Taking the Streets: Activism and Memory Work in Jakarta

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the roads are widened,
we are displaced,
building the kampung, evicted,
we move and move,
sticking onto walls,
uprooted,
thrown out; we grasses need land, listen!
Join us, let’s become the president’s nightmare!


As theorists who work on major North American and European cities lament the demise of public space in those contexts, in Indonesia concerns about public space are just beginning to re-emerge as part of the latest developments in political culture and urban lifestyles. The post-Soeharto era that I discuss here, from 1998 to the present, has seen two parallel developments that put urban understandings of public space at the forefront of the urban imagination of those who live, work, and engage in cultural and political practices in the capital city of Jakarta. The discourse of public space in Indonesia contains both the anxieties and the hopes of the social classes affected by this idea of ‘public space’ and what it promises. The first idea of public space takes place in the interior zone of a shopping mall, shaped by middle-class ideas of comfort and safety, an idea which operates against the fear of the hot, dusty, and dangerous streets. The second and more recent development, the revival of street politics, uses these dislocations to its advantage, as activists use the street to gain proximity to the rakyat (the People) and to disseminate their political rhetoric in a most spectacular fashion. The city is the setting for these contestations for public space by different groups, made up of multiple and heterogeneous components, which nonetheless approach the street with a shared sense of its wild possibilities. One could say that a metonymy is being established, where increasingly the conditions of the street have come to represent the city.

1 Arguments of the death of public space are concerned with the corporatisation or the privatisation of public spaces, and with gentrification projects which create architectural barriers to the habitation of ‘public space’ by the undesirables; the homeless, the urban poor, and the working classes. See Mitchell (2003); Deutche (1996); Allen (2006).

2 The rakyat is best likened to in meaning as the populace or the citizens of the nation. Referring to the rakyat is an often-used convention in Indonesian to mean the common people, with overtones of their being poor and uneducated, but nonetheless remaining the good and moral citizens of the nation.
Where the urban middle and upper classes shun the openness of the street, imagining the irrepressible urges of the lower classes to commit criminal acts against them, the student/activists\(^3\) and their constituency of urban poor, artists, workers, farmers, and itinerant, ‘flexible’ labour,\(^4\) deploy the mediating and circulatory nature of the street to take their political statements public. They too are transgressing its supposed wildness by imposing the order of their demonstrations upon it. This paper takes up the discourse of the street to analyse the ways that ideas of the street and urban subjectivity (as a classed sensibility towards the city space of Jakarta) have shaped each other. Rather than analysing the historical development of city space at length, I look at the cultural practices of the Student Movement in the post-Soeharto era that take up the discourse of the street, and compare these to the inclination of most middle-class urbanites to impose boundaries against the masses. By focusing on certain important events, such as the First Semanggi Tragedy (13-14 November 1998), I consider the activist narratives that I gathered in my fieldwork as both narrative acts of memorialisation of the recent political past, and as an experiential, bodily connection to ‘public space’. That violent events (‘tragedies’ and riots), raucous and uneventful street demonstrations, and a widespread fear and fascination of the streets of Jakarta can all appear in post-Soeharto narratives of the city seem to prove a simple fact; the urban imagination is no longer under the New Order directives of discipline and order. There is a recognition of disorder in Jakarta that leads to these simultaneous developments – unruly pockets of loud, populist cries on the street, and glittering facades of malls and elite gated communities. At the moment, both sets of urban restructuring are receiving equal attention as Indonesia’s way forward.

**The Road, the Crowd, and the City**

Certain cities remain intact, the crowds believe they trample them – the regiments of tourists banderilla it with foreign flags, course through the roads, occupy the arcades, no attack will ever force the City to surrender.


In Mrazek’s opening chapter of *Engineers of Happy Land*, images of the soft, wet tropical earth native to the Indies collide with the hard, clean lines of modern Dutch road-building. Road-building as a feat of engineering was much more than a demonstration of the splendours of technology in the colonial laboratory of the Dutch East Indies. The layer of asphalt covered the most basic of native faults; that internal, essential softness of a tropical malady. The late colonial Dutch regime fought against the compelling pull of the mishmashing of cultures and languages. By imposing speed, traffic rules, new vehicles, and scheduled Time, the engineers of Happy Land dreamt of change as a road towards modernity. In Mrazek’s words, ‘ruling a colony, as writing its history, may be

\(^{3}\) I use the ‘/’ to indicate how these two separate identities are linked, but one does not totally contain the other. There were students who were not ‘activists’ in their daily lives but who joined the demos, there were activists who were not students, and there were student-activists who formed the main intellectual organising body of the Student Movement.

\(^{4}\) These are all social categories of trade and profession, and implicitly class, deployed by the activist groups in their printed and spoken statements. The mass alliances between groups that claim to represent the rakyat consist of these different communities (komunitas).
done by hitting the road, a road that needs only to be smooth, and in case of trouble, yet a bit smoother’. (2002: 9) Such was the careful regulation of the road, where public space belonged to the colonial masters (Mrazek 2002: 29), and living quarters were racially segregated. But built into these technological advances was a predicament; the road brought the crowd with it.

Figure 1. The Mobil Komando circumambulating Bundaran HI. Photo by the author.
The idea that public space existed for the purposes of congregation and expression of a democratic public, and that that space ought to be the street, had a brief existence in the Nationalist era during the first half of the 20th century. Rallies and marches for workers and farmers were common public spectacles under Soekarno, the first President of the Republic of Indonesia, whose special rapport with the rakyat earned him the title the ‘extension of the people’s tongue’. Then, the massa (the masses) assembled had a revolutionary purpose, more in keeping with the assembling of the People rather than the meaning ‘massa’ attained in later years, as the apolitical ‘floating masses’ and the embodiment of a violent crowd. Soekarno’s populist style of politics disappeared under Soeharto’s reign in the New Order period (1966-1998), which did not lack for spectacle, but replaced mass political gatherings of people with carefully engineered and ritualised ceremonies. Demonstrations were made illegal, as were union strikes. University students, a group who had a long history of being actively engaged in national politics since the late colonial era, were effectively disbarred from any form of political activities. Those who opposed the harsh tactics of the government during the New Order had to go underground and conduct their resistance movements at great risk to their safety.

