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LANGUAGE AS ASPHALT

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe.

It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

—Marx–Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*¹

Bare Feet

IT MAY help, just for a moment, to think, with Bergson, about a landscape in the beginning, as if it were “the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled.”²

On February 13, 1891, an expedition embarked on a route out of Padang Pandjang, a small town in West Sumatra, a point at the edge, a station in the late-colonial Netherlands East Indies beyond which trains could not go. The aim of the expedition was to survey the area yonder for a new railway to Siak, across the island, to its east coast. At the head of the Siak expedition was Dr. Jan Willem IJzerman, the main engineer of the Dutch state railways. He was forty at the time and a renaissance man of sorts. Besides being, possibly, the most influential technician behind building the new Indies railways, he was a well-known amateur archeologist and a member of the archeological society in the princely town of Yogyakarta.³ Toward the end of his life, in 1924, IJzerman, too, had been recognized as the initiator of the first and only technical college in the late-colonial Indies. His bronze bust had been placed in IJzerman Park, near the school campus in Bandung.⁴

On February 13, 1891, at six o'clock in the morning, the IJzerman Siak expedition started up “with a little word *madjoe*,” which meant “forward” in Malay, the lingua franca of the colony. The plan was to walk “from six till four,” every day, from sunrise to two hours before sunset.⁵ In addition to IJzerman and three other Dutchmen, there were about a dozen Javanese servants, twenty Javanese railway workers, and about 120 helpers recruited locally from among the Sumatrans. The expedition carried “trunks, field beds, chairs, imitation-leather sheets for shelters, mats, ammunition, wire, ropes, nails, paraffin, wicks, a photographic camera, and food.”⁶

Dr. IJzerman, as they were on the way, never parted with his pocket re-

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volver. He was as happy, or so it seems, as a man in his forties might be: “Here,” he wrote, “the saying of Mr. Potter from his famous American novel rings true: ‘*What is a man without a revolver in Texas?*’”⁷ The men of the IJzerman expedition killed fish for dinner with dynamite cartridges.⁸ Their camp in the jungle was attacked by “bandits.”⁹ The sense of the Wild West was heightened by an image of a pioneer’s grave. This was, actually, how IJzerman opened his story in the expedition memorial book: “Since the discovery of the Oembilin coal fields by the genius of a mining engineer, W. H. de Greve, in 1868, people started to speak and to write about a desirability to reach the big rivers that flowed as far as into the Straits of Malacca.”¹⁰ A large photograph of the engineer Greve’s grave in the jungle, “merely a little pile of earth in the shade of a big *tjoebadak* tree,” took up the entire title page of the memorial book.¹¹

IJzerman’s men, as they walked, came repeatedly upon fresh *sporen*, “tracks” or “footprints,” of “elephants, rhinoceros, tapirs, tigers, boars, deer.” The footprints were “sharply engraved in the damp clay.”¹² Most of the time, it was just footprints the men saw; rarely did they spot an animal itself.¹³ It was, largely, just sensing, prints of animal feet on the thoroughly calm and unruffled surface of earth. Yet in Dutch—the language of the expedition—*sporen* meant both the footprints of the jungle animals the men sensed and the railway tracks they came to build.

In their own account, the Dutchmen in the expedition appeared exposed and their senses seemed bared. The untamed nature through which they passed, too, appeared as if opening itself up, and—if a man could take it—in a sense, friendly:

In the forest, far from inhabited world, deep silence reigned most of the time. There were no monkey colonies to raise echoes with their merry shouting, no flock of songbirds to start their crystal melodies, all the large animals as if were extinct. . . . No mosquito disturbed our rest at night, we did not even have to unpack our mosquito nets. No poisonous snake, no centipede, and no scorpion made our sleeping in the open, under the trees, on the mounds of molding leaves dangerous, no rat gnawed at our rice reserves, cans with our food could be left around opened. . . . The plants were even more innocent, no leaf inflamed our skin, no thorn infected our blood. . . . We could even drink forest water safely.¹⁴

As the men moved, so the memorial book of the expedition describes it, they felt the landscape as kindred and moving with them. The memorial book conveys a sense of fluency between the people and nature. The expedition worked a river, for instance, and the river, thunderously and grandly, streamed past the people as they worked:

Gigantic tree trunks raced with great speed and broke on the rocks that filled the riverbed, in pieces, crushed in pieces the lumber moved on its way to the sea, or,

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ebbed off the stream, gathered on the shallow sands . . . there was a majestic calmness further ahead; noiseless, dark-green woods gently blanketed the river banks.¹⁵

The men's language was lush with words, as their days were lush with actions and movements, and their senses lush with sounds, shapes, and scents. Or, to put it less innocently, this was a Baroque-like sameness of man and man's surroundings, in which dreams and man's labor as well as conquest might be supposed to come together. One of the Dutchmen on the expedition, Van Bemmelen, captured another moment in this particular sensing of colonial modernity. As they struggled along one of the untamed rivers, "In my elation, I shouted to [I]zerman and urged him to admire a newly appearing splendor on the right bank. 'I look only to the left side,' he shouted back, 'this is where the railway must go.'"¹⁶

They worked the river and the jungle so hard, moved with so much exertion, sensed everything so intensely, that there seemed to be little time and motivation left for landscape mapping, animal stuffing, or, for instance, butterfly pinning:

Initially, it was our intention to check the longitude and latitude of all important spots with the help of chronometer and by astronomical observation, for the remaining assessment patent *boussole* Smalcalder was to be used. But, very soon, it became clear that, given the limited time at our disposal and given our limited forces, we would have to be satisfied with just fleeting measurements made with a simple compass and a tape.

Besides, "The number of containers with alcohol for collecting natural samples, and the quantity of paper for drying and pressing the plant samples, had to be reduced; all other considerations had to be put aside in face of the necessity to carry an amount of rice large enough to feed 300 men for at least 14 days."¹⁷

All the work was done so that the (railway) wheels, in the future, might turn. Yet, for the expedition to move—and to move the landscape as they moved—meant leaving footprints in the damp clay, like a rhinoceros or a boar. To move on, a particular technology of movement was required: "clambering over fallen trees, balancing on their trunks, skidding down, and stumbling through the muddy holes in between."¹⁸

The exertion, the working the landscape and the walking, it seems, was powerful enough to create a credible illusion. It even appeared natural, after such a day of prospecting, when a photograph was taken, that it would take time and effort to distinguish IJzerman and the other Dutchmen from the Javanese and Sumatran, as the memorial book formulated it, *reisgenooten*, "traveling companions," and *metgezellen*, "companions."¹⁹ A greater part of the illustrations in the memorial book of the expedition, as usual at the time,

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were either watercolors or drawings made from photographs. In *An Evening Deliberation*, for instance, a group of men is seen, huddled together. Even the artist who made the drawing did not apparently think it particularly important to retouch the photograph. It is not easy, at all, to tell who is IJzerman, where the other Dutchmen are, and which ones are the Asians.²⁰

Softly, even, they seemed to work together. As the work was accomplished, on the first morning after the expedition reached Siak, the final station of the future railway (before they set on their way back onboard a Chinese steamer), Van Bemmelen, as he wrote in the memorial book, woke up, and his thoughts went back over the past weeks. He thought of the days as “days of freedom, camp life without borders,” and “adventure.” However, it is clear that the Dutchman most eagerly wanted to tell it as a tale of walking. What would stay in his memory most powerfully, he wrote, was “dampness in my half-torn *laarzen* boots, and the gaiters that almost turned brown by the exposure to campfires and mud.”²¹

Hard and Clean Roads

In 1840, a new and eager Dutch minister of colonies, Jean Chrétien Baud, ordered forty camels to be shipped to the Dutch Indies. As an afterthought, two hundred donkeys were also to go. A year later, people in the colony were not allowed to slaughter buffaloes, which might be used for work in ports and on roads.²² This kind of eagerness lasted. As late as 1862, a deputy in the Dutch parliament suggested that a number of llamas and elephants should be sent to the Indies to work as draught animals, especially on the “sugar road” between Semarang and Salatiga in Central Java.²³ However, this deputy already appeared to be behind the times.

Since the early nineteenth century, the Great Daendels Mail Road had been in use in the Indies, cutting through the main island of Java from west to east. It was built, between 1808 and 1811, as a part of the defense against an expected British invasion, and it was “a gigantic road-building project that, with justification, was called ‘Napoleonic.’”²⁴ The Daendels road was a pre-twentieth-century wonder of speed (18 to 20 kilometers per hour in the best places),²⁵ and, equally so, of order. As native children learned in 1886 from their primary school textbooks, “Along the road, each 16 1/3 minutes, there is one stake [*paal*] to indicate a distance. At each fifth stake, there is a post [*bangsal*] for the government mail to change horses.”²⁶

For most of the Indies, even most of Java, at the time, the road of course was not very relevant. As late as the mid-nineteenth century, it took as long as three, even five, months for a load of coffee from the interior of Java off the Daendels road to reach the sea port of Semarang.²⁷ As the traffic got heavier, the highway itself, even for the areas that had access to it, became

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insufficient for anyone wishing to travel modern: “a European coach, usually overloaded with passengers and their belongings is, frequently too heavy to manage for the little Javanese horses.”²⁸

In 1842, a year after the Dutch colonial minister Baud suggested the camels, the first ever magazine published in the Dutch Indies, *Kopiïst*, “Copyist,” launched a series on inventions, and, as invention no. 11, presented “steamways and steam carriages”:

If we are not mistaken, Asia, until today, does not have a single railway. The invention, in the East, did not extend beyond the northern shores of Egypt. . . . It is a widely known fact that the population of Java, as far as its numbers and potential are concerned, is not evenly distributed. In a country like this, introduction of even a single steam machine, certainly, would free a vast number of hands so urgently needed by our agriculture in other locations. The steam means of transport, generally, has a power to release the population from the unproductive drudgery in which it is bound today.²⁹

According to the *Kopiïst*, Asia, and namely, the Dutch Indies, was at least as fit for the wonderful new invention as Europe. The terrain of the Indies, the *Kopiïst* wrote, did not pose any serious obstacle; it laid, waiting for the trains:

From Soerabaia, to the north of the river Kedirie, towards *dessa* [Malay for village] Menoeng . . . the turf is flat. . . . From Tjirebon to the river of Madioen, there are no great hurdles. . . . Over the river of Madioen, a wooden bridge could easily be built . . . the rugged ground there could easily be leveled and the ravines filled.³⁰

Reading the *Kopiïst*, one just could feel how agreeable it would be to build the tracks through Java, from the port city of Surabaya in the east, hundreds of miles to the west, to Batavia, the metropolis of the colony. As the *Kopiïst* saw it, there appeared nothing prohibitive in the costs of the project either:

the population can do the earth-moving and stone-crushing work for the railway free of charge or, at worst, it can be paid in rice and salt, as this can be made a part of a usual *corvée* service for the government . . . it is evident that the costs will be even more affordable than those in either Europe or America.³¹

To build the main track, the *Kopiïst* calculated, would cost merely 8,704,080 guilders, and the side tracks 3,215,520 guilders, for a total 11,919,600 guilders, 2,000,000 guilders would pay for vehicles and warehouses, 1,000,000 guilders would take care of interest. The grand total might be “21,000,000 guilders only.”³²

In 1842, the same year the *Kopiïst* article was published, in the same vein of engineering optimism, the king of the Netherlands, Willem I, issued the first railway decree for the Indies: “In order to promote the transport of



Opening of a new tramway line in the Indies, 1904 or 1905.
Foto Suit Kan. (KITLV)

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products and other goods from Semarang to Kedoe, the Princely Lands in Java, and vice versa, an iron railway will be laid.”³³

It took twenty-five years, in fact, after the first Indies royal railway decree to build the first 25 kilometers of the iron rails in the colony, and it took another decade to build the next 300 kilometers—all of them on Java.³⁴ By heavy and slow steps, rather than daintily as the *Kopiist* suggested, the Indies trains came into existence. By 1882, in the words of a special commission of the learned *Indisch Genootschap*, “Indies Society,” railways and “the little railways,” the tramways, also in the Dutch colony, proved themselves to be “the most useful of the present discoveries, the most admirable victory of man over time and distance, the most powerful incentive to labor, exchange in values, and civilization.”³⁵

By 1888, eight main railway lines were in operation, all in Java, and the fifteen largest cities of the island had a railway connection.³⁶ In April 1899, an electric tram was installed in Batavia,³⁷ and, in 1909, the tramway lines in the city were already 14 kilometers long. That whole year only one fatal accident was reported on the Batavia tramway lines.³⁸

Raden Ajeng Kartini—a teenager when Dr. IJzerman went on his expedition, twenty years old when the electric tram started in Batavia—was the daughter of a high-ranking Javanese official in the colonial government, a *boepati*, “regent,” of Japara. Japara, where Kartini spent most of her life, was a small place on the north coast of Java. Kartini’s friends, mentors, and protectors, almost all Dutch, in the hype of their time, called her a Javanese princess. In post-colonial Indonesia, and until today, almost a century after her death, she has been called the mother of Indonesian nationalism.

