. Her heart (hati) was torn in two. Ibu Tuti holds her fists tightly, holding back a lump in her throat, and asks me to imagine what it was like for her to leave her family behind when she was still breastfeeding her eight-months-old son, and her breasts were still producing milk. As she looks at what is now a door of the house, she wonders aloud: “bayangkan (imagine) mbak.”

As our conversations are punctuated by the sounds of the river silently but deeply flowing in the back, and chickens crowing and goats bleating in the front yard, we realize that it is getting dark. In the villages, you tell time by the changes in nature, not by the clock. The rain stops too. Our voices do not have to be as loud anymore. I cannot imagine that Ibu Tuti enjoyed recounting what was waiting for her in Indonesia when she came back: never-ending financial difficulties that still loom large and greedy local employers who refuse to pay decent wages. After a moment of silence, Bu Tuti lets out a big sigh and smiles. She says, “susah jadi orang kecil, mbak.” (It is hard to be a little person, Miss.) She just could not find more words. She knew more struggles were coming and felt helpless.

All I can do is to nod. I feel helpless, angry and uneasy. As we prepare for my departure from the village, I ask if she will ever work overseas again. She says no, as I see her husband and children returning home. Her hati is no longer torn in two; now it is only one. In her heart (hati), her family needs her, and home is where she needs to be. As I say goodbye, she tries to convince me to stay for the night. I politely decline but tell her I wish that we will meet again. I turn back to
see them once more by the main road—the only road in this village—and she is waving and smiling next to her husband and two children in front of their beautiful house.

5.4 Imagining a Return to Family

Ibu Tuti’s story, as with Mbak Efa’s, places the migration experience on a continuum. They talk about a life before becoming a migrant worker and a life after returning home. This disrupts the tendency to see migration as a process validated only when a migrant is travelling outside of her/his place of origin or, in other words, is on the move. Ibu Tuti’s story is an affirmation of the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries in one’s experience. “Tuti” or “Efa” exists across time, not just as a “migrant worker” whose existence is validated only by her employment overseas.

In the re-creation of their experience, the returnee women began re-imagining their expectations of return. As discussed in the Pulang chapter, all of my interviewees, when asked why they did not choose to stay overseas, asked me why I asked the question. Their answers were often “karena saya harus pulang” (because I had to come back). For Indonesian migrant workers, the return is already being imagined and constructed even before they leave. This process can also make the physical borders seem irrelevant. Some returnees, for example, told me that they called home regularly to make sure the family was spending money strictly according to what they instructed from overseas, often first for school fees and then the rest for other family needs. The financial and material support they could provide for their family is carefully, intricately tied to the idea of return, painted with emotions about reuniting with the family and providing something “better” for them.
The idea of capital earned could be an abstract one, but in Ibu Tuti’s case, her house memorializes her memories as a migrant worker, her experience of displacement and, ultimately, her imagination of return. As she relives the memory, her house provides a sense of attachment to values and ideals she once strongly desired and an imagined, but now realized, backdrop that evokes the intimacy and availability of the desired (Boym 2001). Her present precariousness is not spoken of in the presence of her house, but her words and stories disrupt the spatial and temporal binarism of existence resulting from displacement through “in-between spaces” and “the meanwhile” (Bhabha 2004; Benedict Anderson 2006). The present clearly had to be better as a consequence of displacement, and the certainty of the village—the place she knew her entire life—had to provide a clear sense of her space, which she would have control over.

In Ibu Tuti’s present life, which is not much different from the past in its difficulties and challenges, stands the house on which much of her earnings have been spent. Its existence is unaffected and unassuming, and yet exudes a sense of obsession that occupied much of Mbak Efá’s imagination about her return. Her house stands, in fact, as a reminder of her experience only for her, one which her family is not able to share or understand. Despite her invitation to “imagine,” her own family—the ultimate reason why she made such sacrifices—exists in her private memory as an ideal that was being reconfigured and reconstructed. The family exists as punctuated stops in her daily life in Hong Kong while she worked for another family that she could not call her own. Her family kept her motivation up, and she desired and longed for them. In her hati, she indiscriminately and categorically missed them, and having reunited with the ideal she so wanted to be with and belong to, Ibu Tuti has a difficult time finding a better reason to leave them behind again. What feels right in her hati is sufficient logic.
Hati opens up a space to critically examine global capitalism and its workings from the point of view of a worker engaged in affective labour (Hardt and Negri 2009) in contemporary production of global capitalism in the form of labour export. Mbak Efa makes a distinction between “Indonesia” as an economically prosperous state and “Indonesia” as a political entity that failed to provide for her. The glorious sight of the Jakarta urban centre does not excite her about her impending arrival at another urban centre, Hong Kong; the scene instead carries understated yet palpable sadness. Mbak Efa invites us to be on that rooftop, overlooking the city and feeling what is in her hati. Her migrant voice questions the economic inequality, limitation of opportunities and forced removal of an opportunity to belong. Similar to what Sara Ahmed (2010) describes as a “melancholy migrant”48, Mbak Efa emerges as a migrant figure who makes the current status quo uncomfortable and unlocks the symptomatic display of the internal suffering of a migrant who is also an innately political subject.