The Student Movement of the 1990s, increasingly daring in their tactics of resistance, began to organise mass demonstrations in factories and on the streets in the mid 1990s. The financial disasters that followed the Asian Crisis in 1997 claimed their political victims as well, as more and more Indonesians from different professions and social class backgrounds began to turn against Soeharto. For the first time in three decades, mass demonstrations took place on the streets without severe repression by the armed forces. In effect, as the political classes began choosing sides, university students formed alliances between political dissidents, NGOs, student groups, and the rakyat, and organised massive protests that received international press. The month of May 1998 launched the beginning of a Reformasi (Reform) movement, and was also the month Soeharto resigned. The first half of May 1998 claimed many lives throughout Indonesia, with terrible riots in Jakarta and other cities, as well as shootings of students during a 12 May protest at Trisakti University in Central Jakarta. In the following months, large demonstrations led by student/activists culminated in violent clashes between demonstrators and military troops. The Student Movement was especially affected by the violence that occurred in Jakarta, particularly on the roads that led up to the Central Business District. Rudolf Mrazek describes the road conditions of late 1998, around the time of the Semanggi Tragedy:

Riots stopped traffic entirely, and suddenly far-flung parts of Jakarta could be reached in no time. Somewhere, the radio reported, the uncontrollable massa were rioting. The roads, illustrious namesakes of Indonesian generals and heroes Diponegoro, Thamrin, Thamrin

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5 For a thorough history of the underground politics of the opposition to Soeharto, in particular the linkages between student/activists and political dissidents in the 1980s and 1990s, see Aspinall (2005).
Sudirman, as well as the destination points of the Semanggi Cloverleaf bridge and the Parliamentary Building at Senayan, became sites of physical outbreaks of violence, with rubber bullets, teargas, water cannons, and batons deployed by the state security forces, and molotovs and rocks thrown back by student demonstrators. This paper takes up one of these addresses and the events marked by its name: Semanggi, the gathering point of the Student Movement during the mass demonstrations of 1998 and 1999.

13 November 1998: The First Semanggi Tragedy. At the gates of Atma Jaya Catholic University, a crowd of student demonstrators and ordinary people protesting the Parliamentary Special Assembly (Sidang Istimewa) were fired upon by state troops. Fifteen reported killed, and more than 100 demonstrators hospitalised. The Second Semanggi Incident, 23 September 1999: protesting the ratification of a new emergency act giving the military unprecedented power, 6 people were killed. In both cases, the military denied issuing live bullets to their soldiers (van Dijk 2001: 453). By now, 8 years on, the violence of the events of Semanggi I and II have attained a finished quality. Finished but unresolved. What happened on that major thoroughfare, Semanggi?

Several cases of ‘people power’ in the last few years in Southeast Asia have demonstrated the political ramifications of this show of power, and intensified fears of the street. In 1998 Indonesia felt these political reverberations; the feet of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators hitting the street in different cities throughout the archipelago. The call was ‘Turun ke Jalan!’, ‘Descend to the Streets’! The most dramatic and well-documented of these demonstrations culminated in the violent encounters between state armed forces and student-led demonstrators in Semanggi. The shooting of demonstrators on Jakarta’s showcase road, using the props of high rise buildings and flyovers, changed for a time the meaning of Semanggi into an historical event. But in the space of 8 years, commemorations of the ‘Semanggi Tragedy’ have dwindled, and a newly-built mall, Plaza Semanggi, takes its place-name instead. To counter this narrative smoothing, I suggest an analysis of how Semanggi’s history as road and place-name retains traces of its politicised past, and how certain activist memories refuse to be laminated into a single grand narrative of a successful Reformasi. The Student Movement does not want to be subsumed into a history divulging the intrigues of the political elites, who many consider to be the real actors of Reformasi. Compelled to repeat and retell their part in Semanggi, the student/activists place themselves at the scene of the moment of political change; yet this eye-witnessing never lends Semanggi the permanence of a memorial site. The oral recollections of Semanggi follow a formulaic chronology of the demo route taken, suggesting an underlying linearity to the way the disruptive politics of 1998 are remembered. What I call the ‘I-witness’ account tames the chaos of violence into a personal history of participating in and surviving national politics, with important repercussions for how present-day actions by the Student Movement are ordered and experienced.

Walking is memory work (de Certeau 1998), tracing the routes of various demonstrations that ended both quietly, and as spectacle. The oral histories circulating

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6 Various estimates place the figures between 13 –20, some even higher as reports of disappeared corpses circulated amongst students (my fieldnotes). See van Dijk (2001: 348).

7 The KOMNASHAM investigations have yielded little results in the attempts to form an adhoc court to deal with the Semanggi killings. Thus facts about the number of victims, deaths, and injuries continue to be debated. As for the perpetrators, evidence points to the military or the police but again, there has been no institutional accountability from the state.
amongst activists provide a stark distinction from the growing body of literature, text, images, and films that seek to represent and claim the historical products of radical student politics. While the bulk of Student Movement literature relegates the violence of Semanggi to the production of Reformasi heroes who sacrificed their lives for the moral good of the nation, the standard plot lines conclude too readily that all is past. The passage of Reformasi gains the quality of the passing youth of the students of 1998 (Strassler 2005: 249). In my research, what I pay attention to is the sense of history that reaffirms the survivor who is at once I-witness and incredulous agent of history (pelaku). There is more than a sense of whimsy in these recollections, as I shall show below. What dominates these narratives is the unrepresentable ‘I’, the sense of escape and survival that cannot be fixed by others’ representations and memories. Surviving the chaos of Semanggi I and II, and enacting all the subsequent demos since, the ‘I’ returns to the scene and is compelled to retell those stories as a supplement to the road. The order it follows is the chronology of history, a mental mapping of Jakarta as it was then, scene of carnage and site of escape.

Figure 2. Facing the Police, activists demonstrate in front of Parliament. Photo by the author

19 August 2004: If, following Trouillot’s argument, the past ‘is a position’ (1995: 15), Semanggi’s past is becoming detached from its physical space, lingering only in the bodies of the activists who repeat the demo route. Walking under the bridge that wound

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8 For example, see films such as ‘Kutunggu di Sudut Semanggi’, which makes a tragic teen love story the focus of the plot, or the genre of investigative books such as Fakta Tragedi Semanggi: analisis hukum, sosial-politik, moral (1999).
upwards towards Parliament, I felt a chill. The drop in temperature and sudden quietness felt dark. Here was an ordinary sunny day, a student/activist demo on the way to the demo site, and suddenly a darkness that spoke the character of the covered road. Here was where a heated battle took place between demonstrators and troops, protesting the legitimacy of the extraordinary parliamentary session. Seven years after the fact, I ponder this fact in passing.

