Undoing ruination in Jakarta: the gendered remaking of life on a wasted landscape

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This intervention shares images and stories from the women evictees in Jakarta who collectively give voice to the psychic, physical, and material injuries inflicted by state dispossession in the city. Engaging Ann Laura Stoler's (2013) language to expose the politics of ruination and preservation, we illustrate the gendered nature of the remaking of life on the most wasted of urban landscapes. The focus of this piece is Kampung Akuarium, a neighborhood violently evicted in April 2016 as part of a broader evictions regime in Jakarta under the governorship of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok. In the aftermath, Kampung Akuarium became the most restive of Jakarta's landscapes as residents returned to make claims for justice and compensation, and to remake their lives directly on the rubble of their old homes in defiance of the city government. Flanked by the preserved warehouses of the VOC, the ruined neighbourhood ultimately became a site where colonial histories, state- and capital-inflicted expropriation and ruination, and gendered forms of injury and struggle all found material modes of expression alongside one another.

> [T]he nominative work of a "ruin" does less work than "to ruin" as an ongoing process. Ruins can represent both something more and less than the sum of the sensibilities of the people who live in them. Instead we might turn to ruins as epicentres of renewed collective claims, as history *in a spirited voice*, as sites that animate both despair and new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected collaborative political projects. (Stoler 2013, 14, emphasis added)

Jakarta's most restive landscapes have stories to tell, and their narratives reference both the present and the historical, the local and the global. In the context of a localized evictions regime, as in many similar contexts of urban ruin and resistance across the globe, Jakarta's ruined neighborhoods become places where claims are made, places of unexpected—and gendered—political projects, and places where history "in a spirited voice" becomes particularly audible. Our intervention shares images and stories collected in 2016 from women occupying the resistant site of Kampung Akuarium, where colonial histories, state- and capital-inflicted expropriation and ruination, and gendered forms of injury and defiance all find material modes of expression in the present.

If, as recently as March of 2016, you had taken a walk through Pasar Ikan (Fish Market) to the neighbourhood of Kampung Akuarium you would have passed by a neat row of unique small shops. The *kendang* drum manufacturer with its deep rooms of hand-made drums stacked in tall, colorful towers often caught the attention of passers-by, while the outstretched fishing nets at the front of repair shops made reference to the area's intimate connection to the maritime industries. Pasar Ikan itself is positioned against the curve of the sea wall, beyond which lies the historic port of Sunda Kelapa, where wooden Makassar schooners[1] still line up to be loaded and unloaded by hand. Continuing onward, you would have found your way to an old and established neighborhood of two- and three-story houses, many with little shops and workshops integrated within them. You might have lost yourself here in the *kampung*'s maze of narrow winding streets, but you would have registered the life of a vibrant community, at once integral to the wider Jakarta economy, yet at the same time productive of its own complex forms of social organization.

All of this is now gone. Kampung Akuarium, at the time of writing, lies in ruins, deprived of its social life and razed to the ground by the Jakarta city government. The kampung's destruction left behind a landscape of detritus, an open desert plain made up of fragments of formerly solid homes; metal and masonry crunches under the feet of those who now walk over the crumbled walls that once provided them with privacy and shelter.

This rubble has acquired a political life of its own, however, and the wasted landscape of Kampung Akuarium is now also the site of an extensive occupation in

which women have been particularly visible as organizers and spokespeople. Evicted residents returned to live, at first in tents pitched on the debris of their former homes. Later, more solid structures began to appear, until a shattered neighborhood was partly remade out of the waste (Figure 1). Kampung Akuarium eventually took on the political aesthetics of the camp—becoming part camp of refuge, part protest camp. Akuarium became a place where the most basic shelters were created out of destroyed homes, but also a place where renewed and resistant subjectivities began to be produced, and where claims for justice were formulated and voiced.

Figure 1. Kampung Akuarium collective life remade on the rubble of the ruined neighborhood. Author's photograph.