Ibu Tuti has decided to return to the site of what Rosa Luxemburg termed “non-capitalist strata” that Tadiar explained as “social formations which appear to exist prior to and outside of capital” (Tadiar 2009, 132). Nonetheless, the village is no longer at the periphery of capital. Her return—and her friends’ continuing departure—is accompanied by the workings of capital, with monetary and mental souvenirs of Asian urban centres governed and regulated by capitalist principles. In new and renewed structures of dispossession and exclusion, Ibu Tuti now decides to return to “traditional forms of personhood, cultural capacities, practices of social cooperation and ways of life” (Tadiar 2009, 133) by claiming her space in capital reproduction as a mother,

48 See Chapter 4 “Melancholic Migrants” in The Promise of Happiness for more discussion.
wife, villager and *jamu* group member. In particular, being a mother is a role that she sees no one else being able to fulfill, as demonstrated by her invitation to me to imagine the moment when she had to leave her baby behind. As a woman from a small village with little education, she may indeed be part of the dominant narrative surrounding migrant workers—a poor, uneducated village woman working overseas to earn money—but in her return, she complicates the simplistic capitalist rhetoric by engaging in a creative mode of production in homemaking, childrearing and entrepreneurship. From the beginning, Ibu Tuti’s goal was clear: build a better home, not a better house.

### 5.5 Memory and Emotions in the Migrant Worker Experience

In considering the life of returnees, it is helpful to take stock of the memories and emotions they have experienced as migrant workers. Although, in reality, Indonesian female workers are employed in diverse occupations overseas and their occupations are not necessarily limited to factory and domestic work, the idea of “TKI” is confined to that very limitation. For instance, those working in white collar jobs would not be considered TKI, and they would not consider themselves as migrant workers. Structurally, BNP2TKI exists only for TKI, Indonesian overseas missions take care of TKI, and non-governmental organizations take care of TKI who are considered vulnerable and at risk. The existence of TKI is not positive or encouraging, as it confirms that “Indonesia” is not able to provide for its citizens and that TKI have go overseas not to seek adventure but instead to seek employment. Rather than focusing on the state’s inability to provide, the discourse around TKI is on *kasihan* (pity) in terms of the problems associated with the workers, such as their education levels, poverty, abuse, debt bondage and fraud. As the Indonesian government continues the discussion around closing the migrant worker program for
domestic workers, the rationale continues to be encouragement of the export of “professionals,” or “skilled workers,” whereby domestic workers are labelled and considered as de facto unskilled and less professional. It is not difficult to understand why the emotions surrounding the TKI are often negative and pitying.

In addition, as the capitalist market economy in neoliberal governance segregates the duty of care to workers, while attempting to keep the family unit intact, the work of Indonesian domestic workers has been defined and taken up in developed economies. In fact, as a population of workers that contribute a percentage of their remittances to the economy, the TKI also serve as a group of labourers whose production in the market is another opening and entry for Indonesia into the global market. Nonetheless, as Hardt and Negri (2009) pointed out, women’s work in the service sector is often conceptualized as “affective labour” that is defined within the production of intangible services that are difficult to quantify with accuracy. In the market economy, “affective labour” is only as good as the salary the workers make, which in many cases is pegged to the minimum wage—if that—of the destination country. The amount is considerably larger when converted to the Indonesian rupiah, making the opportunity attractive for Indonesians to sign up for the migrant worker program, and legitimizes the establishment of a systemized protection mechanism by government. It is not, however, large enough for the workers to be treated as a valued asset in the Indonesian economy.

49 For example, as of January 2017, the minimum wage in Hong Kong was HKD$4,310 (approximately US$555 or 7.4 million Indonesian rupiah). Most domestic workers received this amount. Some workers might receive a small annual increase and a long-service payment at the end of a four-year contract. This is not legislated or regulated but depends on the employer. Long-service pay is required by law.
Therefore, while the rationale for their existence and the official narrative is economic and financial, the TKI experience—the domestic workers’ experience—gets transported back to Indonesia with unexpected returns. Their work dispenses care to others by looking after children, the elderly and the disabled, and supporting the role of mother; and in return, they receive a reward that is both financial and emotional. When privatization of recruitment began and the number of workers went up steadily and rapidly, it was not foreseen how the emotions of workers’ experiences would travel back to Indonesia. The work of TKI is focused on taking care of those who are considered vulnerable by the host society, even while they themselves may be considered as vulnerable by those who are involved in protecting them. In other words, those in need of care are placed in their care. Undoubtedly, communicating a sense of care to people is an emotional task.