The demonstration took place that afternoon at the gates of Parliament (Gedung DPR/MPR). Symbolically, the student demonstrators faced off with a row of brown-uniformed policemen guarding the gates. More senior officers milled about the road, watching traffic, and lazily eying the thirsty demonstrators, some of whom were sitting on the ground, or snacking at the roadside warung. The scene of tension lasted only a few hours, and when the policemen left for their break, the protestors rushed at the gate and rattled it. Some groups were content to climb up the gates, facing the street, to be photographed displaying hand-written banners with their respective demands for social justice. We were joined afterwards by another contingent with a more wild reputation. In the papers the next day, a photograph pictured these students dismantling the gate. But having broken down the physical barrier, they did not venture in. In May 1998, thousands of students had occupied the grounds, claiming their right to this site of national politics. Thousands of students perched on the green convex roofs of the building, sitting on the steps, urgently articulating their radical desires in the escalating political situation that led up to Soeharto’s resignation. The scene of that tension has since been lost.

My walk home took me across the overhead bridge from the Gedung DPR/MPR to the back alleys of Bendungan Hilir just off Semanggi, through a dense network of gang, or alleyways, that led to various housing blocks. My walking companion, a former University of Indonesia student/activist who had been deeply involved in the events of 1998-99, was surprised that I chose to walk home. He said:

We never used to walk here, instead, we ran. Whenever we were chased by cops. What year was that? 2000? A big aksi was taking place at DPR, but all of a sudden the order came down to arrest us. We all ran! Down these alleys. I pretended to be a journalist. I went over and started talking to them, and the cops couldn’t be sure if I was or wasn’t a journalist, so I was let off the hook. Did they get anyone? Yes, probably, they arrested people. But most of us got away.

And so it was. During an earlier and more critical time, right during Semanggi I, my companion, who had a limp, was being fired upon and couldn’t run fast enough. There was nowhere to hide in the openness of Semanggi’s road. His comrade came running and half-carried him away, running at the speed of a top athlete. And now he’s become comfortable and fat, my companion grinned. The open structure of Semanggi’s cloverleaf laid bare the student-activists and other protestors on the road; it also provided a vista of the violence from which even spectators were not exempt. ‘A little (collateral damage) girl of five was among the victims. Her father raised her on his shoulders to let her see better. An army bullet hit her, as it flew over and passed by’ (Mrazek 2004: 434).

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9 Fieldnotes, 1 March demo description, and observations from demo dated 19 August 2004.
10 Fieldnotes, 30 September 2004.
11 Fieldnotes, 30 September 2004.
Commentary: The ethnography shows individuals running in so many directions, who by their very subjectivity are attuned to the city’s space, dispersing from their choreographed demonstration. The Semanggi Cloverleaf can leach away into the pre-existing alleyways of a less rational city that existed before it.

Figure 3. Commemoration of the Semanggi Tragedy at Atmajaya Catholic University, November 2003. Photo by the author.

Semanggi: Progress and Its Ruins
Semanggi was built in the 1970s as a bridge – in cloverleaf form, it was best viewed from the sky, providing an elegant and striking four-petalled bloom in the middle of Jakarta’s most prosperous district. In its constant flow of traffic, the Cloverleaf smoothed out the organic urban chaos of Jakarta’s crowded neighbourhoods into an experience of linearity. Semanggi rose up from the wide roads built in Sukarno’s modernisation heyday of the 1950s and early 1960s, where dressing Jakarta in monuments and asphalt was the symbolic equivalent to nation-building (Schulte-Nordholt 1997). More than a bridge, Semanggi became a monument, to be photographed by tourists to and from Jakarta (Kusumawijaya 2004). A prominent Indonesian architect described the building of Semanggi as the mapping of Jakarta; the users of the bridge were taken for a smooth, always forward-moving ride that simultaneously dispersed and united the four main areas of Jakarta (Kusumawijaya 2002). Semanggi was the metropolis’s shining gate, a draw to visitors and Jakarta’s inhabitants alike. Its graphic proportions drew attention to a new way of understanding the city, altering urban cosmology into a rational, schematised map whose meaning was contained within the road itself. Lacking signs, street vendors, and complicated traffic lights, one could only follow Semanggi where it took you.

An aerial view opens up this question much better. The main roads (Jalan Raya) of Jakarta intersect and splice the city like so many arteries, bisecting and disappearing into the spidery veins of side streets and tiny alleyways (gang). The gang is a different space altogether, a road-space where cars and speed are subject to the rhythms of its residents. Jakarta contains its kampung (urban villages), nested in between the modern high rises, each jostling the other for added space.¹² The gang and the jalan raya are necessarily connected, but the gang emerges as a safety zone, denoting an in-visibility in contrast to the openness of the jalan raya. This is the city by foot, an escape route memorised by those fleeing the demo site. Many activists recounted their experiential knowledge of these otherwise inconvenient and non-linear routes that allowed one to trespass upon thriving kampung communities. Those new to Jakarta were surprised by their discovery that Jakarta was not, in fact, a sterilised metropolis. The in-between spaces of the kampungs provide a different scalar perspective of the city, one where white-collar workers from the high-rises live, eat, and mingle with the urban poor.¹³  These are the everyday settings of the counter-processes of urbanisation and ‘ruralisation’ taking place, driven by the flow of migrants from the country to the city (Mohamad 1994: 28-29).