“If I were a boy,” Kartini wrote in 1900, from Japara to a Dutch friend, “I should not think twice, but would become a sailor at once.”³⁹ Kartini thought of ships often: “We do not want any more to sail on a sinking ship,” she also wrote, meaning Javanese society;⁴⁰ “courage of the hand at the rudder, and pumping at the leak, could have saved us from destruction.”⁴¹

Japara, where Kartini lived, was very much off all the new and newly emerging modern Indies roads. From Japara, one had to travel on horse or in a horse-driven cart, on a dirt, and often muddy, road to Majong. There, one might board a steam tram to Djoewana or Semarang. Only there was there a “real train.”⁴² Kartini often warned potential visitors of “the tiring trip.”⁴³ Yet, whenever an opportunity arose, or in her dreams, she quickly got onboard: “we were on the track with the first morning tram . . . long before the tram station of Pernalang appeared, as we steamed on, we were looking out for our darling.”⁴⁴

When guests were to come to Japara, Kartini traveled with her aristocratic father to meet them at the station: “how afraid we were that we miss the tram.”⁴⁵ She was allowed to travel very little, as she was an unmarried Muslim woman. Yet, the moments on the train, carefully counted, were the most

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intense for her, and, so it sometimes seemed, the only real moments of life.⁴⁶ Kartini met people, was touched, received news, and heard rumors on the train or at a railway station: “In the train . . . I pressed my hand on my heart . . . I heard much in the tram.”⁴⁷ The dreams were most frequent and drew the clearest image: “Now, we fly with a storm over the iron road”:⁴⁸ “Would I ever be able to forget that divine ride with her to the station? . . . Do not fly so fast on the smooth iron tracks, you sniffing, steaming monster, do not let this beautiful meeting end so quickly. . . . I prayed that the ride would never end. . . . But, alas! the stoker did not hear me.”⁴⁹

It was beyond any doubt to the excited Kartini that the modern roads in the Indies had to be made all anew, and hard. The newness, the hardness and cleanness—it was the roads’ modernity. Cleanness of the roads, in this logic, was purity of times, democracy even, we might say. There were some people in the Indies, Kartini wrote, who demanded that they be addressed by aristocratic titles; often, these titles did not even belong to them. On the whole, Kartini wrote, “it is a matter of indifference”: “but when overseers, railroad engineers (and perhaps tomorrow station masters too), allow themselves to be thus addressed by their servants, it is absurdly funny.”⁵⁰

New roads through Java and in the whole colony, to Kartini, were to be fully made of progress, and, as long as they were made of that hard and clean stuff, nothing could stop the wheels. A Javanese girl was run over by a tram not far from Japara, and Kartini reported the accident in a letter. This event proved, Kartini wrote, how a modern system of “the first medical aid” became very important.⁵¹

Kartini died a year after she was married, at the age of twenty-five, a few days after she gave birth to her first child. She may be written about, perhaps, the way a Viennese author, Robert Musil, at about the same time, wrote about one of his Austrian contemporaries: “She was one of those charmingly purposeful young women of our time who would instantly become bus drivers if some higher purpose called for it.”⁵²

There were no buses in Japara, and in the entire Netherlands Indies colony, in 1900, however. And also, Kartini, in her liking for newness, cleanness, and hardness, would dream of planes instead of buses. This was, at least, what she wrote, three years before her death, in 1901, to one of her and her father’s friends, physician Dr. Anton, in Jena, Germany: “flying machine will have come into use, and on some golden day you will see one of them flutter over Jena’s blue horizon bringing a guest from afar. I should indeed have been born a boy.”⁵³

Struggle for the Roads

Modern roads in the Indies, besides the many wonderful things they did, became from the moment of their inception a battlefield and a space where the Dutch in the colony were clearly uncertain of themselves.

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Professor Stokvis, a Dutch liberal and respected colonial expert, in a lecture in 1894, “Man in Tropics in Connection with Colonization,” declared that “not a single example is known to me of a European family that has been able to reproduce itself in this tropical land for as much as three generations without regularly traveling to Europe, or without being blood-mixed with one of the local races.”⁵⁴ This vulnerability to mixing, another respectful Dutch expert wrote at the time, should serve as a warning against “too rosy” an expectation about the future of the Dutch in the Indies.⁵⁵

Many of the honored voices in the colony warned that the Dutch might sink in the Indies. An eminent Dutch engineer and best-selling author, van Sandick, wrote in 1891:

against every one who might accomplish it, there stand hundreds who will get stuck in the Indies, without a chance to see Europe again. Holland will be reached again only by those who are truly loved by fate; the aggregation of those who, year after year, depart to the tropics will also die there, forgotten by their motherland.⁵⁶

According to official statistics widely publicized at the time, 80 percent of the Dutch population of the colony, by the early twentieth century, had been born in the tropics. An unspecified but large majority of them, according to the same source, had in their veins, indeed, “a drop of native blood or more.”⁵⁷ In 1900, according to another very seriously heeded estimate, among all the legally Dutch children born in the Indies (i.e., including those with “a drop of native blood or more”), as many as 40 percent could not speak Dutch at all, and 30 percent of them spoke their “native language” with difficulty.⁵⁸

In 1900, about 60,000 Europeans, mostly Dutch, lived in the Indies.⁵⁹ In 1930—when the last ever census was taken in the colony—the number had grown to 208,000. Still, it was merely 0.34 percent of the 60 million total population.⁶⁰ As one Dutch journalist, Willem Walraven, put it in the 1930s the Dutch lived in and moved over the Indies “like flies upon milk.”⁶¹

Through this landscape of milk the modern roads of the Indies were to push. In 1880, in the most prestigious and scholarly journal of the colony, *Indische Gids*, “Indies Guide,” J.F.F. Moet, again, as many before him, argued in favor of trains in the Indies. He emphasized one point in particular. He wrote about how wonderful his experience was in Europe—Kassel, Germany, for instance, or on the steam tramway between the Hague and Scheveningen, in the Netherlands:

In spite of the fact that the train passes through the busiest roads and streets, it does not cause any difficulty. Horses are not frightened, even in the evenings, as the locomotives move amidst the houses of the towns with their large red lights in front and large white lights on the sides. I saw a machine with two carriages, at [the main square of Kassel], in fact, on the market day; it puffed through the

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very middle of the crowd, and the women kept sitting behind their stalls and selling their fruits and vegetables as if nothing at all was happening.⁶²

This was, and increasingly so, the late-colonial plan and dream. Horses and crowds would not be frightened in the Indies. It would be, in this aspect, quite like Europe. The time schedule, and the list of stops, depots, and terminals of the new electric tramway in Batavia, in 1910, for instance, read exactly in that programmed and dreamy way. New modern roads would be kept clean and hard, running upon the landscape of milk, calm and orderly, between one and the next point of an undoubted modernity:

Telephone Office, Photographic Association, Batavia Sporting Club, Military Engineers Workshops, Railway Station Weltevreden, Protestant Church, High School, Racetrack, English Sporting Club, Telephone Office, Officers Barracks, Concordia Club, Waterloo-Square Concert Terrain and Soccer Fields (also for natives) . . .⁶³

As late as the mid-1920s, even the rails for the Indies railways were imported from Europe.⁶⁴ As late as in the early 1940s, to the very end of the Dutch colonial era, virtually all technical equipment came from the West. Only a few body parts of carriages, and the sleepers, were made of teak and other Asian wood.⁶⁵

Many, and in some parts most, of the skilled railway and road-building workers were Indies Chinese, or natives imported from other islands or other parts of Java.⁶⁶ In 1918, the Indies state railways employed 179 Dutch officials born in Europe and 564 Dutch officials born in the Indies.⁶⁷ Not a single clerk, station master, or machinist was a non-European. In 1917, a few dozen natives, in the colony of 60 million, had been admitted to a new state-railways training course for the bottom-level clerical positions.⁶⁸ The milk should not be stirred. The idea was to install a tradition of just another vocation, inherited, gradually and orderly, from father to son, exactly as in Europe, without frightening the crowds.

Trains in the Indies, however, as everywhere in the world, possessed an amazing power of attraction. Horses, perhaps, might be made not to panic. But, as soon as rails were laid and the first train appeared, people, the whole landscape, turned around and moved to the train.

In 1883, a Dutch official publication about the contemporary colonial Indies noted: "Particularly the native population makes a great use of the existing railways."⁶⁹ This became an inevitable appendix of the road optimism. Most often, it was just an awkwardly placed emphasis.

In 1904, a special government investigating committee reported that the number of passengers in the first ("European") class of the Indies trains rose by 4,000 during the previous 3 years; in the second (lower-income "European" and top-level "native") class the number of passengers rose by 33,000. Not very much, in fact. In the third ("native") class, however (or *kambing*,

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“goat” class, as it was commonly called), the increase was 550,000!⁷⁰ The committee did not hide its surprise: “The use of trains and trams by *kleine man* [Dutch for “little man,” man in the street, native] is rising faster than initially expected.”⁷¹

The same committee hired a group of “four deft native conductors” and sent it to the trains on various lines to engage the passengers in “little kind talks.” The data thus collected were also unexpected. The little” men, women, and children, as a railway touched upon their habitat, did not appear to panic, but neither were they in any perceptible awe over the modern technology. In fact, they did not appear to change their traditional ways very much. They just appeared to add a little to the tradition. Pragmatically, en masse, and with an efficient use of the trains, logically, they appeared on the move:

A. Reasons to travel of economic nature; market, search for work:	69.5%
B. Reasons to travel of personal nature:	30.5% . . .
f. visits to other family members	20.8%
g. law and order; summons to government office or court of justice	3.6%
h. faith and tradition; visits to graves and other holy places	3.0%
i. pleasure travel	3.1% ⁷²

The natives, as the four conductors found out, were choosing the trains, best of all, that allowed them to carry free baggage of 50 kilograms or more.⁷³ The little people of the Indies traveled as they always did, with their goats and their hens sometimes, and with bags of clothes and food. The Madurese (of the island off the northern coast of Java), the report noted, had always been known as *echte zwerwers*, “real wanderers or drifters.” By now, however, as the report put it, “all natives appear eager to use trains and trams for their own goals.”⁷⁴ The commission discovered, also, that the natives of lower standing, the “simple men,” the real masses, traveled more eagerly and often than their higher-ups, native aristocrats, native colonial officials, the Dutch-supported elite, who, in the ideal plan of the empire, should have been transmitting the modern manners in an orderly way to the plebeians of the colony: “the native notables [were found] much more *hokvaster* [home-loving, literally: fond of one’s fireside] than the little man. . . . The little man . . . changes his places of sojourn much more frequently than one usually thinks.”⁷⁵ *Santri*, the Indies Muslim scholars and students—for a long time suspected by the colonial government as a subversive element of the native society, potential leaders of unrest—were, indeed, found by the conductors’ report to be one segment of the Indies native population that used trains and trams radically more than the rest.