As an owner of a migrant worker recruitment firm in Surabaya told me, training someone to become a domestic worker is easier said than done. The technical and linguistic training to operate household equipment and understand instructions can seem feasible enough to be designed, taught and practised. Nonetheless, how does one teach caring? How does one teach the cultural practices and norms of care expected from a mother, a sister, a daughter or an aunt? Can people be trained in how to appropriately express emotions in a culturally proper manner? Conceptually, care cannot be defined by objective criteria of technical abilities (Kelly 2017; Fine 2007), but only by the giver and receiver in their account of mutual experiences. Thus, how much expectation would be there waiting for these workers who are to dispense care in a satisfying manner and to be compensated for it?
Indonesian migrant workers leave Indonesia without any answers to these questions. All of the workers I spoke to said they were more worried about leaving their family behind and were focused on the fact that they were not able to provide care to their own family. The intensity of the migrant worker experience—life in the urban centre, an increased level of freedom, a heightened sense of isolation—provides circumstances and an environment for them to go through many emotions. Returnees, especially a few years after their return, clearly remember the feelings and emotions they had, as opposed to specific places and activities. This is not to say that all the women workers are emotional and therefore their decision-making is based on impulse. Instead, it underscores that a migrant worker’s existence should be validated because of his/her emotions, not only because of his/her economic activity. In an era when emotions appear to be acknowledged everywhere instantly, with the rise of social media and increased connectivity, anyone’s existence tends to be simplified into either the likeable or the unlikeable. As we continue to experience emotional overload in polarized language and images on a day-to-day basis, returnees are caught in the didactic imperative that their past experience was for the economic development of their nation and thus their emotional struggle should be put aside. Mbak Efa’s and Ibu Tuti’s words explain this well.

*Salting the Sea* (2015), a video project by Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett, looked into a particular set of emotions surrounding migrant workers. Tita and Irwan have been involved in intervening in the lives of migrant workers since 2011, including making visits to Taiwan to work with Indonesian migrant worker writers and to the Netherlands to make a film about the very small number of Indonesian migrant workers there whose poor working conditions are not well known.

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50 I learned from informal conversations with some Hong Kong employers who have domestic workers that workers whose repeated visits to Hong Kong have made them seasoned workers carefully distance themselves from the family.
The two Jakarta-based artists travelled to a village in East Java known as a migrant worker-producing area, to spend some time trying to understand the situation. They soon befriended the villagers and got to know the stories of six workers who are imprisoned in Taiwan. In the video, Tita and Irwan collect the tears of the villagers in glass vials as they recall their family members and take those vials to Taiwan. As the water evaporates, a small amount of salt dries on the surface inside the glass and, together with the liquid from other vials, gets sprinkled in the sea in Taiwan. The video also features the simple, country-like scenery of the village and the raw emotions of the villagers as they call out to family members whose return is uncertain. In the final minute, the imprisoned workers appear in their own words that manifest in an artist’s drawings.

In terms of the migrant worker profile, this video project is out of the scope of my research. However, the intervention of Tita and Irwan provides a few key points to aid my discussion of emotions, memory and the migrant worker experience. First, in the video, the emotions derived from the migrant worker narrative are grounded in the workers’ unfortunate circumstances and initially are presented to invoke and intensify pity. Salting the Sea then takes a significant turn toward reconsidering the emotional geography of migrant workers, in that it moves emotions beyond geographical limitations and makes them portable and mobile by creating a channel through which a series of emotions are invoked by the mention of individuals. Tita and Irwan take the tears and salt to Taiwan, as an invocation and a geographical conflation, bringing the emotion to unintended spaces that are unprepared for this arrival. The video-makers visualize the villagers’ condensed memories of their loved ones into tears that are collected in small, delicate

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51 One curator based in Asia whom I interviewed was aware of Salting the Sea. She said that she felt the piece was too sad to be shown in her gallery.
glass vials that could be broken very easily. This symbolizes the fragility of the memories, as one of the workers confirms in words: “I wish they would forget me.” Their names alone, steeped in unfortunate circumstances piled one upon the other, contain memories and emotions tied to labour migration as an unavoidable choice. The video is also a reminder that migrant workers are remembered most clearly in their unfortunate situations, as the entire village mourns and grieves for its missing members.

Second, since these workers have not returned and may never return to Indonesia, the video provides a comparative perspective on the notion of return. Their voices and faces could not be recorded due to their imprisonment and are thus only captured by the artists’ work and the words that appear with the drawings. This symbolizes the reality that migrant workers’ voices have to be selected in order to appear and that they would never emerge on their own. Absence and silence force the viewer to concentrate on the workers’ situation, and the watching experience is amplified by the wailing of the villagers crying out to God about the injustice. Here, Tita and Irwan interrupt the marginalization that claims to “give voice to the voiceless” by leaving the workers in literal silence and yet helping them appear through their homes and families, while absent from them. In a sense, the video is their return home without their physical bodies being present in the village, when their names are screamed out loud, their memories recalled and their absence is felt and expressed. The visceral reactions to their silence and absence communicate that a family dispossessed of a family member feels violated and that the suffering deepens over time. This gives some clue to how important return is to the migrant worker families and family is to the social makeup of Indonesian communities.
Finally, the South China Sea is chosen strategically as a place of diplomatic rows and power struggles, and has a symbolic presence in the intervention, challenging and criticizing the governments for their inaction toward the workers (Tita Salina and Irwan Ahmett, in discussion with the author, 19 Nov 2016). The workers have been abandoned by political processes and any diplomatic intercession that could secure their release from prison, and trapped in a no-man’s zone where the political in the migrant worker identity has dissipated. Their existence no longer serves a purpose; they have become unable to provide economic contributions and are no longer afforded protection from the sending and host societies. By pouring in tears and sprinkling salt into the space of a territorial dispute involving multiple countries, Tita and Irwan attempt to re-insert the migrant worker issue into the diplomatic arena. They attempt also to overload the video with intense emotions about the hopeless situation: as a result, the workers’ cases are placed at the intersection of the emotional and the political. The devastation over the absence of migrant workers, performed and captured for the video, fills the void through a recognition of their existence and validates their place in the community. The rawness of emotions, with the complexity of the situation in the backdrop, does not make the workers less valuable as a political subject but allows their humanity to emerge strongly in order to begin restoring just that. *Salting the Sea* is not a lamentation but rather a proclamation and a condemnation. It speaks to the human emotions that move us to become who we are and who we can be as part of a society, community and nation, and highlights hierarchies of power.