In 1998, it became important to harness the energy of these kampung-dwellers, and (mostly) disaffected young men, to join the marches, as an indication of the support of the rakyat. Specifically referring to the enormous crowds of demonstrators gathered

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¹³ See Abidin Kusno’s section ‘Spatial Practices: The Discursive, the Unruly and the Appropriation of the Kampung and the City’ (2000). Kusno’s important book on the role of the workings of urban space in shaping a post-colonial subjectivity brings the contradictions of the seemingly separate concepts of ‘kampung’ (village) and ‘city’ into sharp focus. Here he refers to the contestation of urban space, where the traffic limitations of the highway ‘macet’ meet the middle class and the urban poor (youth), an encounter inlaid with an anxiety that is not displaced by the need for the kampung’s cheap labour (2002: 145).
during Semanggi I (13-15 November 1998), the radical students’ party the Partai Rakyat Demokratik (PRD, People’s Democratic Party) issued an injunction:

Take the strategic roads – the main roads with many alleyway entrances (gangs) that lead to well-populated neighbourhoods – in the parade/action to enable the participation of the people in student-led action. The experience of our struggle in the month of November has proven this!14 (PRD 1999: 54, my translation)

In 1998 student/activists were accustomed to marching on the main roads and making strategic detours into the gang, both to urge the rakyat’s participation and to evade police capture. The gangs lead the students to these pockets of power: the kampungs where the populace reside. The reasoning behind this populism is strategic; the rakyat are seen as potential energy to feed the demo, but in order to become the revolutionary masses they must wait to be asked. The power of the rakyat is thus integrated into the main body of the demo, its movement determined by the student/activists who form its intellectual head and heart. It is not surprising then, that in the kronologi (chronologies) of demonstration routes, the lesser streets disappear in the narration of the demonstrators traversing the main roads. The gang only serves to connect as in-visible arteries to the public space of promenade and visibility. The kronologi serves as a neat repackaging of the demonstration, masking the sluggishness of the masses in the late afternoon, and focusing on eventful moments, such as clashes with the police, or arrests made. Kronologi is a timeline that maps the Student Movement via a constellation of politicised and monumental figures; from one university campus to the next (UI Salemba to Trisakti), and from one major thoroughfare to another. Without interruptions, the kronologi creates a linear sense of time unfolding, as the student/activists and their supporters reach their intended strategic objectives.

Kronologi and its Uses

First, a counter-example to the more spontaneous utterances brought on by contact with the road asphalt; below is a long and stand-alone example of the ‘official’ historical activist narrative of Semanggi. A former student/activist from Jayabaya University spoke to me, remembering the kronologi of Semanggi in detail. Here, the ‘I’ escapes, giving way to group actions, collective decisions, the force of solidarity on the street. It was an educational retelling for my benefit, triggered by the presence of so many old comrades at a student/activist reunion.

The beginning of Semanggi I. With a long march to Matraman, the ABA-ABI campus to Salemba, from there to Diponegoro, (we) marched to Jl. Manggarai, and the Kampung Melayu areas. In front were students with banners, but behind them were already thousands of massa. We used Jl. Kuningan to enter the Kuningan area. There were 4 lanes. Our friends from FAMRED were already

waiting for us there; we contacted them so they could join our march. They were in the right lane, and opened up the left lane for us.

And then we were blockaded by the army.

We had an emergency meeting, should we go on, or retreat? We decided to go forward so as to not disappoint the massa who were so enthusiastic. We passed through Sudirman and Thamrin, and for the whole length of the road there were no cars. The government had already spread the news that the situation called for high alert. The armed forces were also on alert. All activities were quiet in Jakarta. Our high school brothers also readied themselves. They said, Older Brother (Kak), we’re ready. (Here he says, ‘Oh, I’m moved just remembering this.’ He wipes his eyes.)

We got through the police lines, all four layers of men. By hitting, by all kinds of means. Right at the Semanggi bridge, in front of Atmajaya University, we were stopped by at least 8 to 10 rows of army troops. We made speeches. Until 9pm. Still energetic, and still supported by the masses. Businessmen, professors, sent medicines, food, drinks, so that we could stand our ground for at least quite a while there. After 2 hours, we moved forward to Parliament. And the troops were ready, with tanks, water cannons, weapons (lethal bullets). At 10pm we clashed with them in front of Atmajaya (University).

The troops opened fired, we thought with rubber bullets, but we found out later that they were in fact real bullets. Four of our friends died. One from Forbes, one from the open university, his name was Heru. One from FAMRED, two from Atmajaya, and one more from UAI. So that was 5 dead.

So that was in fact an attack. We asked WHY? Why were we shot at, when everything we did was for our nation? Why? It was a total attack. With tanks.

We ran to Atmajaya, some ran to the Jakarta hospital, and to the Naval hospital. The students were busy defending themselves, the massa were resisting also. They threw stones, made molotovs, we filled empty bottles and cans with fuel, and launched them. That was 3 in the morning. We rested. Worn out.

2:30am. Sudirman was overtaken by the army again. It was early Friday morning. Throughout the morning, we all hid in the small alleys. Friday night, there was movement again at Atmajaya. We made speeches. Because of the print media, the press, the coverage roused the anger of the public, and we garnered momentum again.

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15 Forum Aksi Mahasiswa Untuk Reformasi dan Demokrasi/The Forum for Student Action for Reformasi and Democracy, one of the largest student/activist groups at that time, centred on the Atmajaya campus.
Saturday morning, the massa gathered; there were people from the NGOs, bringing flowers; moving like a tidal wave, they took over the streets again. We moved towards Parliament.

There was another obstacle. We negotiated with the commander of the marines. They said, we are not your enemies, but please let’s not have a repeat of what happened last night. We negotiated to pass their barricade, and at last they agreed, with one condition: the students had to be non-violent. We agreed, so they would open the streets.

We walked until Taman Ria Senayan, and there we met the land forces, and the police. We negotiated between those two bodies. But there was a conflict between the navy who supported the massa, and the army loyal to the government. They ended up fighting hard, until the army lost to the navy.

But it was Saturday, and parliament was not in session, so we left (membubarkan diri). We agreed to demonstrate again the following Monday. On Monday, all the campuses were open, but no students went to class. Instead they joined us on the streets. The death of our friends became a hot political issue.