Running alongside the rubble desert of Kampung Akuarium—as if to make an explicit statement about the politics of ruination and preservation—are the conserved old storage warehouses of the Dutch East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC). These are privileged ruins, preserved and repurposed for the melancholic tourist in search of imperial remains (Figure 2). The Company warehouses and the nearby restored Dutch fort make for a tangible, material reminder of the early

seventeenth century when, by claiming a defendable territorial site, the VOC began to consolidate its status as monopoly merchant across what would later become the Dutch East Indies. The settlement formerly known as Jayakarta—meaning "the victorious and prosperous" (Abeyasekere 1989, 6)—had been variously Hindu-Javanese- and Muslim-governed. However, the domination of the territory by the Company in 1619 marked the first time the port settlement would be entirely destroyed and then remade to embody and project European power. Then, the wholesale ruination of Jayakarta made way for a Europeanized imperial center: Batavia, a town built around a neat, rationalized grid system with canalized rivers and straight rows of Dutch-style buildings. The Dutch even imposed a ban on Javanese street stalls, lest mobile enterprises with an Eastern aesthetic interrupt the embodiment of European power in Batavia's urban material. As the remains of Batavia attest, empire in the East Indies was born out of a thorough act of ruination.

Figure 2. Preserved Dutch East India Company warehouses provide the backdrop to the ruins of the demolished neighborhood of Kampung Akuarium. Author's photograph.

Since Indonesia's independence from Dutch colonial rule in the mid-twentieth century, pockets of the city now renamed Jakarta have been produced and reproduced to reflect the vision of successive regimes. Neighborhoods have been evicted, razed and then remade to project nationalist power through monumental architecture or, later, to project the preferred form of international capital, which might be vertical, commercial buildings known as "superbloks," or sanitized and securitized areas of leisure for the wealthy. Recent decades have seen both nationalist and internationalist urbanism work in parallel to reproduce multiple areas of Jakarta at the expense of the urban poor. The ruination of Kampung Akuarium was brought about under the governorship of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, popularly known as Ahok. Governor Ahok presided over a two-year intensified evictions regime (Wilson 2016) that resulted in thousands of families losing their homes and businesses. According to the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute, in 2015 alone, 8,145 families were evicted from their homes while 6,283 businesses were also removed (Anya 2017).

In the context of this evictions regime, the stories from shattered neighborhoods across the city follow a familiar sequence. They begin by recounting patterns that might be viewed as triumphs of individual agency in the face of adversity, as evidence of individual and household progress in spite of structural constraints. Ibu Irma,[2] for instance, moved to Jakarta from rural Java and married a man from Sulawesi. They rented for a while in the city, then in the 1990s bought a plot of land in Kampung Akuarium for three million rupiah (equivalent to US$1,300 in 1995 or US$200 in January 2017). They gradually built their own house close to maritime economic activities and schools for their children. Astri and Rika have a similar story: they are sisters, descendants of a Bugis family from Sulawesi, who put down roots in the capital four decades ago. Their parents met originally in Kuningan, West Java, and lived on a boat for a while before renting a house in Jakarta, finally buying a plot of land in Kampung Akuarium and building their own home. Ibu Dita, another recent evictee, had lived in a six-room house built for a three-generation family of nine. Dita had built up a small business in the kampung with a consistent shop income of around 100,000 rupiah (US$7.50 at 2017 exchange rates) per day prior to her eviction. Now, with her stall re-pitched on the rubble of her old shop, she earns only half that. The stories of incremental development and progress in Jakarta's ruined neighborhoods all end in a

similar way—with eviction, dispossession, and impoverishment. These evictions amount to acts of mass expropriation. Residents who understood themselves to be owners of the land on which they lived, and who even paid annual land and buildings tax, are suddenly, and often violently, dispossessed. Their home and shelter is destroyed overnight, often along with the economic space within the home that had enabled their means of income.