5.6 “Evidence of Experience”

“All of us are better when we’re loved.”

- Alistair MacLeod (1999)
Some stories the returnee women shared with me were told with precision, and carefully articulated. Yet somehow, they felt practised and rehearsed. I heard about their struggle with employers in Hong Kong, the financial difficulties of their families back in Indonesia, and the mockery they endured from both overseas and at home. The dominant narrative around Indonesian migrant workers—represented by a word, *kasihan* (pity)—demanded that they process their own story against the larger one that resides in the public memory. Their own stories have begun to participate in and contribute to the grand narrative of TKW, albeit it is one they sought to resist. However, in my interviewees, I began to see snippets of stories that appeared to be outside the constructed stories of TKW, and that is when their *hati* appeared. I saw raw emotions and expressions on the women’s faces when they told me about saying goodbye to their families, when they reunited with their partners and when they met a boy who kept them sleepless for months. When they revealed their *hati*, their resistance emerged strongly against the economic and political power that has done injustice to their lives.

Therefore, the “evidence” I offer in the stories of the TKW is located in the commodification of labour obscured by a valorization of capital, and in the realm of resistance in its discursive construction (Scott 1991; Park 2015). Rather than claiming that the reconstructed narrative of TKW rebuilds the knowledge around their agency and therefore reproduces the visibility of their identity, I would argue that the stories of *hati* challenge the categories in terms of their representation, operation and continuing discourse. My interviewees treated the recounting of experience not as a declaration of a lived reality but as an enunciation, making their speech act (*parole*) a use of language and an operation performed (De Certeau 2013). In other words, by drawing from a renewed category of affect, Indonesian migrant returnee women critically
question and interrupt the capitalistic, market-oriented categorization of female migrant labour. By imagining a permanent return and partnership under the conditions of mobility and uncertainty, they articulate a kind of experience that denies a fixed analytical frame and demands historicization of their “experience”—one which recognizes multiple planes where their stories have developed and been located.

In fact, stories of *hati* contribute to the disruption of what Hyun Ok Park (2015) called “market utopia” as a sociopolitical project pursued by the Indonesian state and of its articulation of migrant labour as a destined route to global capitalist development. Exposing the unevenness of and tracing the emotions involved in the expressed desires of migrant women are discursive forms that directly contest the state’s attempt to manage migrant lives, according to Foucault (1979)’s notion of biopolitics. What is crucial is that the migrant women put forward a narrative wherein the established social category proved to be insufficient, thereby historicizing their “experience” in its relationship to the past through an analysis that is “contextual, contested and contingent.” (Scott 1991, 796–797)

The Indonesian migrant women’s stories of return for family and marriage indicate that their struggle for happiness is not to obtain or achieve something extraordinary. In the everyday sphere, they are stories of trying to keep the family together and fill it with love. I question, therefore, why these seemingly simple, basic desires could not be realized in the women’s own communities and why suitable opportunities could not be accessed. Their stories cause me to wonder why their path in life did not afford them something so simple yet so critical to the existence of every human beings.
Chapter 6: Conclusion: Ungovernable Migrants

We hope that there will no longer be migrant workers, women who work overseas. We hope that it would be enough to be in Indonesia. From Sabang to Merauke, the land is fertile here. Our hope is that Indonesia in the future will be better and there will not be any more migrant workers. And there will be development spread out equally, not only in big cities but also in villages....

- Ibu Lana

In our current time, the discourse around transnational migration is often understood as a phenomenon to be managed as opposed to a process or progress natural to the human condition. Migration has always taken place in different ways and forms, and an argument could be made that it has always unfolded on a significant scale. When states started to become more concerned about boundaries and nationhood, those who crossed what was demarcated as a national border and those who did not fit nicely into the criteria assigned to the idea of a nation were labelled migrants and subject to a set of rules and regulations, often placing them outside the domestic and international legal regimes.

Ibu Lana’s proposal above could be a provocative one, given that she works for the Indonesian Ministry of Labour that manages the migrant worker program, and that as a migrant worker returnee, she is able to enjoy a career as an activist and a government consultant. Nonetheless,
after having been a migrant worker herself and having spent a significant amount of time resolving the issues migrant workers face inside and outside Indonesia, and getting involved in policy discussions in the ministry, she is challenging the idea of sending migrant workers overseas. She hopes that “migrant workers” will no longer need to work in foreign countries. To put this in context, she does not want to see more female workers going to another country to work as domestic or factory workers; she wants that reality to cease.