Notice the upward surge and unstoppable motion of the students on the street in the narrative above: a stop-and-go motion, but carefully ordered to demonstrate the students’ success against all obstacles. The linearity of the road triggers these memories in ways that are not coincidental; one says, in the gerakan (movement), that politics are connections that must be mapped. The structure of their memories therefore closely follow the linear time of the kronologi as memory-aid, recounting in degrees of varying detail the long march towards Semanggi. The actors all become ‘I-witnesses’ who proclaim their place in the past. Looking outside of themselves, but not too far, activists who have a great deal of animosity towards each other, and who belong to politically different camps, will say, ‘Ask him, he was there.’ This is the ‘posterior anterity of memory’ that powers the statement ‘I was there after the fact’ (Spivak: 124). In these narratives there is both celebration and decline. The student/activist hero is remembered, does the remembering, and celebrates his seemingly singular experience. In reiterating kronologi, the ‘I-witness’ faithfully repeats the formula of student movement history by placing himself there. But the place he intends to reach cannot be reached. Semanggi was not a destination after all, but a collapse of political momentum and hope. Semanggi and 1998 are conflated, co-evaluated, and therefore compelling. It is always experientially bigger than the number of victims dead. ‘You should have been there,’ they tell me, drawing me into the affective economy that made witnessing an act of historical agency. Yet as readers we need to be reminded that this specific vantage point of rendering the streets a populist, public space has not replaced the middle-class fear of the streets. Part

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16 My fieldnotes of 15 January 2004, are filled with an immensely detailed verbatim account of Semanggi I by J, a Forbes activist, who talked for more than an hour, listing names, places, and times, and often in the middle of his narrative checking with friends nearby as to the veracity of his account. While it was clear that he had repeated this chronological narrative over the years, he was still emotional when recounting the solidarity of youth groups merging on the streets.
of this failure, I argue, is that even in asserting the immediacy and historical significance of their actions, student/activists remember in linear ways that order and suppress the chaos of violence that would lend force to their witnessing. Instead, what one hears becomes the sense of repetition borne by a loosely attached fragment of history.

In an essay on ‘The Streets of Jakarta’, Nas and Pratiwo (2003) explore the culture of fear that has grown in Jakarta since the era of Reformasi. The uncertainty of the streets, they claim, has become a part of daily life, as Jakartans retain a mental map of escape routes. People connect with each other to obtain information via remote technologies (cell-phones, radio, and for a time, high-frequency walkie-talkies) out of a sense of flight from danger. Rumours of mass riots and theft feed these uncertainties, creating urban myths and material changes to the architecture of the city, with gates and walls demarcating ever more sharply the lines between the street and non-street spaces. If, as Nas and Pratiwo argue, ordinary (middle class) Jakartans are compelled to talk about the 1998 riots and to point out the ruins of that violence, their mental maps are of a variety driven by rumour and distance from the event. The middle class subjects of Nas and Pratiwo’s article are devoid of encounters with the street and the productive spaces of alternative politics contained in the activist accounts of that same time period. But this disparity in understanding arises as an effect of the street itself, where rumours of crime and violence bring with them a recognition and rejection of the otherness of those who belong on the streets: namely, the mad, the destitute, and the criminal. Contra to the singularity of ‘I was there’, the repetition of the riot stories say, ‘it could have been me – because I am middle class’. Such avoidance of the street plays out in the urban development of malls, as the upwardly-mobile educated and political classes build fortresses of ‘public space’ that the rakyat cannot afford, even if they might enter to look.

Urban Desires: ‘A Mall Will Be Built Here’

In May 2004, I chanced upon an art installation dispersed in several prominent areas in the historic district of Yogyakarta. In the alun-alun\textsuperscript{17} of the Kraton, outside the gates of the Vredeburg fort, in shaded leafy areas near old Dutch colonial buildings were large painted signs declaring ‘A mall will be built here’ (Di sini akan dibangun mal). I watched a group of young men dressed in pink costumes, looking for all the world like a small acrobat troupe do a performance art piece outside the kraton as a part of the ‘Mall’ project. This pointed statement about the takeover of famous public spaces to create a new and different kind of urban space also reveals a sense of the inevitable. Here, the mall will be built. The malls of the major cities of Indonesia beckon to the young. As places to congregate, consume the sights and sounds, and most importantly, to be comfortable.\textsuperscript{18} As places to dwell.

\textsuperscript{17} Public square.

\textsuperscript{18} See Hedman (2003). Hedman’s article gives a ticklish description of how middle class protestors during the second wave of People Power wandered through the Robinson Galleria, one of Manila’s biggest malls, at the height of the political crisis, quite naturally bringing their family members, and planning and regrouping in food courts and cafes. Note the emphasis on an urban middle class culture that seamlessly brings protest to the mall, home to the ‘single most widely shared experience, across distinctions of social class and hierarchy’.
In a study linking consumption patterns and class identity, Ken Young (1999) has looked at not only actual consumption but also the symbolic consumption of lifestyle by the new-rich in Southeast Asia. Young draws some general conclusions about the larger, trickle-down effects from the drive towards consumption being encouraged in the developing economies of Southeast Asia, in particular the use of the shopping mall as an educational space of socialisation that teaches the lower classes to imitate and desire that which only the middle classes can afford. Shopping malls are ‘like prescriptive institutions such as civil service training institutes’ (Young 1999: 69), where urban sophistication is learned and practised. In Young’s observation, malls in Jakarta are being described as public parks, and serve the function of public space, drawing both the rich and the poor. Note his description of the burgeoning of luxury malls in Jakarta in the late 1990s:

In the most opulent malls of central Jakarta (such as Plaza Indonesia, Plaza Menteng, Sarinah Store), or in prestige locations like Pondok Indah, Pasaraya Blok M or Citraland Mall, one can spend hours walking past a seemingly endless array of specialist boutique shops, large national and international department stores, supermarkets, banks, franchised food outlets and the like…Yet, even here, there is an admixture of teenagers in school uniform, sightseers, couples on dates in the restaurants and fast-food outlets…What is being studied most assiduously are the elements of middle-class style. (Young 1999: 70)
Malls create a sense-repertoire that can be replicated across the archipelago. While these ‘academies’ of class socialisation enable the rakyat class of people to experience the lifestyle of the upwardly mobile, the experience of the mall itself encourages a specific uniformity. Well-dressed youth are the target audience of these malls. It is a uniformity that points to a standard experience and a standard fear; the expansion of air-conditioned sanctuaries is ‘closely connected to middle-class anxieties over the worsening street crimes in Jakarta’ (Kusno 2004: 2319). Cotermoinous with the development of gated communities, the malling of Jakarta provides a safe haven for the retreat of the middle class, away from the perceived dangers of the street (Kusno 2004: 2390-91). Indeed, Kusno argues that these urban anxieties have only escalated post-1998, where political ruptures and frequent recourse to the street demonstration by activists, students, religious and urban poor groups have eroded former norms of public life. Yet as a new kind of urban space, the malls do not favour the socio-economic differences to be found in the public space of the streets, where street children and unemployed youth appear so prevalent. In the architect Marco Kusumawijaya’s words, the mall attracts the middle class by drawing them away from the street, so that the street becomes something to be experienced only from the window of a car (2004: 81).