This was an alarming vision of a breaking down of the ideal plan of empire through an invasion of physicality, crowding, and, most gravely, touching. In Batavia, in 1909, on the electric tram lines, in a single month, 10,404



Funeral hearse of the Aceh tram constructed by the Netherlands Indies Army Engineers, ca. 1890. (*Gedenkboek van het Korps, Marechaussee van Atjeh*)

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passengers traveled in first class, 72,623 in second class, and 255,197 in third class.⁷⁶ True, there had been, most of the time, a special carriage in every train for each class. But the rhythm of the train, the shaking, and the machine were the same. All the passengers were (traveling) humans, and their uncomfortable sameness could nowhere be seen, felt, and smelled as strongly as in the train.

About the time of the glorious invention of the electric tram in Batavia, Louis Couperus, a famous Dutch writer, published a novel about the Indies, *De Stille Kracht*, “The Hidden Force.” It became one of the most widely read books in the colony. Couperus wrote about an undercurrent that he, sooner than most of the others, felt in the colony, gathering against the Dutch colonial presence. As the Couperus story comes to its end, the Dutch woman protagonist of the novel wanders through modern Batavia, and she watches, in particular, the first European class of the new electric tram:

in the mornings—when she did her errands in the shops on Rijswijk and Molenvliet, which, with a few French names, tried to give the impression of a southern shopping center of European luxury—did Eva see the exodus to the Old Town of the white men. . . . The exodus filled the trams with the white burden of mortality. Many, already well off, but not yet rich enough for their purposes, drove in their mylords and buggies to the Harmonie Club, where they took the tram to spare their horses.⁷⁷

It took a whole third of a century from the opening of the first railway line in the Indies for the colonial government, in 1908, to decree a single time for its railway, post, and telegraph service throughout the island of Java.⁷⁸ Even after this, and until the 1920s, in fact, “Java time remained inconvenient . . . local time was maintained for all other purposes, though there was some tendency for this so-called *midden Javatijd* [Central Java Time] to be used more widely. Local times continued to be calculated for places outside Java and Madura.”⁷⁹ The modern Indies roads, until the end of the colonial rule, were strips, largely, with a special time. An economic nightmare, certainly, but also a comforting exclusivity against the vision of panicking horses and people.

Special time, indeed, went hand in hand with special security. As Henri Van Kol, well-known Dutch engineer and socialist expert on colonial issues (also Kartini’s mentor at one time), rode on the Atjeh tram in North Sumatra in 1903—passing through the region only a few months before the scene of the fighting between natives and the Dutch, the most bloody colonial Aceh war (1874–1903)—Van Kol was thrilled, excited, and truly a pure-idea model colonial passenger: “Such a short time ago, so many fallen. . . . [And now, there] by tram, from Lho Seumawé to. . . . Maneh . . . All through, and safely.”⁸⁰

Mas Marco Kartodikromo was a contemporary of all of them—IJzerman,

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Kartini, Van Kol. He was a most extraordinary journalist of the fledgling Indonesian nationalism in the early twentieth century. As far as the Indies modern roads and trains were concerned, he had the acuteness of a guerrilla fighter. Even at a time when there seemed to be a perfect peace in the colony (no uprising, no political unrest), Mas Marco saw the Indies “little man”—*boemipoetra*, “son of the soil,” *saudara*, his “brother,” as he called him⁸¹—when about to take a modern road, or board a train, as approaching a thin yet well embanked battle line. One of Mas Marco’s several journals was called *Doenia Bergerak*, “World on the Move.” When one happened to be a son of the soil, *Doenia Bergerak* wrote, in 1914, for instance, one would do well to approach a railway station in a state of alert:

Disappearance of platform tickets

As every one of our readers knows, platform tickets used to be available at all the big stations, in Koetoardjo, Djocja, Bandoeng etc. . . . As we read in the newspapers, however, Malay as well as Javanese ones, at the station of Koetoardjo, for example, platform tickets recently disappeared. Somebody may write to us, hopefully, and explain it. This does not seem to be done in order to please the public, and to make it possible for the people to see off and welcome friends at the train without having to pay an additional charge. . . . Now, a Javanese dad, let us say, cannot go inside the station gallery, and has to wait in the open, at a safe distance from the station. . . . However!!! when someone happens to belong to the Dutch or Chinese stock, well, please, do enter and sit on the bench inside the station. Hmm!!! . . . The Javanese dad is made into one-fourth of a man.⁸²

When a son of the soil, a native, penetrated as close to the battle line as the ticket office:

Tramway tickets in Tjepoe railways station are sold out

. . . When we asked for the green (3rd class) tickets to Solo, we were told by the ticket-office man: *We hebben niet meer in voorraad* (Dutch for “we have no more in stock”). Thus, we were forced to pay for our tickets from Tjepoe to Goendih (2nd class price) 1.80 guilder, and, in Goendih, from Goendih to Solo, again another 0.90 guilder.⁸³

When a son (or a daughter) of the soil got on board:

Various News

On July 19, 1914, several women boarded a train of the state railways to *Kalisoso*, where they were going to visit some holy places together. The Dutch conductor on the train (the train leaving Solo at 5.40), in manners not too polite, chose to amuse himself with the women on board. So the story goes . . . the conductor pinched the cheeks of the women, for instance, and, throughout, he expressed himself in words that rather should not be heard in public. As he was doing this, the women became pale, ashamed, and afraid. If this report is true, then, why do these women themselves, their husbands, or others in their families not complain

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to the railway management? What is there to be afraid of? Don't be scared! We stand ready to help as much as needed! Our cause is just!⁸⁴

Some sons of the soil, natives, made it eventually as close to the line as to become themselves native road or railway personnel. Here is a letter full of technology from one of these as printed in the same Mas Marco paper:

Stationery and Pencil Inventory

. . . Beginning with 1913 . . . we were asked to use pencils instead of pens. We do need *inktpotlood* (indelible pencils) of course, and very strong ones, because we write, as a rule, through one or more sheets of *doordrukpapier* (carbon paper). Ink pencils came from the inventory of the state railways. . . .

Beginning January 1914, I was transferred to the present place in N. Since then, and until April 1914, I used the pencils I still had from my previous station—three stubs of Koh-I-Noor pencils. Then the pencils were finished, and, in April 1914, I asked the chief of the station in N. for another pencil. He gave me a red ink pencil model "Johanfaber's No. 400." After I finish this, I will not get another one, since there are no more pencils in the inventory; this, at least, the chief told me. . . . By September 1914, already, I was using a pencil of the length of merely between 3 to 4 cm. I talked about it to a friend, and he advised me to attach a tendril made of bamboo to the pencil (it was done in the friend's workshop). Thus, at present, I could still use the pencil. On September 1, 1914, I was transferred to the station ticket office, but my pencil is now only 1 cm long . . .

Many greetings and respect from me, *Watjono*.⁸⁵

It was a thin red line. We do not know what happened when Watjono finished his Johanfaber's pencil. Late in 1918, however, as World War I ended and as reports of an attempted socialist coup in the Netherlands reached the Indies, a radical dissident Dutch journal in the Indies, *Beweging*, "Movement," published a list of popular demands that, the journal felt, might be raised in case the revolution spread from the Netherlands to its colony. Besides doing away with the Dutch monarchy and other upside-downs, there would be, almost certainly, the journal wrote, a demand raised for "only one class to be installed on the railways, cheaper, and offering more comfort than it is now the case in the 3rd class."⁸⁶

Revolution, however, like Godot, never seemed to come to the Indies. In 1921, in spite of a general decline in living standards, ticket prices on the Indies railways were raised. There were, still, the same three railway classes, with the third class as uncomfortable, and as native, as before.

The city of Semarang was a major railway junction in Central Java. (It was a place, also, close to Japara, where Kartini used to travel on the train most often.) By 1921, Semarang was called "The Red City" of the colony. From Semarang, in 1921, according to a historian, "Communist influences spread

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in its vicinity and to smaller towns along railroad lines—to Pati, Demak, and Purwodadi to the east; to Salatiga, Boyolali and further to Madiun and Nganjuk to the south; and to Pekalongan, Brebes, Tegal, and Cirebon to the West.⁸⁷

These were the (railway) nerves exposed. On May 10, 1923, a railway strike broke out in Semarang, the biggest strike ever in the history of the Dutch colony. The strike spread through Java, as far west as Cirebon, a city and railway station only five hours by train from Batavia, and as far east as Surabaya, the biggest port and naval base and the most important strategic point of the colony next to Batavia. The rails and sleepers were torn off the tracks, and the battle cry of the strike was *spoor tabrakan*, “tracks crushing!”⁸⁸ When a Dutch liberal journal, at the end of the era, in 1941, looked back and tried to identify one crucial moment when colonialism failed in its project of modernity, this event, the railway strike of 1923, was picked to be the point.⁸⁹

Godot, anyway, did not come again. The smoothness with which the crucial moments were being passed over, in fact, seems to be the main theme of late-colonial history, and, perhaps, of Indonesian history beyond. The colonial project, in a sense, worked. There was a machine-like easiness of the past moving into the present, and the future. The railway strike of 1923 was over in a mere twelve days. The membership of the principal railway workers union behind the strike fell, in a single month after the strike, from 13,000 to less than 1,000.⁹⁰ The trains were running again, and, indeed, sharp on time.

In 1922, a year before the railway strike, Louis Couperus, the author of *The Hidden Force*, visited the Indies once more, and for the last time in his life. This time, he did not stay only in Java as usual. He traveled widely, through most of Sumatra, Java, and even to Dutch Borneo. The new late-colonial network of railways and roads made it possible by now. Couperus went by ship, train, and car. Some of Couperus’ critics say that the refined author did not like the new Indies at all; the only true affection, they say he felt was for the Indies buffaloes. This is not entirely fair. Couperus clearly—and he was setting a new standard for the refined and anxious Dutch rulers, residents, visitors, and engineers as well—felt very much affection, also, toward the native drivers: “Both Javanese chauffeurs—there are two who will relieve each other on the long journey—stare straight ahead; sitting behind them we see four attentive trembling ears. I believe that could we see into their hearts we should find they are more afraid of oranboenian (ghosts) than of tigers.”⁹¹

In May 1927, a new factory was opened by General Motors in Tanjung Priok, the harbor of Batavia. Already by early 1928, 5,732 Chevrolets left the plant for the markets in the Netherlands Indies as well as British Singapore,

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Malaya, and Siam. As one of the papers for native Malay readers excitedly commented: “Now, we all can see how great progress and human endeavor is, and, with each day, how all this comes closer to ourselves.”⁹²

By 1939, there were 51,615 cars in the Indies, 37,500 of them in Java, 7,557 in Batavia, 4,945 in Bandung, and 657, for instance, in the Japara–Rembang region, where Kartini had lived and where she had died.⁹³ Most of the automobiles in the colony, of course, were owned by the Europeans. Unlike on the Indies railways, however, from the early times and increasingly, there were natives behind the wheel.⁹⁴ In the first three months of 1928, for example, in Surabaya, there were 524 serious traffic accidents, 42 percent of them caused by cars, 23 percent by trains or tramway, 17 percent by motorcycles. Among the drivers involved in the accidents, 11 percent were Europeans, 6 percent Chinese and Arabs. As many as 83 percent were natives.⁹⁵

More than trains and tramways, also, the cars and motorcycles on the modern roads of the colony appeared vulnerable and bent on “going native.” Initially, as should be the case, it was a matter of inventive engineering. At the historic first and big Amsterdam world and colonial exhibition, in 1883, for instance, a gold medal was awarded to a “Batavian one-horse hand-wagon on two wheels . . . Price 350 guilders . . . inventor—C. Deeleman.”⁹⁶ By the 1920s, this very *deeleman*, which became *delman* or *dilman* in the process, was already fully taken over, and it belonged to the little people of the land. *Deeleman* became as familiar a name on the Indies modern roads as the names of the traditional horse-driven, ox-driven, or buffalo-driven carts such as *tjika*, *grobak*, or *sado*. Gradually, and *deeleman* led the way, many of the *tjika*, *grobak*, or *sado* began to use rubber tires. Toward the end of the Dutch era, some *deeleman* became motor-propelled.