In fact, the Indonesian government had plans to stop out-migration of domestic workers by 2019. The idea is that migrant workers will be trained as skilled workers specialized in their own field. Thus, instead of sending out a domestic worker, Indonesia will send a cook, a babysitter and a nurse, for example. However, the timeline for this project has changed multiple times. In 2014, the first time I heard about the plan, the deadline was 2016. In 2016, I heard that it was pushed back to 2017. In 2017, CNN Indonesia reported that the government plan had been delayed to 2019. Many activists I spoke to doubt that it will come to fruition at all, pointing out that this would encourage “black” migration and would not stop the clandestine flow of migrants, which already exists anyway. Some returnees I met in villages asked me where people could find work in the absence of opportunities to work as migrant workers. Ibu Lana offered her thoughts on this too:

*Kalau menurut saya, itu bukan solusi yang terbaik. Solusinya bukan menutup atau menghentikan penempatan PRT di luar negeri yang formal. Tapi bagaimana di dalam negeri pemerintah Indonesia meningkatkan skill. Meningkatkan skill untuk tenaga kerja kita yang akan bekerja di luar negeri? Bagaimana berkerja di luar negeri merupakan pilihan bukan karena terpaksa untuk mencariakan karena di Indonesia tidak ada pekerjaan. Tapi bagaimana dia memilih? Tapi dengan itu tadi konseguensinya dia harus*

My opinion is that this [stopping out-migration of workers] is not the best solution. The solution is not to close up or stop the formal placement of domestic workers to work overseas. But how can the Indonesian government increase skills [of its people] in the country, increase skills so that our workforce can work overseas? How can working overseas become a choice, not a forced decision because there are no jobs in Indonesia? But how can she\textsuperscript{53} choose? The consequence is that she must have skills, must have real skills that would facilitate going overseas. Therefore, really, she will not become a domestic worker again. She can cook, then become a cook. They can develop their skills further overseas and become a cook. Babysitter how can she focus on becoming a babysitter? Nurse, nurse, can take care of senile older people. Does not have to work in domestic service. If other sectors are open, that would be better. We must also be ready

\textsuperscript{52} Ibu Lana meant to say babysitter.
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{dia} in Bahasa Indonesia means both “he” and “she.” I have chosen to translate this as “she,” given that Ibu Lana is describing the case of domestic workers.
with skills. If not ready with skills, then don’t leave. Perhaps workers cannot be stopped from going overseas. As long as there is enough work that could satisfy the workforce, stopping migration is not a solution. The solution is to increase the quality of the Indonesian workforce going overseas.

What pushed Indonesian policymakers to bring the migrant worker program to a halt was what the whole endeavour became known for: cursory training, clandestine documentation practices, employer abuse and persistent poverty among the workers. The hallmarks of neoliberal treatment of low-skilled migrant labour did not agree with the brand of “Indonesia” the government has sought to create. If the Sukarno and Suharto years were devoted to creating “Indonesia” as a unified nation with a singular identity, the “Indonesia” of today struggles with the troubling realization that in the sending mechanism of modern-day Indonesian women migrant workers, the “dynamics of neo-colonization and global marketplace” are revealed through “imperial amnesia” (Cruz 2012), as the government is trying to elevate its status in the hierarchy of the market. Nonetheless, those who keep their fingers on the pulse of the community—prospective migrant workers, un-/under-employed village women—argue that prohibiting people from moving is not going to address the problems associated with migrant workers. Returnees suggest that it comes down to creating an environment in which employment is a practice enabled by a wide range of choices, which then leads to fulfillment from following *hati*.

### 6.1 Applying “Returnee” as a Category

I have argued that “returnee” as a category is, in fact, useful, because it expands migrant workers’ temporal boundaries and continues the migrant experience into the present after their return. “Returnee” as a category tends to reside outside the space of marginalization, with a heavy focus
in the migrant worker discourse on the pre-departure and employment periods. Returnees are able to articulate the migrant experience from a perspective that still qualifies them as migrant workers because of their past and that has also afforded them another perspective informed by temporal and spatial distance to evaluate the experience and the new experience of rebuilding their lives after their return. While I have exclusively examined the Indonesian case, the experiences of returnees, articulated in their own words, help us identify the institutional apparatus surrounding other migrant workers as well. The striking absence of government programs and regulations around returnees, compared to the level of detail stipulated in sending migrant workers, is an indicator of how the state understands migrant workers. They are recognized when they are leaving or have left, but not when they have returned. Examining the returnee experience and relying on the accounts of returnees also reveals that labour is not an isolated segment of a worker’s life and that migrants are ultimately ungovernable while they continue to exist in the bureaucratic maze. In other words, migrants are a category riddled with institutional traces but continually defy the argument that they need to be managed by challenging prevailing notions.

Furthermore, Indonesian returnees disrupt several spaces of categorization. An argument in this area concerns the workings of the phenomenon of the so-called “feminization of labour.” This phrase is often invoked when explaining the export of female migrant workers from Southeast Asia to various urban centres around the world, and hinges on the notion that female workers get paid less than male workers and that they almost always work in the service sector. Several conversations I had with returnees revealed that they were the breadwinners for their family—in other words, their income was higher than that of their male spouses or heads of household.
Regarding the type of employment, domestic work is traditionally defined as being in the realm of a “woman’s role,” but Indonesian returnees’ words demonstrate that sometimes their work was much more than the assigned role. Feminization of labour also assumes systematic and institutional labour export, and governance and regulation of female workers.