Figure 5. Plaza Senayan, Jakarta. Photo by the author.

The mall may seem a digression in this discussion, but it has emerged discursively as part of measures taken by urban planners and the middle class (consumers) in reaction to the dangers of the streets. The Mall as anti-street presents new challenges to the memorialising of radical politics associated with Semanggi. In 2004, it was a sign of the times when Plaza Semanggi, henceforth nicknamed ‘Plangi’ (rainbow), opened in the
strategic location at one end of the Semanggi Cloverleaf, right next to the elite and private Atma Jaya University. Urban theorists such as Marco and Kusno regard the proliferation of malls with concern, as the ‘safety’ of the malls reproduces an interior world that becomes increasingly distinct from the social, cultural, and political differences of the streets ‘outside’. These are spaces that are markedly middle class, and Plangi meshes well with the stylish urbanites who populate Atma Jaya University. Delinking Atma Jaya students from the weight of Semanggi’s violent history, the mall provides safe passage from one place to another; from campus to mall, establishing once more the inherent middle-classness of student identity. And this lexical shift of Semanggi from street politics to mall occurs despite Atma Jaya’s enormous contributions to the Student Movement of 1998, as shelter, point of congregation, and site of attacks. The streets appear to smell of the rakyat, but in practice they do not belong there either. The rakyat dwell in the urban kampungs, attached to the main roads by the gang, a space alternately imagined by the middle class as a menacing crime scene, and by activists as access to the power and safety of the rakyat. The mall and the gang form two separate and oppositional endpoints of the main road of Semanggi, each held in place by the poles of class difference.

Merging with Traffic:

Given the seemingly harsh demarcation between the outside and the inside expressions of public space, can one dwell on the street as a form of political action? That is, is taking the way of the street the radical shift student/activists claim it to be? I explore two readings pertinent to road behaviour to answer this question; one example (a kronologi) extends the flow of the road to the mapped character of the demo, keeping the visual and auditory spectacle of the demo in constant motion; another section (Leaving the Streets: Silence in the Common Imagination) looks at the photographic representations of the City that reveal a deep unease about occupying the road. Street politics are temporary interruptions of an imagined public order, but within the demo itself, the question of order is significant. ‘The demonstrators interrupt the regular life of the streets they march through or of the open spaces they fill’ (Berger 2001: 248). The street remains unsafe in its openness, and the tendency is to run away from the main road and its apocalyptic possibilities, or sit on its sidelines. Here is where Jakarta has absorbed anti-government demonstrations into the mainstream of its daily life. The city continues to function with these mild demo interruptions appearing in designated political hotspots, traversing routes that had been strategically and symbolically significant in 1998.

Experimenting with different road experiences, activists in Jakarta began to deploy carnivalesque elements in their demonstrations. Instead of walking in a long march, they would rent orange metromini buses for a considerable sum of money (about US$35 per bus for the day) to bus student/activists to the demo site.19 Echoing the hazardous scene of commuters perched on top of commuter trains travelling to and from work every day, students (mostly male) climbed on top of these orange buses bearing t-shirts, insignia, banners and flags with their group names and messages. The buses made no show of slowing down from their ordinary driving speed to accommodate the safety of the passengers crowding the roof of the bus. Changes in demonstration strategies reflect

complex changes of political alliance and breakage within the student movement itself. Unable to sustain the massive mobilisation of protestors as in 1998-2000, other technologies of spectacle developed within various groups. More costly and baroque details were added to the body of the student demonstrations, traversing the city’s main roads to keep the demo in circulation by NOT hindering traffic. Here, recall Mrazek’s words: ‘Streets were jammed = there was no riot. Streets were empty = there was a riot somewhere.’ In the 18 months of my fieldwork there were plenty of demonstrations and small scuffles but no riots. These technologies of spectacle are not singular to the student/activists; contemporary politics in Jakarta belong to the road and its mediatic possibilities.  

Figure 6. PDI-P 2004 election campaign, convoy on Jalan Sudirman. Photo by the author.

20 The general election campaign tactics of political parties also make use of the road in organising parades, motorcades, and motorcycle convoys to dominate the road. See figure below for an example of the campaign strategies of then president Megawati’s political party in 2004.
My first experience of a student-led demo was a Forkot (City Forum)-organised motorcade that began in the green belt of the Senayan stadium parking lot. In the planning stages, it was actually called a ‘karnaval mobil’ (a car carnival). Sixty-odd festively decorated cars bearing slogans, printed posters and signs, and a number of ‘antimilitary’ memorabilia were parked in a numbered order in the lot, awaiting their turn to drive through the city and announce themselves by sight and sound. In February 2004, the lead up to the presidential campaign was just beginning, and students were already protesting the number of presidential and vice-presidential candidates of military background. ‘Sipil memilih Sipil!’, or ‘Civilians choose civilians!’ became a graffiti slogan scrawled across walls on the demonstration route. The mobil komando (command car) was an open truck that had an enormous sound system strapped to it, and balanced on top of these bulky speakers were a number of young men who would shout and sing the entire way in leading the demo. Ostensibly these men would address the public, those spectators who stopped to watch from the sidewalks and who peered down from public buses, bridges, and so on. But the public in this case was the demonstration itself. Looking backwards from the back of the open truck, the orators faced the oncoming line of the demo vehicles directly, urging them on, reminding them of their reason for protesting. Seldom did they engage the bystanders at the specific addresses we were passing through.

I was assigned to a young man who had a notepad and pencil, and carried no other recording tools on his person. He was the kronolog, the documentarian assigned to this specific demo. His job was to chronicle every single incident and movement that would provide, and if necessary prove, a ‘student’ version of the truth should outside provocateurs or police action against their demo occur. This was the kronologi aksi (chronology of the action), a detailed series of events that depended heavily on place names and street names. The kronologi aksi often constituted a large part of the press statements that the group would release to the press or to the public, via print and electronic media. However, many details were often glossed over. In reconstructing this seemingly sterile fact compilation activity, fact-checking never occurred. Despite the fact that I had a rather poor grasp of geography at the time, Boy asked me time and time again where we were, relying on my reading speed to identify road signs as we whizzed by in a car. The demo would stop and start along the way, and Boy would run out of the car to the front of the demo, scribble a few words, and throw himself back into the car with a bang. I sat in the car with one of the main coordinators, whose girlfriend was driving. He fretted the entire way over logistical issues such as the provision of food and ongkos for the demonstrators, at times flipping through the radio to look for news reportage of the demo.