It was engineering at a distance from a revolution. A battle much less visible, let’s say, than the great railway strike.

In 1923, in the year of the strike, a long essay was published in a prestigious and scholarly Dutch Indies journal, *Koloniale Studiën*, “Colonial Studies,” about what its author thought to be one of the most serious consequences of World War I in the colony: a historically new, and very fierce, competition between the automobile and the train. Before the war, the essay explained, the railways in the Indies had virtually a monopoly. The native animal-driven carts could not compete with the trains, in speed, in capacity, or in comfort. World War I, however, in spite of the fact that the fighting took place far from the Indies, caused a general disorder in the colony’s economy and communications. In the suddenly emerging looseness, through fissures of the upset order, *vrachtautos*, “lorries,” appeared in the colony. The author of the essay made it clear that what he meant were native lorries, and that he saw them as a menace: “The state of tires on which the lorries ride leaves much to be desired. . . . Overloading of the lorries is a rule rather than an exception. . . . Public—very fatalistically inclined native public, natu-

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rally—makes quite some use, indeed, of this cheap opportunity for transportation.”⁹⁷

Two years later, in 1925, in *Koloniale Studiën* again, yet another many-page treatise was published on the subject. “Initially,” this study opened, the role of the automobiles was thought to be in filling in only, where there was no railway available at the moment. “Passenger automobiles,” besides, were meant to serve, largely, as a “*de luxe* means of communication.” In Europe, according to the author of this second essay, the development of road traffic after World War I did not appear to cause a fundamental problem. In the Dutch Indies, however,

as yet, it has been beyond us to build a railway network outstretching enough. . . . Therefore, *sado, deeleman, ebro, kretak, kossong, andong*, and whatever name all these carts might have—as the traffic intensifies, everywhere, and even in the largest cities—take on themselves, more and more, a role of the reigning means of public transportation.⁹⁸

The European transporters in the colony, the study admitted, “have little understanding of the psyche of the native traveler.” In the field of medium distances—and this was the crucial area—the “native transporters” (actually large numbers of them were the Indies Chinese), the “wild buses and trucks,” were able to offer “faster transport, wider selection, with a greater flexibility, and along the routes the native travelers really desire to take.” The adjusted animal-driven carts, and, increasingly, “native-owned” lorries and buses filled, crowded, a huge and growing “gap” in the colony’s modern landscape. It was futile, and a little desperate, to argue, as the essay in *Koloniale Studiën* did, that this was not a modern technology, too: “These vehicles, as a rule, are second-hand, and, even, third-hand, and, very often, they are in a state of being barely able to hold together.”⁹⁹ And, besides, they destroyed the asphalt.¹⁰⁰

Language-game

Certainty is *as it were* a tone of voice in which one declares how things are. . . . Doubt gradually loses its sense. This language-game just *is* like that . . . the *sureness* of the game.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*¹⁰¹

People in America still ask me, when they read my texts and hear my accent, how difficult it is, for me, to write and speak English. I rarely tell them, but it is a fact, that, in Czech, my speaking and writing goes more slowly than in English. It is, perhaps, because Czech for me, more than English, is made of what Wittgenstein called “words with an atmosphere.” For me, speaking and

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writing in Czech, more than in English, is like treading on expressions, each of which has a powerful yet uncertain memory, as walking on pebbles only loosely attached to the whole, in a state of equilibrium, so I still try to believe. My Czech, also, feels to me like a language of wet earth. The walking is soft and slow, each step is as if barefoot and expectant of an invisible root of a word that may halt the progress again.

My English, when compared to this, moves easily and fast. Its words are like blocks of stone in a pavement: cut and polished words, in my English, become usable tools. In English, in contrast to Czech, I am less expectant and less afraid that a word, like a stone, may come loose and, like a patch of plaster, peel off the language. That language, like the hard and clean surface of road, may crack and even, in a disaster scenario, fall apart.

Articulated in English, for instance, even my memories of Prague are like chiseled stones of pavement; or like the well-mashed corpses of prehistorical plants and animals that make much of the modern asphalt roads. It is how memory can most easily be stored. Uncouth pebbles are sunk into the once-organic matter. The language as asphalt can be spread out fast, and it can cement even the most incongruous things together. It can be, and it is, used to cover a large territory. My English is a language that is most handy against tardiness, and against the fear of language.

This is where the theme of this chapter, and my writing about it (done in America and in English), came most intensely together. I felt, and it was my imperative in writing, that there was a common potential and danger in both my English and the late-colonial language(s) of the Indies. Both, in order to simplify matters (being languages of strangeness, either of an exile or of an intervention), are eager to mash memories. Both entice to cruising. Both promise to be good against all stammering, but also against touching. Both are ready to help in building a shiny—and the most perverted—idea, that ruling a colony, as writing its history, may be done like hitting the road, a road that needs only to be smooth, and, in case of trouble, yet a bit smoother.

Magneet, “Magnet,” first appeared at the end of 1913. It was the official organ of *Motor-Wielrijders Bond*, “Union of the motorcycle riders,” and probably the first journal in the Indies devoted exclusively to life on modern roads. Reading through the first volumes of *Magneet*, one is impressed with how firmly its language-game was played. First of all, one is aware of smoothness.

Much of each issue of *Magneet* was taken up by various announcements and reports on *clubtochten*, “club trips”: “Our aim . . . is first of all making collective club trips by members, with focus, first of all, on slow and careful driving.”¹⁰² *Magneet* described, for instance, the Wilhelmina Park in the center of Batavia, the heart of the colonial capital, as a scene of the greatest jollity:

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Our first Club-trip

Wonderful Sunday morning, December 28 [1913] . . . The whole Weltevreden is still half asleep . . . motorcyclists are standing in groups on the fresh green grass of the Wilhelmina Park. . . . Just before half past six, our motors zoom, and off we go from the meeting place. . . . What a delightful sight! . . . a medley of little club flags . . . *raméh* [Malay for busy, bustling, lively, festive, noisy], in line . . . Photo-cameras click and clack. . . . Forwards! Past Rijswijk the cheerful troops buzz, through the French quarter, via Tanah-Abang past Koningsplein towards Matraman to Meester. . . . Past Goenoeng Sari the happy company is drawing, attracting many eyes, then into the old town, and, out of there, still in moderate pace to Versteeg, where cold beer is served. . . . The men are riding through the busiest of neighborhoods, yet so considerately—it is proved by this trip that it is not dangerous to take a couple of dozens of motorcycle riders and let them loose on the street.¹⁰³

The first trip of the union ended in the hotel *De Stam*, “The Trunk,” in New Godangdia, the newly built modern quarter of the city, with yet another cold beer.¹⁰⁴

Through the zooming of machines and the language describing it, the colony’s rural landscape was also pronounced safe. The motorcycle-club members, as *Magneet* reported, penetrated deeper, from the center into the suburbs, and inland. Joyful, excursion-wise, on bicycles, tricycles, with or without sidecars, in groups or alone, they were—or were described as—cruising. The union rented a “Club Café,” *Buitenzorg*, southwest of Batavia at the foot of the hills, and, in the hills, *Restaurant Ridders* with a *Clubhotel* near Cipanas, south of the capital. Other restaurants and hotels soon staked out the club’s most popular routes.¹⁰⁵ The language was powerful, and it is still quite comforting to read about it in *Magneet*:

Along the Tangerang road

The calm and the darkness that rule all around are broken only by the hot-tempered puffing of my motorcycle, and by sharp flashes of my motorcycle lamp. There is nobody on the road except for a few drowsy watchmen—but they are everywhere—and, now and then, there is a coolie trudging under his *pikoel* [Malay for burden carried on shoulders]. . . . [Then] the somber tops of the mountains . . . the air becomes rosy. . . .

The road takes me through a Chinese cemetery. There are graves on the left, and graves on the right; a city of the dead—or so it looks to me—and it stretches out in the vastness. Where the cemetery ends, there are *sawahs* [Malay for wet rice fields], a bridge, then sawahs, and again a bridge.¹⁰⁶

There were villages with nobody, as the club chairman described it in one of his trip reports, “merely a couple of wretched huts, a market, and a chicken I ran over . . . in a Chinese *toko* [Malay for shop] I got gas.”¹⁰⁷

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Accidents happened, and the language of *Magneet* handled them well, too. A motorcycle crashed into a *grobak*, a native horse-driven cart. A native girl was killed as she crossed a road:

Fatal accident . . . A motorcyclist, in a cloud of dust, found himself, suddenly, against a native on a bicycle, coming from the opposite side. Various Europeans, men living in the neighborhood, declared that the native was *bingoeng* [Malay for confused], and that he zigzagged on the road in a most awkward way. . . .¹⁰⁸

On the road between Klender and Bekasi, traffic was blocked by a *grobak* pushed from behind by three evidently drunk natives. We base the suspicion of alcohol on the fact that the cart on the narrow road was pushed in an extremely odd manner. On honking by a *Sacoche* motor-tricycle, the cart moved to the left, barely enough that it could be passed. But, when a *Sarolea* motorcycle began to honk, the fellows with the cart, who had to be absolute idiots, swung the said *grobak* in their good-natured stupidity to the middle of the road *in a diagonal direction!* Then, the scoundrels just stopped and waited. . . . All three natives have already been punished for their “performance.”¹⁰⁹

Collision. Mr. W. A. van den Capellen of Bekasi Road No. 3 was charged for killing with his motorcycle a native girl, called Moenah, of *kampoeng* [Malay for native quarter] Doereng III. The gentleman was driving without a driver’s license. If he had had the license, the accident certainly would not have happened—¹¹⁰

Accident Chronicle . . . on an interior road near Modjokerto, a dogcart in which *wedono* [high-ranking native official] of Goenoeng Gendeng was traveling was hit by a car coming from behind. The *wedono* was thrown out of his little carriage by the impact, and he broke his leg. The car took him home.¹¹¹

There were some hitches, inevitably. A certain Mr. Arriëns, *Magneet* reported, a member of the club, was beaten at a scene of one of the early Indies accidents. Evidently, he was considered by native onlookers to be the cause of the accident. He was attacked by stones first, as might be expected in the case of natives being enraged. Then, however, as *Magneet* reported, he was “worked over” by other means, too, including *Engelschen sleutel*, a monkey wrench. Fortunately, a Dutch official, an assistant-resident, came to the scene in time, and he took Mr. Arriëns away in his car.¹¹²

There were modern-road accidents, and, naturally, they multiplied. Yet, somehow, most of the time, they appeared to *Magneet* to be easily dealt with. In a sort of excursion-wise way, as all the rest of the news, fleetingly, the crashes on the road were made to read as a part of the club calendar. Placed always on the same page, among other regular features, they all seemed to happen on Sundays mostly.