Moving inside and outside of what appear to be carefully calculated policy moves, Indonesian returnees’ stories prove that migrant workers are ungovernable: Indonesian domestic workers becoming the face of Indonesia overseas, the emergence of *sastra BMI*, and the spontaneous, organic progression of the returnee’s career into uncharted territory by becoming a high-earning office manager, a social entrepreneur or a filmmaker. Furthermore, returnees articulate that feminization of labour complicates the workings of capital, as employing domestic workers may be conceptualized as the possibility of purchasing the role of women. However, it still does not redeem the women entirely—both those who employ domestic workers and those who leave their own family behind. If the flow of capital and the neoliberal, neo-colonial movement of people have contributed to the feminization of labour in Southeast Asia, the returnees point out the contradictions they live through on a daily basis.

### 6.2 Emotion and Labour

Especially in the *Hati* chapter, I have tried to argue that emotion is important to understand as a form of experience, and that emotion and experience are essential to understanding memory and the migratory networks in which memory is displaced in time. Linking emotion and labour in this way allows us to appreciate each migrant worker as a human, not a nameless, numbered, faceless individual. This approach also highlights the complexity of subjectivities and the
emotional identity of the migrant workers, as returnees consistently emphasized to me about their experience, in a word: *macem-macem* (all kinds, varied).

The very fact that migration, for Indonesian domestic workers, begins with hope for a better future—an idea that is never supposed to fully bloom and that is difficult to explain and articulate—makes for an experience dominated by feelings and senses. In tracing their steps, returnees go back to the moment in time when they were prompted to feel the desire to become more prosperous, educated and refined. The emotions enabled by their very identity as labourers are then inseparable from their experience of work, because even when they do not work, they are always defined by their work as “unskilled” workers, domestic workers.

The prevalent themes in Indonesian labour migration should revolve around the economy, as seen in the movement of people organized by capital and the discourse of unmet needs of families, but the abstract themes relate directly to experiences. Behind each migrant worker is a mother unable to pay her children’s school fees, a daughter who wants to build a more durable home for the entire family, a sister who wants to help siblings get a university education and a granddaughter who wants to grow livestock for the family. Thinking “emotion” and “labour” together also opens up the space to consider the power relations through which migrant returnees used to operate and which they are matched against upon returning to Indonesia. While the stories of departure may highlight their vulnerability and poverty, the fact that they have taken steps to alleviate these unfortunate circumstances and that they are able to bravely *(berani)* move

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54 Nonetheless, Hannah Arendt (1958) wrote that “since unskilled work is a contradiction in terms, the distinction itself is valid only for the labouring activity, and the attempt to use it as a major frame of reference already indicates that the distinction between labour and work has been abandoned in favour of labour.” (90)
overseas by themselves gives the workers an opportunity to disrupt the existing power relations. Images of scrupulous brokers, a bureaucratic maze and abusive employers may create an environment for these women to become “victims” without any relevant personal experience, but the Indonesian returnees recount stories that challenge the victimology of migrant workers. What is crucial here is that by connecting emotion to labour, they are able to assume powerful narratives propped up by effective arguments, which in itself is an act that centres experience around their own voice, which chooses to speak about the events and ideas of importance, and to shape new discourses around migrant workers in Indonesia.

6.3 Final Words: Coming Together

This project provides a critical look at the construction of “migrant worker” as a disciplinary category and uses the analytical category of “returnee” to uncover the agency beyond the marginalization of women, domestic workers and people of rural origin by setting the story in the city of Jakarta. I have written this dissertation to be another connecting element in the big picture in which “returnee” enhances the very connectivity among migrant workers upon their return to Indonesia and the community that gets formed as a result and that exerts the collective, indisputable and discernible force of returnees in “Jakarta” and “Indonesia.” The network of the returnee women, with me woven into it and reflected through my act of questioning, listening, seeking and writing, not only is a manifestation of my positionality, but also demonstrates that knowledge-making is a collective effort—and therefore strengthens the argument that the process must be ethical in the cultures involved.
In my methodology chapter, I attempted to describe some of the struggles and challenges I experienced in the field while trying to be an ethical researcher in the local context with the training I have undertaken as a doctoral student in Canada. The Indonesian women I interviewed and worked with alerted me of the importance of not remaining “the other” and learning and enacting the local customs in order to be respectful to them and their stories. In that process, the city of Jakarta gradually gave in to my attempt to carve out a space where I can come home and feel at home—or, in other words, where I can pulang. Returnee life is found in the chaotic Indonesian blend of decentralization and decolonization: in the political arena, the ongoing bureaucratic experiments to achieve a decentralized governance structure; and in the sociocultural arena, the legacy of colonization and the efforts to deal with and in some cases shed colonial remnants. Our attempt to “occupy” Jakarta and understand it in fragmented ways—which also explains the never-coherent, monstrous city that functions erratically, as seen in my narrative in the *Jakarta* chapter—and uncover and restore the emotion (*hati*) and agency of migrant workers then naturally led us to a political conclusion, the undercurrent that has been flowing underneath us all.