It is also overwhelmingly apparent that these renewed forms of repetitive primitive accumulation in present-day urban settings are explicitly gendered. Men's economic activity in the maritime trades, transportation, the building sector and other industries often continues after eviction, interrupted and notably inconvenienced but nonetheless ongoing. In contrast, women's productive activity—and especially their informal economic activity through which they earn an income that in turn facilitates their independence—is much more likely to be centered on the home and therefore destroyed along with neighborhood demolitions. This is, in part, because women's unpaid social reproduction activities—such as housework, childcare, and the care of elderly relatives—are largely anchored to the home domain. As such, many women find that running small businesses from home allows them to combine their productive activity with their socially reproductive roles. These small business activities are embedded within localized markets and are also dependent on the spatial and material composition of the home and kampung (Tilley 2017). As such, evictions, dispossessions and demolitions amount to a disproportionate attack on women's wealth and income levels, simultaneously increasing their poverty as well as their dependency on male household members.

Yet, at the same time, evictions have become an unlikely catalyst for the re-centering of women's roles in urban political life. At the time of the Kampung Akuarium evictions, many of the kampung's male residents, especially those employed in maritime industries, were away and unaware of events. Women, dressed in their white prayer robes, knelt together in a mass worship action while thousands of uniformed troops gathered to demolish their homes. The action of women made for a spectacle highlighting the stark contrast between the moral, spiritual and feminine performance of the protestors and the masculine, unethical and violent state agents of the eviction.

A year on from the evictions, women predominantly define the political life of the wasted landscape of Kampung Akuarium. It is overwhelmingly the kampung's women residents who give voice to the psychic, physical, and material injuries inflicted by the eviction and ruination of the neighborhood. Women are also remaking the social and commercial life of the area, despite the anguish of having to pitch their existence on the very rubble of their old homes, and despite the real prospect that even this new existence will be temporary, ruined again as soon as the developers move in. Household and collective life has been partly remade where group tents and individual homes have been erected to provide space for community and family activities, while shops and food stalls have also been reconstructed, selling sustenance out of sachets and small plastic bags (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Sachet life: a warung pitched on the rubble selling snacks and drinks. Author's photograph.

Dina remade her life on the plot of her old home. She declined so-called social housing (*rusunawa*) because the small high-rise studios offered tend to be far away (up to eighteen kilometers), relatively expensive to rent and—with no space to run a home

business—a complete dislocation from her existing way of life. Now, like many of the other women of the occupation, she has remade life through makeshift means. She uses her delivered water sparingly, heats food on a stove constructed from masonry and cement into which she feeds burning logs, and sells fried vegetable snacks and sachet-based iced drinks, as well as tea and coffee (Figure 4). Maintaining her position on the plot of land she bought many years ago and keeping her daughter in the nearby school for as long as possible are her main objectives in the short term.

Figure 4. A mother keen to stay close to her daughter's school runs a small warung selling meals and snacks inside the rebuilt family shelter. Author's photograph.

Pasar Ikan, then, leads us back to a landscape that displays present and historical political material in stark relief. Against the preserved ruins of the VOC warehouses, the rubble of the present remains as testament to the ruination of lives that had taken decades to build. These lives were cleared to make way for new modes of capitalization and a development that is expected to project the power of capital in the present. Yet the occupation stands firm on the rubble as testament to refusal, voicing a notably gendered articulation of the injury inflicted by the process of ruination. The women of the occupation, in particular, remain as a constant reminder of what the city government has attempted to erase. Their existence as occupiers is fittingly centered on their mosque (Figure 5), a place of both collective and spiritual life, and one of the first

structures to be remade when the occupiers returned. The building's corrugated metal roof and its reclaimed silver ornament shine defiantly in the sunlight over the mosque's given name, *Musholla Al Jihad* – the "prayer room of struggle." Here, on the rubble, we resist.

Figure 5. Musholla al Jihad: A reclaimed prayer space built on the rubble, which bears the name "the struggle." Author's photograph.

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[1] A Makassar schooner (also known as *pinisi*) is a particular type of sailing vessel, usually with two masts, which is typically made in Sulawesi.

[2] All names of women occupiers interviewed for this project have been changed.