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21 During 1998, the largest alliance of student groups, which subsequently fragmented itself. In the following months of the election in 2004, Forkot also organised a ‘roadshow’ (using the original English term) from campus to campus to garner support for its anti-military campaign.


23 John Berger describes how the demonstration is in large part for the demonstrators themselves. Thus the demonstration creates its own function (2001: 248).

24 Indonesian for expenses, a word which becomes problematic because of the associations with paid demonstrators who act as mercenary massa, especially during election times.
The 60-car demo wound its way through South to Central Jakarta, moving from Senayan to Sudirman, passing under the Semanggi bridge, to Monas, and then back again to Senayan. It was accompanied by a number of police cars that guarded and escorted the demonstrators, ensuring the flow of traffic remain undisturbed. Resembling the official convoys (voorzijders) required of state officials in motion in the city, four young Forkot members on motorcycles whizzed through the front and the back of the demo, acting as traffic regulators, and guardsmen of the integrity of the unbroken line of cars. If other vehicles that were carrying demonstrators were deemed more important in their visual impact, the organiser’s car I was in would wait at the side of the road until all the demo cars had passed, before joining the tail of the demo. The student demonstrators had taken on the role of the traffic police themselves, regulating to a tightly controlled degree the flow of their own traffic and the unbroken unity of the demonstration from beginning to end. The demo was considered successful because it garnered media attention, and was unusual in its choice of strategy in staying on the road, and off the ground. It had become a part of traffic, not macet (traffic-blockage), and the kronologi proved it. Timing to the minute a linear, unbroken narrative of place and time events, the kronologi aksi made it appear as if the route taken was indeed smooth and intended.

Even as a sign of contrast, the ‘chaos’ of 1998 follows the structure of the kronologi. Fact-finding teams and published accounts return to the mapping of the events, in precise chronological order. An account published in the student tabloid ‘Bergerak!’ (On the Move!), while somewhat truncated, details the route taken by demonstrators en route to the Parliament building to oppose the extraordinary parliamentary session. These events took place on 9 November 1998, just a few days prior to Semanggi. The account reads:

The day that was turning into night became even wilder with the presence of thousands of students gathered under the Forkot grouping. The arrival of the Forkot contingent was welcomed by the students on UI campus. Forkot had earlier failed to demonstrate in front of the parliament building because of the increased security forces blocking their way, and after a half hour spent on Salemba main road in front of UI campus finally moved towards the UKI campus on Diponegoro.

These accounts give a sense of the potential for violence seen lurking on the streets in the early years of Reformasi demonstrations. But they do not yet chronicle the after-effects of going home after a demo, of leaving the streets in silence. Newspaper language describes the dissolution of demonstrations as membubarkan diri, dissolving itself. More often than not, present-day demonstrations end on this note of dissolving itself after an ineffectual demo, rather than the climactic clash of violence reminiscent of Semanggi and other

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26 ‘Hari yang menjelang malam menambah semarak dengan kehadiran ribuan mahasiswa yang tergabung dalam Forkot. Kedatangan rombongan Forkot disambut dan diajak bergabung oleh mahasiswa yang telah berada di dalam kampus UI. Forkot yang sebelumnya gagal mengadakan aksi di gedung DPR/MPR RI karena dihadang aparat keamanan yang menjaga ketat jalan menuju gedung DPR/MPR RI setelah selama setengah jam berada di jalan Salemba Raya depan kampus UI akhirnya bergerak menuju kampus UKI di jalan Diponegoro.’ (Bergerak 1998).
noteworthy incidents of 1998. The next section requires a bit of imagination to sense what the emptiness of the streets might mean.

Empty Streets: Silence in the Urban Imagination

At an exhibition held at the Antara News Gallery in December 2005, the works of ten young photographers affiliated with the agency were launched. These ten were recruited for an urban ‘documentary’ workshop to explore the theme ‘Sense City’, under the supervision of a renowned German photographer, Peter Bialobrzeski. The catalogue introduces the techniques used by these student-photographers to interpret their sense of the City, but what is remarkable is the consistency in the conceptual approaches taken to express the ‘urban nightmares and wonders of Jakarta’ (SenseCity 2005: 3). The introductory essay begins with an appropriate declaration, that ‘(c)apturing a city is not an easy task, let alone a Megalopolis like Jakarta’ (SenseCity 2005: 3). Thus the photos overwhelmingly feature shots that point to the contradictory conditions of urban life – mega-slums and mega-skyscrapers. To find the quiet of the street, the photographers were forced to wait until night, which held its own dangers. Furthermore, technical provisions had to be made; the fastening of a pinhole camera that could ‘project an image of the city,’ through long exposure making it appear what it was not: ‘unpopulated and quiet’ (SenseCity 2005: 3). These are tricks of the mind, projecting a solitary, individuated way of seeing that is internal, sensed, but physically impossible in the world of the street. Walter Benjamin’s treatment of the crowd in his essay on Baudelaire seems to declare that perhaps this sense of internalised isolation is inevitable in a functioning urban landscape. It is also one against the relentless, teeming crowd on the streets. While Baudelaire might look upon the crowd on the Parisian streets with horror, in ‘SenseCity’ there is not so much a philosophy of the city that is countered by the natural and beautiful life of the country, as much as a more tolerant form of nostalgia for an empty space, a road without traffic, people, and things. The road as a non-commercial place is still a space that is alive, only at rest. Rest is built into the routine of work and urban living. It is as necessary to the road as the roads are to the city.