Our participation and performance as returnee women and migrant women in and of the city is a political act that questions a new brand of nationalism that is on the rise, predicated on the idea of development and progress. Meanwhile, our political act also invokes the cultural memory of colonialism, and that resists the state categorization that fails to provide for the families. Sending out migrant workers, under the current practices and manifestations, deepens the struggle and challenges that everyday Indonesian families face, as told in the stories of returnees who had to repeatedly overcome structural difficulties. This argument does not limit one’s desire for
mobility, but, as succinctly put by Ibu Lana, aims to provide economic opportunities in the communities and guarantee uninhibited access regardless of where one lives. As returnee women have shown, what is crucial is to allow their networks to be formed and to function so that they can support one another in building a nation-state that is not didactic but dialogic, and thus truly “Indonesia.” To Indonesian people, the capacity of the nation-state will continue to be demonstrated by its ability to take care of its workers at home and abroad, and to restore and regain the subjectivity of returnees, not by using economic indicators and political might.

6.4 Epilogue: Indonesian Migrant Workers in Hong Kong

Every deed and every new beginning falls into an already existing web, where it nevertheless somehow starts a new process that will affect many others even beyond those with whom the agent comes into direct contact…. The smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness and unpredictability: one deed, one gesture, one word may suffice to change every constellation. In acting, in contradistinction to working, it is indeed true that we can really never know what we are doing.

– Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition

It is a wintry Sunday morning in Hong Kong in mid-January. For visitors who underestimate the Hong Kong winter and expect it to be a colder variation of tropical weather, cold temperatures and the wind through the concrete jungle can be an unpleasant surprise. For locals, it is an opportunity to bundle up and try out their winter jackets. At Causeway Bay, as they have done for years, Indonesian women fill the streets and parks, sitting on plastic sheets and cardboard boxes, in varying degrees of winter gear they will never wear back home. According to the Indonesian consulate in Hong Kong, as of early 2017, out of 165,753 Indonesians who lived in Hong Kong, 150,239 were migrant workers, 99.9% of whom were women and domestic workers
or elderly care workers (Konsulat Jenderal Republik Indonesia di Hong Kong SAR dan Macau SAR 2016).

A friend of mine, Ibu Tini, and I take a stroll in Victoria Park, famously known as the Indonesian gathering place on Sundays. As I step in, I realize the park is completely full of Indonesian women. I can hear Bahasa Indonesia everywhere, smell Indonesian food and see Reog Ponorogo dance groups, silat practices and a singing competition. As Ibu Tini says hello to some people she runs into, I am busy looking at the signs: “Don’t sell,” “Don’t dump garbage” are from the Hong Kong government, and “menerima kasus” (accepting cases or reports for help) from an informal Indonesian domestic workers’ group. Imperatives from the Hong Kong government tell the Indonesian women what not to do, implying that they have disrupted the local laws and regulations. The signs in Indonesian are a confirmation of the perceived reality: the workers are often in trouble.
Figure 17. Victoria Park. Left: A sign erected by one of the entrances. In Bahasa Indonesia, Chinese and English, it prohibits hawking, which is punishable by a HK$50,000 fine or two years in prison, and ends with the sentence “Don’t risk your future.” Right: Indonesian workers helping each other. Photo by Kilim Park.

The dark clouds cover the sky, and the rain is about to drop. I ask Ibu Tini where people would go if it were to rain here. Ibu Tini, who lived and worked in Hong Kong for “a long time” (sudah lama) says she is not sure. As soon as she finishes her sentence, the rain comes down from the sky, and she laughs: “Kilim, jawaban ya (here’s your answer)!” It is clear that these women have nowhere else to go. No one is leaving the park; instead, everyone takes cover under big trees, shelters and any kind of roof. A few people form groups to take an extra plastic sheet and put it over their heads. Impromptu plastic tents pop up like mushrooms in Victoria Park.
The word on the street about how Central became the place of Filipinas and Causeway Bay the place of Indonesians is that there was a conflict between the two. I asked Indonesian women, one after the other, to see if anyone knew what had happened, but no one was sure. No one complained either. In fact, beside an entrepreneurship group, *Mandiri Sahabatku*, that gathers behind the Central Library was a volleyball court where a group of Filipinas played every Sunday and held cheerleading competitions. They were surrounded by Indonesian workers, including *Mandiri Sahabatku* members, Balinese ladies burning incense and presenting offerings, and those who were strolling in the area, but there was no sign of animosity. Indonesians and Filipinas observed each other from a distance while carrying on with their day, laughing, yelling, resting and enjoying their only day off. The boundaries set by the Hong Kong government (or anyone else) were renegotiated, and the rules that were meant to govern foreign workers did not have to be applied. In no way is the scenery of Victoria Park on Sundays a case for an absence of governmentality in the space reimagined and reconfigured every week; instead, it is a case for humanizing migrant lives that extend just beyond the rules and regulations, both formal and informal (See Law 2002; Latief 2017; Lai 2010; Constable 2009).