Auto-terreur, “terror by automobile,” breaking the rules by the natives themselves driving motor vehicles, was mentioned, in *Magneet*, but carefully and very rarely.¹¹³ Natives driving on modern roads were overwhelmingly

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those in an animal-driven cart or—instant victims and the most ephemeral figures—on bicycles. Whatever might happen to them, articulated by *Magneet*, they were jocular. In the language of *Magneet*, with a preference, they were called *bruine broeders*, “brown brothers,” or—in a mash of English (the *à jour* motor-club language) and Malay (the language of natives)—*would-be toeans*, “would-be-masters.”¹¹⁴

The monkey wrench, with which Mr. Arriëns might have been beaten, in *Magneet*, disappears quickly amid, virtually, heaps of language describing other tools and other technologies. There were types of motorcycles described and depicted, a most impressive instrument in itself, as one advertisement in *Magneet* put it, “*Made Like a Gun*.”¹¹⁵ There were whole pages, naturally, on different segments of the motorcycle. As smoothness was the motivation, surface was in focus, and outer parts of the motorcycle were especially favored. Motorcycle reflectors were the most frequent and prominent presence; only the technology of honking, maybe, could compete with them. In these cases, the richness and extravagance of *Magneet* vocabulary peaked. Motorcycle klaxons, for instance, were *claxons*, *autofoxen*, *sirenes*, *gabriëls*, *olifanten-kasten*.¹¹⁶

In 1913, the magistrate of the city of Batavia decreed that noise and light by these very technologies had to be restrained or kept outside the city limits. Only “one-tone signal horns,” for instance, were to be allowed.¹¹⁷ To Mr. Lankhout, however, affiliated with the *Magneet* motorcycle club, this was not acceptable. He went all the way to municipal court to fight for his three-tone trumpet. His campaign was followed by *Magneet* in detail. The frivolous technology made for a frivolous journeying, and it was, justifiably, accepted as heroic, as a struggle for the smoothness of it all. As the matter was heard in the court of Batavia and *Magneet* reported it, Mr. Lankhout

had all the native deputies on his side, as they understood nothing of the entire proceedings—somebody has forgotten to translate the debate into Malay, and they were simply saying “yeah” and “yeah.” Only one *hoofdjaksa* [native prosecutor], who could understand Dutch, voted against. In this way, Mr. Lankhout could keep his trumpet.¹¹⁸

Nothing was said about the Dutch members of the court. Nothing needed to be said. Bemused, perhaps, by the native deputies’ “performance,” they voted for the klaxon.

Amusement (and inner calm), *Magneet* has shown, might be attained by quoting natives talking. A native policeman, in yet another *Magneet* story, decided on one occasion to stop a *Magneet* motorcycle club member who sported too big a lamp (“floodlight”) on his machine. The burden of the story was the native talking: *Toean paké sekijnwerwer tida bolé*, “Mister uses lomp [sic], that’s not allowed.” The hilarious spelling of the technical term—it should be *schijnwerper*, “light thrower”—was the trump of the language-game.¹¹⁹

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As one might expect, racing was another important signature of *Magneet*. Even more than when on a club trip—beyond any discussion, and with absolute justification by the rules—when racing, or reading and writing about racing, one had an obligation to be impatient, and to have a zero tolerance for everything on the road that might impede the smoothness of cruising. The *bingoeng*, “perplexed,” natives—simply, by purely technological means, by the very nature of the race—were excluded. The biggest race *Magneet* reported, the “Java Races,” took place in 1915. The first prize was to belong to the motorcyclist, who, any time during September and October, could cover the distance between Batavia and Surabaya in the shortest time.¹²⁰ A *Magneet* club member, P. Heidsieck, made the trip on September 29 and 30 in thirty hours, and his report of the race was published in the magazine:

Allah! My fears were well founded. . . . First, the damned baggage carrier! . . . Then: hey, all of you, the Dutchmen with some authority and with that “ethical approach” to it! . . . you are so eager to teach our brown brother to read and write . . . you are busily turning him into a Western dandy . . . if you can only teach him . . . to decently keep on the left side of the road as I am passing by on my motorcycle. If he just can learn this . . . he may, then, also become *my* brown brother. . . . I am truly fed up with all the *grobak* carts that compel me to reduce my speed. These fellows always wait until it is too late to get past them. You may think that they are afraid of klaxon. You should know better! Only my motorcycle *Falot* lamp stirs some respect in them.¹²¹

Power in the late-colonial Indies, as *Magneet* language had it, could only be as potent as it was race-like, and racy. In August 1915, the Dutch governor-general of the Indies made an unprecedented inspection tour throughout an extensive area of Central Java. For the first time in the history of the colony, a large part of the tour was made in an automobile. The tour description spread over several consecutive issues of *Magneet*. The language of *Magneet* in the unusually long narrative was wholly uninhibited, and nowhere did it come to such fruition as in this case:

Central Java . . . August 1915 . . . Hundreds of kilometers are being covered by the governor general in a couple of days, sometimes at a racing speed. . . .

Le circuit through 5 Provinces. . . . an average speed 40 km/h! . . . we are in the old town of Cheribon. Why was the road not cleared before we came? Bang! Clack! Just in an instant, and I might have a foreleg of a *deeleman* horse in my car . . . anything like that should not happen, naturally. . . . The road along the sea [in contrast], is good, and we can travel at a steady speed. There are no carts moving, no, naturally there are none; . . . the order is well maintained. The road is entirely for us. Yippee, driver!¹²²

There was not much, in the smooth language of *Magneet*, about pavement or asphalt. It was too early for this, perhaps. Only on one or two occasions, the

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club members complained about the roads being “bad, and covered merely by that hateful rubble.”¹²³

In another Indies text four to six years younger than *Magneet*, and more on the serious, almost scholarly, side, the hardness of the road had already become the main issue. H.F. Tillema, the author of the text, came to the Indies at the end of the nineteenth century, and he became an owner of a big pharmacy in the city of Semarang. Early in the twentieth century, Tillema was involved in Semarang politics, and was elected a city councilor. He wrote extensively about the Indies. Among many other things, he was an organizer of some of the early motor races in the colony.¹²⁴ Tillema left the Indies shortly before World War I broke out, and, in Europe in 1920, he published his treatise on colonial roads.

Like IJzerman, the prospector of the Sumatra colonial railway, Tillema wrote as a pioneer, but unlike IJzerman, he had no patience with his roads' untamed parts. Tillema sensed the hardness of the modern roads and was on the hardness side. Like Kartini, Tillema believed in progress as cleanness; his, also, was a clinical cleanness—a pharmacy cleanness, indeed. Unlike Kartini, however, he was determined never to let himself be carried away by some boyish dreams.

Hardness was needed. “In Semarang,” Tillema opened his article, the famous “Road of Daendels,” the road built as far back as 1811, the pride of the Dutch in the colony, the most significant connection between the east and the west of Java, had become “one big latrine.”¹²⁵ There was too much dirt on the road, and the dirt, Tillema carefully made it clear, came from the outside, from the beyond of the modern road. “The market people arriving from near and afar” brought the dirt on their feet. “Often,” Tillema added, they defecated on the road, “sometimes in the very middle of it.”¹²⁶ Day after day, Tillema wrote, “Siddin, so let us call the native garden boy,” dumped the garbage from his master's house “from the kitchen and stalls,” “instead of in the trash container,” “over the fence,” “with his gentle hand,” upon the road.¹²⁷

This was *stoffjeremiade*, “dust jeremiad,” Tillema wrote. Modern motor vehicles moving with some speed, and then using brakes, trams, trains, and bicycles, but most of all, “namely, the animal-driven *grobak* carts, buses and trucks, with their wheels and tires worn out and on totally off-centered axles”—vehicles so loved by the native Siddins, by the way, Tillema added¹²⁸—they rode over “the feces of men, horses, and buffaloes, and made them into dust.” The dust, then, got off the ground, all over the place, and it was *in-waait*, “blown into,” open windows, especially of the houses near the modern road:

It has been noticed by those who pass through the area between 5 and 6 P.M. that on the Boeloe section of the road, for instance, the layer of dust is several centimeters thick. As it is raised by bicycles, cars, and carts, people are infected by plague, cholera, typhus, and other things like that.¹²⁹

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It is widely known that the high child mortality, to a large extent, is caused by the dust, and that the inhaling of the dust, either organic or inorganic, causes serious throat, nose, and lung disorders . . . the dust of the road is a most serious threat to the health; it may be a matter of life and death . . .¹³⁰ Typhus spreads through the air. Pneumonia, also . . . and other pathogenic organisms as well.¹³¹

Sometimes, a little piece of stone, even, might be catapulted off the road by a passing vehicle, and the missile might be blown into a house, our house: "From what was said, it is understandable that the Europeans in the Indies consider the dust on the roads not just a great nuisance, but that they fear the dust for reasons of hygiene, and for other things."¹³²

It was natural for Tillema, as a pharmacist, to appeal for modern roads to be taken care of, "healed," as modern man, in the same unkind tropical land of the Indies, was cared for and healed: "Just as we are ready to serve *obat* [Malay for medication] to the people here who are sick, so it should be the case with the sick roads. What castor oil and quinine make for the man in the Indies, water and oil residue can do for the roads."¹³³ Modern roads, wrote Tillema, should be soaked in water and oil residue so that the dust might not rise. Two photographs, of a "spray car" and "sprayer," a native with a "spray mechanism" on his back, were published with the article.¹³⁴

Yet spraying the roads was not the real solution. Soaking might cause softness, and softness in the final definition, Tillema stated emphatically, was a threat. There was too much softness on the Dutch Indies roads, anyway. The tropical torrential rains soaked and eroded the roads constantly. Softness was everywhere. Even the stone most often used in the Indies to pave the new roads, *Indische grint*, "Indies gravel," as Tillema lamented, was dangerously soft: "The gravel is very porous, and it can absorb much water when it rains, which may be good. However, it keeps wet a long time, which is very bad."¹³⁵ What was the worst was mud!

Tillema mused about wooden-board roads, as were recently tried in Paris, France.¹³⁶ But something more Indies-like, evidently, was to be done in the Indies. What truly was needed, Tillema concluded, was a *bindmiddel*, "binding agent," and a *bindkracht*, "binding power."¹³⁷ Various oils might be used, he suggested, perhaps petroleum. Promising also, he offered, might be *melasse*, "molasses," the syrup produced by refining of sugar, the substance then being "mixed with slaked lime." This should work especially well, he thought, for the areas around the big Indies sugar plantations in East Java.¹³⁸ Yet another solution was mentioned by Tillema, termed "curious" by him, but, it seemed, not wholly discarded: "old shoes originating from the armies fighting in the past war [First World War] . . . 5 to 10% of powder . . . mixed with stone and asphalt; 57,000 pairs of old shoes [should be enough for] 1 km of road."



Street sprayer in Batavia, ca. 1916. (Tillema, *Een en ander*)

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“It is a pity,” Tillema added, “that most of the Javanese still walk barefoot.”¹³⁹

To feel safe on a modern road, went the message by Tillema, the road should feel hard and antiseptic. *Wegen-hygiëne*, “road hygiene,” since the 1920s especially, became almost an indispensable part of any debate about the Indies communications.¹⁴⁰ In yet another article, Tillema again warned: “One has to be constantly aware that all improved traffic brings, also, more infection.”¹⁴¹ Tillema, sooner and more clearly, perhaps, than many others, saw that dust and mud is also a communication—a modern communication, indeed. Equally soon, he knew that, because of that, an overextensive contact had to be avoided.