Why are roads so often featured in these pieces? Either overflowing and teeming with traffic in the daytime, or in the (imagined) quiet of night a dead-zone, an empty space. These two extremes actually form a perspectival unit. Evelyn Pritt’s work titled ‘6PM-6AM’ shows a quiet street outside a house, surprisingly free of parked curbside cars, and a shot of a wider street lit by street lamps, in the light of the impending dawn. The last sentence of the caption text reads: ‘Imagining the short bliss of momentary peace’ (SenseCity 2005: 8). At the other end, the works of Vitri Yuliany, which paint the major thoroughfares of Jakarta with rays of neon light, captured from the vehicles which move through them. All of the city enters this dimension of light, which can only be understood through the idea of motion and circulation. Evelyn Pritt’s work is a break from rutinitas, a daily routine which nonetheless yields surprises of a momentary nature, such as finding an oasis of quiet in the city. (Note: the small roads or gang kecil also accomplish this quiet, away from the buzz of the main street.) Vitri’s work, and others, witness the materiality of the city, how walls, houses, bridges, connect to the flow of the street, subject to times and routines as well. Two other photographers take their fragmented readings of the city from a motorcycle and a bus. Literally producing
fragmented images, they crop bodies, cars, and billboards, reading the city at odd angles. They are in motion, on the road. In attempting to explain the fragmented nature of the city, these works only succeed in exposing the connectedness of these disparate activities in creating sensuous zones of living, eating, work, and play. They are fragmented because of the speed of the road; we can only succeed in getting passing glimpses of other individuals who we imagine see us as we see them.

Responding to these works at an invited lecture, Seno Gumira Ajidarma (SGA), writer and ‘city-theorist’, began by saying that to his eye, the works were all the same. He then clarified his statement, saying that they were all different and in their difference every bit the same, a play on the Derridean words, ‘tout autre est tout autre’. This perspective on difference homologises these relations of difference, between class, age, gender, ethnic and political differences. In Jakarta one can find any and all of these combinations, and all could potentially be other. But all the differences are internal to the city – there is no room for the other of the desa (village/country). It is this reading of the city that enables Seno to say, from his lifelong observation of the city he grew up in, that all the photographs show the same degree of (assimilable) difference. Seno goes on to say that there is no standard by which to judge these photographs. But of course there is, to the trained eye, a technical and aesthetic sense of evaluation that can be applied. Yet because these photographs contain and evoke an inherent urban subjectivity, what is read is the longing behind the pictures, both to marvel at how the road is filled, its function, and the city’s inhabitants’ roles within it, and to project through increasingly technological means the composite longing for rest and emptiness. And what remains seen is motion without end, a series of changes and urban developments that remain unclear as to their intention. In this sense, the urban horizon is without historical purpose, adding layers of grey dust to sit upon the city. The crowd that pollutes the city is of the same character as a portrait of a torso, taken by a photographer watching traffic pass by. These are the routine and tolerable masses, not the political body of a long march, nor the ‘sea of demonstrators’ that filled these streets in 1998. They fill but do not occupy the road.

**Popular Places**

Michel de Certeau opens *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1988) with a dedication ‘(t)o the ordinary man’: ‘To a common hero, an ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets’ (1988: acknowledgments). The language of the streets, according to de Certeau, is a language that belongs to no one. The masses are ‘a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets’, providing a continuous flow of movement that gives order and meaning to the ebb and flow of the temporality of everyday life. We may assume in the Indonesian context that the ‘common hero’ of the street hails from the majority of the population, defined by a social order that places him at the very bottom. The individual heroes who form the masses are further distanced from politics by the characterisation given them, that of the ‘massa mengambang’, the floating mass. But the comfort by which the ordinary man, or indeed anyone, belongs on the street needs to be questioned. The ordinary man of the street has not been the driving force of the latest social

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27 Personal Observation, 13 January 2006.
movements in Indonesia. In Jakarta in particular, recent political changes have been galvanised by intellectuals and activists whose backgrounds are primarily educated and privileged; those who belong to what John Sidel has classified historically as the ‘political class’ from whence leaders and rulers emerge (Sidel 2006). The dense networks of economic, political and social privilege that characterised this political class in New Order Indonesia leaves out those who belong on the streets, even deliberately cultivating a middle class discourse of fear about the streets. 28 But with the recent popularisation of ‘public space’ as a theory and as a goal of modern development, the streets once again become contentious symbols of power.

Given the close association in contemporary political discourse between democratisation and activating the masses, the Indonesian Student Movement of 1998 is vital to understanding the emergent political practices of everyday life that link the ideology of populism (rakyat-based politics) to the contestation over who and what constitute public space. Demonstrations are ‘proof’ of mass-based politics, yet the circumstances that lead to their performance are often neglected in favour of fixating on the spectacle itself. In very broad strokes, I point to where middle-class fears and middle-class political actors diverge from one another. If indeed, as urban theorists fear, the mall is the true heart of Indonesian development, and creates a powerful desire on the part of the masses to approximate urban middle class lifestyles, then street politics could not possibly activate an alternative understanding of an inherently political ‘public space’ on the streets. Yet the ethnography I present here conveys a glimpse of those possibilities, where activist memories of Reformasi and the post-Soeharto period maintain the radical qualities of ‘street’ and ‘massa’.

This paper has analysed the temporal shifts in student/activist memories of Semanggi, shaped by the narrative act of repetition, in stories and in revisiting the demo routes that were important in 1998. While the form of these acts of memorialising is made conventional by the chronological ordering of explosive events, the ‘I-witness’ remains a crucial element of the story. From within those ‘I-witness’ accounts, there is a looseness to the depiction of the streets as public space. Even in the main thoroughfare of Semanggi, there are alleyways and escape routes which depend upon the disorder of the city; one could say, an organised chaos where the rakyat dwells. In this brief exploration of the discourse of the street prevalent in the post-Soeharto era, I have tried to show where the politics of public space take place, both on the streets and inside exclusive domains such as the shopping mall. Both developments feel the threat of the other, and seek to combat it. But the nostalgia for empty streets and the desire for secure fortresses remain a part of the urban imagination, which has at its own margins the majority of Indonesians, those millions who still live in poverty in rural pockets abutting major cities, or in the outer provinces which have yet to share in Jakarta’s progress. There, in other sites of imagination, roads are progress, and the lure of the city remains strong. These migrants, whether they like it or not, bear the burden of evidence that the openness of the city’s streets is not easily remade into a habitable or political ‘public space’.

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28 See Jim Siegel’s analysis of the Petrus (Penembakan Misterius) Killings, carried out by the army against alleged criminals, mostly tattooed street thugs (1998).
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