One word to describe Causeway Bay is what is referred to as *rame-rame* (in formal Indonesian, *ramai-ramai*) in Indonesian. There is a sense of activity, a crowd and liveliness, with voices overlapping and sounds constantly streaming through for those who are observing. *Rame-rame* also embodies a sense of ungovernability: an event, a gathering or a function may have been formally organized, but the way it unfolds is often unpredictable. What is key here is the sense and feeling of being together, and not controlling where the flow is directed. Groups may gather for a purpose, but the outcome is something much more creative and innovative than what was
originally imagined. In Mandiri Sahabatku—a women’s entrepreneurship group supported by Bank Mandiri, an Indonesian bank with a branch in Hong Kong—gatherings I went to, what I experienced was not a structure, but a place for the women to occupy a collective space and to come away with a new feeling of being supported, challenged and encouraged. Sangar Budaya was another group of women who were interested in Indonesian folk dance, and who taught one another and invited professional dancers from Indonesia to teach and perform with them. While they practice in the Indonesian consulate building and are often invited to perform in formal events, they were outside the confines of the Indonesian state, while being respectful of the national symbols and carrying them with pride, with requests from the local community and the ever-changing nature of its members.

The strength of Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong stems from the freedom to form new relationships, groups and associations, and to stay flexible in their definitions. Their days off allow for freedom as a “condition of thought” (Arendt 1998) to assume social, political and economic choices outside the definition of “migrant worker,” while still being one. In their spare time, as precious as it can be, Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong practice fluidity by living out their interests through the networks they develop in a way that is different from their social practices back home. The Indonesian state, when exporting workers en masse, intended nothing more than sending out domestic workers to perform a set of duties appropriate for a kodrat wanita (informed mother). In Hong Kong, some of those workers are exposed to opportunities to pursue their own interests, thereby actively pushing themselves out of the boundaries set by the state and proving that their entire being cannot be governed.
At another meeting I attended in Hong Kong in March 2017, Laringan Associasi Cinta Indonesia (LACI: Network of Indonesia-Loving Association) members celebrated the organization’s one-year anniversary and invited Indonesian diplomats to join them. A customs officer and a consular officer gave a brief overview of regulations the workers should be aware of. Most people sitting around me were playing with their phones, chatting with friends or walking around the room. Just when I thought they were not paying attention, the time came for questions, and answers, and many put their hand up. Each question sharply pointed out how the regulations failed to protect the women, and analyzed the loopholes and inconveniences that existed in the policies. When a question was asked, the speaker tried to speak for all the workers. They asked: “What if I just came to Hong Kong and did not know these rules existed, this help was available? Why is the Indonesian government not proactively looking at these problems?” The answers were sincere and yet bureaucratic. The officers, who seemed to have genuine concern for the workers’ well-being, could only give apologies and more caveats. There were a few laughs in between. Nonetheless, the Q&A session was yet another example proving that migrant lives cannot be governed completely, no rules can cover human lives perfectly, and migrants are finding ungovernability to be an opportunity to be ingenious, resourceful and critical.

The last word belongs to the Indonesian migrant workers I met in Hong Kong who sang this song, Tanah Airku (Ibu Soed 1998) regularly at their events. As they contemplate the question from family and friends back home, kapan pulang (when are you coming home?), they sing:

I shall never forget Tanah Airku.
I will remember it for all of my life.
Even if I have to go far away, I shall not lose it from my heart.
I love my land, I care for you.

Many countries I have visited that people say are beautiful.

But my village and my home, there I feel joy.

My land, I shall not forget. I am proud of you.
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Appendix

Appendix A. BNP2TKI: Informasi Kepulangan Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (Information for Returning Migrant Workers)

**INFORMASI KEPULANGAN TENAGA KERJA INDONESIA**

TKI Pulang Secara Mandiri:

~ Mampu mengurus dirinya sendiri

~ Mampu mengurus Dokumen dirinya sendiri

~ Mampu secara fisik dan mental untuk pulang sendiri tanpa bantuan pihak lain

~ Mampu menjaga keamanan dan keselamatan diri sendiri serta barang bawaannya sampai ke daerah asal

Prosedur Kepulangan TKI Secara Mandiri

I. Di Luar Negeri
1. TKI yang akan pulang secara mandiri wajib melapor kepada Perwakilan RI di negara penempatan

2. TKI yang akan pulang secara mandiri dapat juga melapor kepada Perwakilan RI di negara penempatan melalui pengguna atau mitra usaha

3. Perwakilan RI di negara penempatan melakukan pendataan dan memberikan pengarahan kepada TKI yang akan pulang ke tanah air

4. TKI yang bekerja pada pengguna perseorangan, PPTKIS wajib berkoordinasi dengan Perwakilan RI melalui mitra usaha di nega

II. Di Indonesia

1. TKI turun dari pesawat/kapal, menuju counter pemeriksaan Imigrasi untuk pengecekan dokumen keimigrasian oleh pihak Imigrasi

2. Setelah dilakukan pemeriksaan imigrasi, TKI menuju conveyor untuk mengambil barang bawaan TKI.

3. Setelah mengambil barang dari conveyor, TKI menuju ke counter Bea Cukai untuk dilakukan pemeriksaan Kepabeanan.

4. Selanjutnya TKI yang MAMPU PULANG SECARA MANDIRI, mempergunakan transportasi umum resmi yang telah disediakan pihak bandara menuju terminal bis atau stasiun kereta untuk pulang ke daerah asal.