“Whenever we go out, to see a movie, whenever we travel by a tram or something like that,” one of several already existing Indonesian nationalist papers *Indonesia Raja*, “Great Indonesia,” wrote in 1929,

there are against us signs and billboards with “Native” written on them. This may seem to be no big matter, and not a reason serious enough to feel bad. However, when we think about it a little, it becomes clear that there is some deeper meaning beneath. The deeper meaning of those planks is that they divide “us” from “them.”¹⁴²

According to *Indonesia Raja* again, and also in 1929,

Now we want to talk about a Dutchman as we can see him on a bus, or as we are moving through our lives on the same street. . . . There, the Dutchman is thrown into the maelstrom of the Indonesian people. . . . There, the Dutchman has to show his good intentions, there, on the street, the Dutchman, as now we can see him, the Dutchman on the road, and in the train. . . . There, it is there, that we are suddenly capable of thinking of “an intimate bond.”¹⁴³

Tillema’s warning about infection, it appeared, was timely, and it was taken seriously. The point is, here, that the antiseptic quality went together with—and was as important as—grammatical correctness or correct driving. *Verminking*, meaning, in Dutch both “erratum” and “mutilation,” was a standard term describing the natives in colonial offices misspelling Dutch telegrams they were to transcribe, or mispronouncing Dutch messages they were to convey on the telephone.¹⁴⁴ Natives, as the word *verminking* had it, were speaking and writing flesh and blood, or simply mud.

Wherever the natives went, and especially as they dared to approach a modern road, they were read and pronounced as carrying that soft stuff on themselves, on their tongues, on their feet, and on their wheels. Even by way of language, thus, they were made constantly to appear on the verge of slipping off the correct lines. There is a Javanese woman in Louis Couperus’ novel, *The Hidden Force*. The woman is presented as, possibly, a dangerous native. She lives in “a half-marriage” with the resident, a retired Dutch official, and thus she is perceived as almost moving toward modern ways, toward

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modern roads, and into Dutch language. As the novel develops, the Javanese woman is encountered by a Dutch woman, Eva, the epitome of Dutchness, pure, correct, and, eventually, safe. Both women talk, and this is how, by the genius of the Dutch author of the turn of the century, the threat of the native is made to go away: “Beginning with a few words of Dutch and then taking refuge in Malay, smiling politely, she . . . did not know what to talk about, did not know what to answer when Eva asked her about the lake, about the road.”¹⁴⁵

Celeste Langan, in her study of *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom*, writes too about a passing encounter on a public road, and about common language. A bourgeois poet and a haggard vagrant seem to speak the same language on the public road. However, “The poet and the vagrant speak the same language only insofar as the common practice—the logic of infinite circulation represented as ‘coming and going’—has detached their speech from the regional affiliations that might identify it as a dialect.”¹⁴⁶ Langan also connects the encounter and the common language with “simulating”: “simulating . . . the ethical ideal of liberal democracy . . . imagination of freedom: the right of individuals ‘to come and go without permission and without having to account for their motives or undertaking.’”¹⁴⁷ The aim of this, Langan suggests, is to “attach” language “not to the soil but to technology,” namely, the technology of “coming and going,” the technology of the road.¹⁴⁸ “Old” language, whatever it might mean until now, is “expropriated” into a new common language of the road.¹⁴⁹ Through the new language of the road, then, an attempt is made to “abstract the world from its social conditions,”¹⁵⁰ to make it appear as if it is, technologically, suspended in the air.

Vaktaal (Dutch for technical language), the late-colonial language of the road, was hurled upon the native as the romantic language, in another time and another culture, was hurled upon the vagrant. Old language of the native, whatever it might have meant until then, was expropriated into a new language of the road and made as if suspended in the air.

There was much hazard in this language-game. In the *common* language of *public* road, a sense of ownership might easily slacken. The Indies was a very carefully ruled colony, yet by 1935, 150 Indonesian engineers had graduated from a colonial technical college in Bandung,¹⁵¹ and in 1938, 13,500 Indonesians or so studied in the colony’s low- and middle-level technical schools.¹⁵² As Wittgenstein points out, in contrast to the “words of love” and other “words with atmosphere,” technical terms are facilely exchangeable.¹⁵³ Unruly things might happen when native technicians and engineers encountered Dutch masters on the public roads of the Indies. In order to make the late-colonial technical language stick, to cling to ownership, atmosphere and love were to be faked.

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There may be something, in every technical language, that makes this almost easy. As I clicked on “jargon,” now, my *PowerBook Thesaurus* gave me back: “terminology, babble, gibberish, nonsense, balderdash, moonshine, palaver, twaddle.”¹⁵⁴ Faking love and faking atmosphere, and thus trying to save the technical language of the public road for the masters, this was what the motorcycle club journal *Magneet* did so consistently. The amassing of the trivial terms of trivial technology, the personification of road machines, or the affectionate diminutives of spare parts (*lampje*, “little lamp,” *claxontje*, “little klaxon”)—all this was done to keep words by those who invented the game. The words, and the language with the words, were made smaller, into broken pieces, were gritted and mashed into semi-organic little corpses of memory.

Technical language could be befuddled. The main Indies magazine for police agents published a series of long articles in 1940 on the problem of modern versus unmodern traffic on the new colonial roads. A modern user of the road was not described in the article at all, was termed “general traffic,” and was left to be merely felt, unaffected, and (thus, safely) at a distance. The unmodern was carefully articulated—and twaddled. He was a native horse-cart driver. In the otherwise wholly Dutch text he was called consistently in native Malay *Pak Koesir*, “Papa Coachman.” Papa Coachman’s position was set, and photographs were attached to show it, by a tennis-court-like design of straight lines running parallel or at right angles to each other. The lines were drawn on the road’s clearly smooth surface, most probably asphalt, and they were marked *a, b, c*. . . . The horse, harnessed to the cart, stood calmly at Papa Coachman’s side. The poor beast was labeled *p.k.*, for *paardekracht*, “horse power.”¹⁵⁵

Wittgenstein was also quoted as saying: “When attention to detail is abandoned . . . the real function of statements is missed . . . language *goes on holiday*.”¹⁵⁶ The late-colonial language in the Indies, indeed, the technical language of modern road, as it was proudly trivial, was also imperiously vacational. It was an important rule of the game, especially as the colonial crises deepened, that attention to detail should, boisterously, be abandoned, and that the real function of statements should, buoyantly, be missed.

In the *Volksraad*, an advisory council of the governor-general of the late-colonial Indies, in July 1938, modern roads and railways came again to the debate. The next step, in the policy of the colonial government to improve the modern roads, a government spokesman told the *Volksraad*, was to remodel some of the features of the railway’s first class. This rather curious priority met with a general approval of the Dutch deputies in the *Volksraad*, even while all the speakers admitted—they boasted actually—that there was not much in the first class to improve.¹⁵⁷

The authorities, as some deputies suggested, it is true, might “take into account,” in the future, the possibility of adding a few new carriages to the

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third class.¹⁵⁸ But the tenor of the debate was markedly elsewhere. Madame Deputy Razoux-Schultz, very outspoken on the issue all the way, talked about the bad ventilation and “odor” in the third, native, class. Now and then, she said, so she heard, it was not even possible for the service (a waiter?) to reach the third-class passengers: “In the 3rd class, the service, truly, is not always equally good. Especially during the rush hours, the travelers of the 3rd class might not even get any service at all, as even the ordering may be difficult.”¹⁵⁹

The burden of Razoux-Schultz’s speech, however, was in her ardent plea for tourists. They, she said, traveled on the railway’s weekend lines, to the mountains and the spa resorts of the colony. Their bikes in particular should be transported by the Indies railways for a radically lower price than was the case at the moment: “One feels so strongly for the bike parties, which have to use trains on their longer trips, and it is not easy.”¹⁶⁰

Like the first-class train carriage, the structure of the late-colonial Indies modernity was to be constructed: layer upon layer, in a multitiered and upholstered realm that would rest upon what, underneath, a long way down, at the very bottom perhaps, might be the salt of the earth. In the same railway debate in the *Volksraad*, yet another outspoken Dutch deputy, Van Helsing, agreed with all that had been said and aggregated the argument by adding, playfully, one little complaint:

At present, the accommodations in the 1st and 2nd class leave very little to be still desired. The cooling in the new carriages is outstanding, and sitting space is so excellent that it is an undiluted pleasure to be in it. Sometimes I even wonder whether we did not go too far here. The springing of the seats is so good that one actually cannot peacefully read any more. As you settle down with your book, you are swayed and rolled up, down, all over, and all the time, so that one of the greatest benefits of the train travel might be taken away.¹⁶¹

A blanket of jargon, vacation language, and twaddling modernity was being laid over the Indies. Mas Marco, again, soon detected the binding power and the muffling power of the triviality—sooner, in any case, than most among his brothers, the soilsons, the natives, who were thus being veiled and silenced. If we leave the mushy substance on us, untouched, Mas Marco warned, it will harden into an unbreakable crust. In 1914, Mas Marco’s early Indonesian journal *Doenia Bergerak*, wrote:

Automobile, in our time, is a vehicle best loved by all the dignitaries and the capitalists. . . . Nowadays, indeed, what is considered most powerful, and toward which all the strengths and all the time are exerted, is improvement of roads. Big roads become better, more beautiful, straighter, and smoother every day. Measure by measure, as the roads are plastered, covered with concrete and gravel in the most advanced manner, the mountains of gravel also grow. . . . It is certain that this is the future; even the village roads, and all the hamlet roads—no road is too

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small for it—will be made bigger, wider, more attractive, and smoother. The mountains of gravel will grow higher. In our forests, we will keep on digging for the gravel, and the mountains will grow still higher, higher than the real mountains. . . . Already, peasants dig for the gravel, instead of digging in their fields. . . . It is certain that there will always be enough gravel . . . and, at the end, no car will ever break down on the good roads.¹⁶²

The best of the Dutch engineers in the colony knew as much as Mas Marco knew. In 1919, for example, a successor of Dr. IJzerman of sorts, a well-known and much respected railway engineer, Rietsema van Eck, defined the Dutch civilization in the Indies as “an upper or surface authority laid over, and covering a native authority.”¹⁶³ About the same time, another outspoken Dutch technician in the Indies, engineer-architect Plate, in a lecture before the learned Indies Society in Batavia, described the Dutch rule over the colony as *cultuurloos maar gewapend*. *Cultuurloos* is “culture-less” and *gewapend*, either “armed” or “reinforced.”¹⁶⁴ Plate was an engineer. Something even more advanced, a crust even harder than of gravel or asphalt, might be invoked here by the engineer’s jargon. Engineer Plate certainly was well aware that *gewapend beton*, “reinforced concrete,” even as he spoke, was becoming, in the East as well as in the West, in building up as well as binding in, the most trendy thing there was.¹⁶⁵

This was the power of the Dutch rule and late-colonial language—not a capacity of their inner form to emanate power beyond themselves, but, power resting in (hopefully) being impregnable. Several decades after the Dutch colonial rule ended, in the post-colonial Indonesia of the early 1960s, talking to a graduate student from Cornell University in the United States, a very old and most revered Javanese scholar, Dr. Poerbatjaraka, still seemed to recall exactly this. The beauty of Dutch, so the student interpreted what the old man said, was in the language’s “invulnerability to Javanese: In it one could say anything about Java and Javanese culture no matter how sacred the subject.”¹⁶⁶

Bahasa Indonesia, “Indonesian Language”

At the end of the monsoon season, in 1928, “Mas Arga, a journalist, and a native son of this land, started from Tjilegon on an expedition around the islands of Java and Madura. He travels on a motorcycle *Indian Scout*, with 1 guilder (one roepiah) in his pocket.”¹⁶⁶ The image of the Dutch rule, covering the Indies evenly, like asphalt, must time and again be qualified. There was always, and increasingly, a number of natives who made it onto the modern late-colonial roads and who did not slip off their smooth surface. There were many, even, who moved faster and faster.

One has to be skeptical, of course. This was a very unequal situation. It

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was easily possible that the sort of encounter described in Celeste Langan's story of nineteenth-century England was being repeated in the Indies:

I put my hat upon my head
And walked into the Strand,
And there I met another man
Whose hat was in his hand.¹⁶⁸

The meeting of a bourgeois and a beggar through the common language of the public road might be as relevant a model for capitalist England as for the colonial Indies. A picture, to paraphrase Langan, of the beggar as a “subject without property” being turned—through the culture of the public road—into a “subject without properties.”¹⁶⁹

Mas Marco, again, appears to be the best author to read when looking for answers. He has been called the first modern Indonesian journalist and writer. He almost never wrote in his “mother,” “native,” “old,” tongue, which was Javanese. Virtually all the time he wrote in Malay, the lingua franca of the archipelago throughout the centuries of the Dutch colonial period. Malay, as the first language in the late-colonial Indies, was spoken merely in parts of Sumatra, and a dialect of Malay was spoken by some in the big cosmopolitan cities, primarily in Batavia. For most of its users, Malay was a practical, and not very warm, medium of communication with strangers.¹⁷⁰ In other words, it was a language of the road.

For Mas Marco, beyond this, Malay often also appeared to be a language of exile, a “linguistic exile,”¹⁷¹ a voluntary exile from an easy sense of home, and a simple shifting between places. Words of his sentences, it often seemed, were not made to fit together readily. Frequently, unexpectedly, he broke his language, fissured it, with an utterance as from another world. Dutch words and technical jargon he used often, overused even. Sometimes a Javanese word appeared as an incongruous flash and remained as it was, unaffected by its verbal and syntactic surroundings, occasionally even sticking out from the newspaper page in Javanese script.

While the Dutch Indies police magazine, as we have seen, called the native coachman's horse *p.k.*, for *paardekracht*, “horse power,” Mas Marco, with the pleasure of a linguist and a rebel—or so I would very much like to believe—made the Dutch distinguished *Welvaartscommissie*, “Welfare Commission,” into *W.C.*,¹⁷² or sometimes made the word by which he called his brothers, the people of the land, the sons of the soil, *boemipoetra* (*boemi* in Malay, is earth or soil, *poetra* in Malay is son) into technical, farcical, and biting *b.p.*¹⁷³

Instead of Tillema's *Kromoblada*, a hybrid that should denote a calm and happy land of “native(and)Dutch,” Mas Marco used *kromolangit*, “our skies,” *kromoremoelan*, “our moon,” and *kromobintang*, “our stars.”¹⁷⁴ He used expressive Malay-Dutch hybrids of his own, neuters of modernity—so again we like to believe—like *rasaloos*, “feeling-less,” or *maloeloos*, “shame-less.”¹⁷⁵

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He was said to write *koyok Cino*, “like Chinese.”¹⁷⁶ The language of Mas Marco made uncertainty. It might confuse the order that was a must of *Kromoblanda*—across racial lines, for instance. Mas Marco wrote in a language that could easily be mistaken for, or thought identical to, what was described as Sino-Malay, the language of Indonesian Chinese. Both were often called, and misnamed, “Low Malay,” “Batavian Malay,” or “*bazaar* [market] Malay.”¹⁷⁷

Mas Marco seemed to master scratching and cracking whatever might be polished and smooth in the colony. The Dutch authorities, at least, thought so. Repeatedly, Mas Marco was arrested for what he had written and sent to colonial prison. Mostly, his crimes were defined—appropriately, given the guarded impregnability of the late-colonial roads and language—as *haatzaai*, “hate-sowing.” Properly, so it also seems, given the culture, Mas Marco died in 1932 in the notorious Dutch colonial internment camp on Boven Digoel, New Guinea, thus in exile and on the road.

Mas Marco’s language was justly described as “witty” and “sharp,” but, also, with an equal justification, as “speedy.”¹⁷⁸ This brings to mind again a very disquieting thought. Was not Mas Marco’s language—in spite of his scratching and kicking, in spite of his rebelliousness and love for his country—the new kind of language Celeste Langan is writing about, a “language disfigured by a logic of infinite circulation,” a “peddler’s” language? Is not Mas Marco the first great Indonesian writer, actually, by installing this language? Did not he tie his writing so well to the road that—in the weird company of the writings by IJzerman, and Tillema, and Kartini, too—it became suspended in the air?

In 1928, all the principal Indonesian nationalist youth organizations convened in Batavia, and, in the Youth Oath, the young people pledged their lives to “One Archipelago, One People, and One Language.”¹⁷⁹ The language they meant was *Bahasa Indonesia*, “Indonesian.” It was Malay, in fact, but correct Malay, “High Malay” actually, as standardized by the Dutch colonial government and government-owned *Volkslectuur*, “People’s Reading,” or *Balai Poestaka*, “House of Book,” publishing house. Some even called it “Ophuijsen Malay,” the name of the Dutch government language engineer chiefly responsible for it.¹⁸⁰ This language, now, was newly conceived, or constructed, by the emerging generation’s sheer will to become independent of the Dutch.

In 1938, *Partai Indonesia Raja*, “the Great Indonesia Party,” the biggest indigenous political party of the time, instructed its members to use only Indonesian in all their public statements. In the same year, even the native deputies in the *Volksraad*, the most conservative wing of the nationalist movement, decided that, forthwith, they also would use only Indonesian, when speaking in the council.¹⁸¹

A young, brilliant, and now forgotten Indonesian intellectual, Soesilo, in

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May 1939, explained in an article in a liberal and Dutch journal *Kritiek en Opbouw*, “Criticism and Construction,” how daring, indeed hazardous, it was suddenly—by political, cultural, linguistic will—to decide for, and to cling to, one’s own chosen mode of expression: “We must struggle against everything; constantly, we have to perform and to keep on performing an acrobatics of brain! Yet, we have to have the language if we want to build a unity in our Indonesian struggle.”¹⁸² And, in spite of all the acrobatics and daring, Soesilo wrote, one whole region of language, culture, and hope had to be left out: “the field of technical sciences, all the matters that one can grasp only through the purely Western scholarly concepts. This is necessary, otherwise our own cultural values might suffer.”¹⁸³

This appeared to be just another kind of making a language in layers. For the sake of struggle, the “language of unity” was being engineered with little time and strength for nuances and accents. It was a potential asphalt language of a weak and emerging nation. Whoever might look for another way was in a danger of appearing to have mud on his feet.

Sarmidi Mangoensarkoro was a teacher in *Taman Siswa*, “Garden of Pupils,” a system of Indonesian nationalist schools built up as a modern, yet Indonesian, alternative to Dutch and Western education. In quite an emotional series published in 1939 in a school journal, *Keboedajaan dan Masyarakat*, “Culture and Society,” Sarmidi described—similarly to Soesilo—how difficult it was to speak out and to write out. Unlike Soesilo, against a polished and carefully uniform language, he pleaded for *mengeltaal*, *Mischsprache*, or *gado-gado*, “mixed-language,” “blended-language,” potpourri language,” a language of not just a single taste:

Some people, so it seems, close their mouths and keep silent, just in order not to speak the *gado-gado* Indonesian. Some people, it seems, are afraid that if they spoke the language, they might lose the respect of others. . . . Yet, whoever studied the history of the English people, for instance, knows that theirs, too, is a mixed language, *mengeltaal*, *Mischsprache*. And, who would argue that English is not a language to be respected?¹⁸⁴

According to Sarmidi, Indonesian should mature, be spoken, and be written naturally:

First: The progress of such language should happen not merely by intentional care, but, also, and very much so, by the language’s own potency. . . . *Second:* The progress of such language should happen continually. . . . *Third:* The path for the progress of such language should not be staked out by rational calculus, but the progress should be driven by fate.¹⁸⁵

This was a courageous, but, perhaps, a rather desperate position. In this moment of history, someone—Dutch as well as Indonesian—may acclaim “traditional culture” and get away with it. To write, however, about an “un-

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staked path” and “progress driven by fate,” one placed himself on the modern road, in the middle of it, and, inside the language of the road, one stood there, not too much different from the Papa Coachman of the late-colonial stereotype, barefoot, *bingoeng*, confused, bewildered, panicky, perplexed, laughable amid the general traffic.

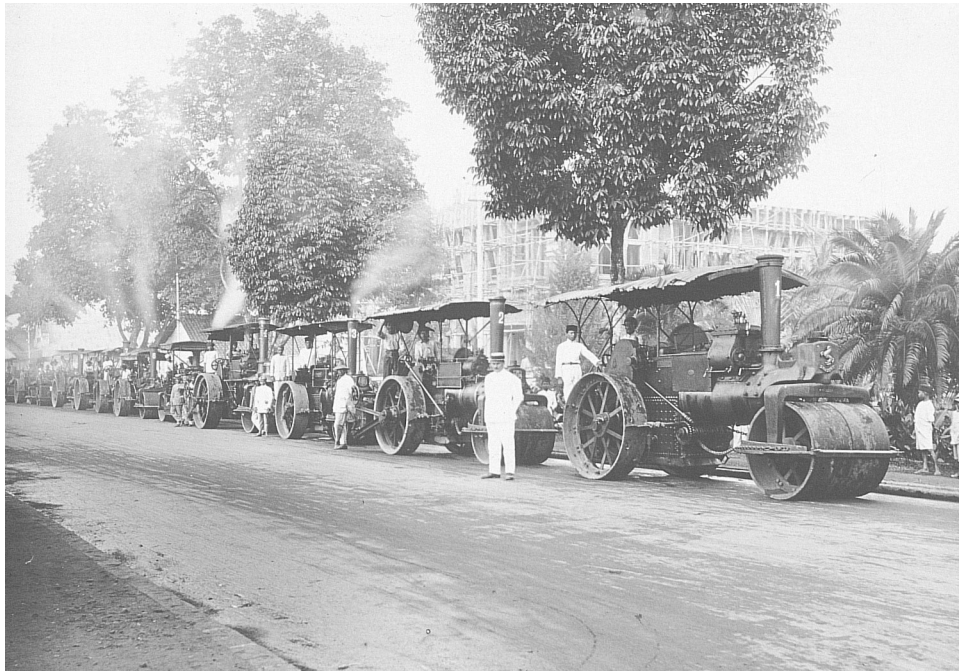
Sjafroeddin Prawiranegara, a Sarmidi partner in dissent, as he wrote about the Indonesian road to modernity, and about the language, even spoke of grass! Sjafroeddin, in the late 1930s, had been a student at the exclusive Batavia Law School and, also, an Indonesian-Islamic student activist. In an article for a student journal published, like Sarmidi’s series, in 1939, Sjafroeddin started by warning that “A language must not become a machine.” Something bad was going on, he wrote. “In fact, now, language is often called an *instrument*, and even a commodity.” This was how the market was getting its sway: “The West speaks too much.”¹⁸⁶

Sjafroeddin was a Muslim and a patriot, and he genuinely resisted the Dutch rule as it developed in the Indies. He tried to ascertain a position for the Indonesian people in the modern world, and he rejected the Dutch idea that

through the centuries, the [native] people completely lost a memory of its origin, [and that] it was purely Western and foreign scholarship, linguistics and ethnology first of all, which retrieved the [native people’s] connection with the past and, thus, the only concept on which Indonesia might be based in the future.¹⁸⁷

Like Sarmidi, Sjafroeddin accepted the rule of the game, stepped upon the modern road, and spoke of the language of the road. He was a modern man. History, and the history of his nation as well, Sjafroeddin was convinced, moved by the force of, as he put it, contradictions. Contradictions, as Sjafroeddin defined them, “dry out like a banana.” “Contradictions,” he wrote further, “are solved thus, that the old vanishes into the ground, and it leaves just a trace on the ground.” Whatever humans and their scholarship ever did, he wrote, had been merely to put a light touch on the pliant face of the earth: “Already before Copernicus the Earth was round. Only people thought that it was flat. Since Copernicus we have a round Earth and a totally *changed and broadened* world view. . . . However, the Earth remains the Earth as it had always been, and it will remain the earth.”¹⁸⁸ Sjafroeddin offered an unacceptable sense of culture, and Indonesian culture as well, as dirt, as flow of water and blood, as roots of grass breaking through armed or reinforced and culture-less modernity. The Indonesian blood, Sjafroeddin wrote, had always been, and always will be, like the Earth and the Earth will always be. “Always, it will flow, and, where it will not be able to stream, it will creep, like the roots of *alang-alang*, coarse tall grass.”¹⁸⁹

Dissidents in every movement are like a broken accent. In the Indonesian nationalist movement, too, there could be only very little tolerance for them.



Steamrollers of the Colonial Public Works. (KITLV)

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Unbroken velocity, rather, speed and/or belief in speed, made Indonesians into a mainstream. From here, also, came the idols. This is what *Soeloeh Indonesia*, “Torch of Indonesia,” the most influential among the Indonesian radical nationalist journals, wrote in 1927, a year before the Youth Oath. The author signed himself or herself as *Setijogroho*, “Passive Resistance”:

Self-knowledge, self-confidence, and self-respect

. . . Comrades . . . Know yourself. Respect yourself. Believe in yourself! . . . This is from where our power stems! Learn by heart what Henry Ford is telling you.¹⁹⁰

Against the full-blown Dutch rule in the Indies, a full-blown Indonesian nationalist movement was rising. With impressive speed, the movement set for itself a clear-cut choice—in fact, so clear-cut a travel plan that it had nowhere else to go. Soedjojono, a young promising artist and an Indonesian nationalist, who after 1945 was to become the celebrated painter of the revolution, wrote a series of articles in 1939 about how the Indies of his time was to be seen and painted. Not anymore the lush tropics, with the half-naked women. Soedjojono demanded, instead: “sugar factories and starved peasants, automobiles of the rich, and pantaloons of the youth: shoes, trousers, and gabardine jackets of tourists on asphalt roads.”¹⁹¹

Modern roads and railroads, or so one tends to expect, were the veins and the arteries of the movement. The movement’s pain and hope, as well as its gathering sense of revolution, were supposed to concentrate on the modern roads.

Sopir, “Chauffeur,” was a little Indonesian journal that belonged both to the movement and to the modern road. It was published in Yogyakarta, Central Java, in the early 1930s, through the time of economic depression by a cooperative, and then a trade union of Indonesian drivers. Taxi drivers and hired chauffeurs, so it was stated by the journal, made up the bulk of the union membership and of the readers.

In virtually every issue of *Sopir*, there was one article of a series running through the journal’s existence: *Nasib kaoem Sopir*, “The Fate of Drivers.” The same illustration at the head of each article showed a driver behind a car wheel; the car was modern, the driver was an Indonesian, and he wore a *pici*, black velvet skullcap, since the 1930s the most visible marker of radical Indonesian nationalism. The fate of the Indonesian drivers, the series wrote, should be cause for grave concern:

In the early days, and, if we are not mistaken, until 1908, the profession of drivers in general was considered a good one, and it was highly valued. This could be seen from the fact that salaries were high, and the Dutch, the Chinese, and the Indonesians all liked to be drivers. Gradually, however, the esteem for drivers declined, and, at present, there are rarely Dutch who may like to become

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drivers, not many Chinese want to do it, and, indeed, only we, the nation of the Indonesians, remained with it. We, so it appears now, hold a monopoly.¹⁹²

Solidarity among the Indonesian drivers was most energetically encouraged by the writers of *Sopir*. What should keep the Indonesian drivers together, according to *Sopir*, was the drivers' professional pride. The most impressive leading articles were "Why do some motors not run even when ignited with starter or handle?" and "What we need to know about the speed on the road": oxcart made 4 km/h, horse cart 5 km/h, regular bicycle 18 km/h, tram 35 km/h, ocean liner 40 km/h, horse at gallop 45 km/h, stop train 45 km/h, fast train 60 km/h, express train 75 km/h, car on a medium-good road 60 km/h, and airplane 150 km/h.¹⁹³ *Sopir* also gave advice to its readers on how to buy a second-hand or third-hand car, and how to start their own taxi business, for example.¹⁹⁴

Kesopiran, "driver-ness," was a word that appeared in *Sopir* as often as "nationalism," "fate," or "future." Indeed, they seemed to be merely various forms of the same idea. Driver-ness, according to *Sopir*, was the capacity of drivers to find their place in the world. The essence of driver-ness was to care for the car.

As the editorial of the first issue of *Sopir* declared:

this is the first magazine about the knowledge of motor, published by our nation itself. This is the aim of this new journal, to spread an awareness about the matters of motor car. . . . In connection with this aim of ours, we hope that this magazine will be useful not merely to our drivers, but also to all those among us who like motor cars and motorcycles.¹⁹⁵

There were, according to *Sopir*, two fundamental obstacles in the Indonesian drivers' way toward a better future: "I. the number of drivers is larger than the number of motor cars; II. the drivers as yet are not fully aware of their driver-ness."¹⁹⁶

Time and again, *Sopir*, and its series on "The Fate of Driver," explained that driver-ness was driver's awareness of oneself as driver, and that it meant:

- a. to care about the car thoroughly, diligently, industriously, and cleanly; to correct everything in the car that is not right, to maintain painstakingly and to protect the car as a whole, and all its parts . . .
- b. to take full responsibility for the car's safety [*keselamatan*, Indonesian for happiness, welfare, safety], and to drive the car in accordance with law.¹⁹⁷

This, again, was why *Sopir* was here, "to unfold and to explain to the nation of Indonesians the significance of motor."¹⁹⁸

In April 1932, *Sopir* published the statutes of *PCM, Persatoean Chauffeur Mataram*, "Union of Mataram (Yogyakarta) Chauffeurs," the drivers' union in the region that had been founded the previous November.¹⁹⁹ In section 5

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of the PCM statutes, driver-ness again was defined from both the point of view of nationalist politics and traffic rules: “Everyone can become a member of the PCM, who is of Indonesian nationality, originally from the region of Djokjakarta, and who owns an automobile driving license.”²⁰⁰

In the same issue, the emblem of the new trade union was shown and explained. The shape of the emblem might vaguely resemble *Garuda*, the mythical bird-vehicle of the Hindu god Vishnu, not an unusual symbol in the Indies and in the Indonesian nationalist movement as well. But it was no *Garuda*. It was, as it was explained by *Sopir* at length, an image of a car:

Purpose And Aim Of PCM Emblem

The emblem of PCM represents a car as seen from the front, looking toward the mask of the radiator. On the left and right sides, there can be seen fenders and automobile lamps. Above the radiator *PCM* is written in distinct letters. Below, a *bumper* is visible, with the full name of our association painted on it. . . . Now, what is the meaning of all this?

First: The car radiator, in fact, is a device to cool hot air, so that the motor can work properly. For the PCM, this means that all lowliness, animosity, conceit, in short, all that is not proper and good for man, can be caught and cooled.

Second: The two lamps mean that the PCM will shed light of conscience on everything that otherwise might remain dark.

Third: The *bumper*, with the full name of the PCM painted on it, means that the PCM is capable at any time of robustly shoving off everything that might impede or disturb the happiness, welfare, and safety of the PCM.

Fourth: The wings on the left and on the right [there is a pair of wings painted as growing out of the car] wait impatiently to carry the PCM high and still higher.

Fifth: The name *PCM* painted above the radiator, in the center, suggests the will of the PCM to sit high in the driver’s seat.²⁰¹

There were reports, in *Sopir*, in this bad time of economic depression, of other drivers’ unions “busily” emerging also in other parts of the Indies.²⁰² A letter to *Sopir*, from the Minangkabau region in West Sumatra in November 1932, spelled out, if this was still needed, why trade unions like this were being founded:

**Before HCM [Himpoenan Chauffeur Minangkabau,
“Minangkabau Chauffeurs Union”] Existed**

You can easily imagine what might happen to a driver in Minangkabau before there was the union, and unity. When such a driver found himself on the road, in the middle of the road, in danger, when his car broke down, what could have saved him was only himself. Even worse, when he did not know what was wrong with the motor, or when he ran out of gas, or when he happened not to have the



A railway and a pedestrian bridge, East Java. (KITLV)

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right tools with him, wrenches, and things like that, then he might be forced to sleep in the open, on the roadside.²⁰³

Now, however, the letter explained, there was the union, whose members were ready and willing to help. At some points on the roads in West Sumatra, small union repair shops, and even gas stations, were set up or planned.²⁰⁴

This was an ideology, engineering, struggling, and dreaming in an asphalt way, and in layers. *Grobak*, *tjika*, or *sado*, the native animal-driven carts of the Indies, were mentioned often in *Sopir*. The intensity of the driver-ness demanded that the native vehicles and their Papa Coachmen be referred to with an intense sense of apprehension—often in a state of high irritation. Coachmen were not drivers! They were unruly, the cause of accidents, and a threat to drivers. A brother magazine of *Sopir*, *Motorblad*, “Motor Magazine,” lamented under a headline, “BUGGIES MUST HAVE LICENSE”: There are countless examples to prove this. Virtually every motor-car driver suffers, and not to a small extent, by the brutality of the coachmen. They frequently and with great indulgence linger in the middle of the road, and, in all possible manners, impede the general traffic.²⁰⁵ Everybody driving on a modern road, the same journal suggested, should be obliged to carry a written report of one’s recent medical examination.²⁰⁶

At certain moments, to recall Wittgenstein again, words can be used to replace feelings. “Hurts,” for instance, can be used instead of weeping. The word “revolution,” similarly, can be used to replace a sense of struggle and change. The word “revolution” no longer describes revolution but replaces and displaces it. Thereby it creates a new way of behaving. The word comes between us and the world “like a sheath.”²⁰⁷

There was something irresistibly raw in the battle cry of the big Indonesian railway strike of 1923, *spoor tabrakan*, “tracks crushing.” It truly sounded like trains, and words, crushing against each other. *Spoor*, “track,” was Dutch, and *tabrakan*, “crushing,” was Malay. Terrorism is never nice, but this crash was like touching. *Spoor* was Dutch, but in fact it was Malay, too, as the appropriation of the Dutch word by the local population was very far advanced at the time. *Tabrakan* was Malay, and in fact it was becoming Indonesian, too, as the language was just being born out of Malay. This was one of the brief moments in history and language when many possibilities seemed open. Or, perhaps, the striking railway workers spoke so beautifully because they did not have enough time to express themselves.

In 1939, sixteen years after the strike was defeated, the railway workers, of course, and even some of their trade unions, were still there. The best known among them, *Persatoean Boeroeh Kereta Api*, “Union of Railway Workers,” published its own journal, *Sinar Boeroeh Kereta Api*, “The Ray of Railway

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Workers.” In May 1939, the journal published a report on the activity of the branch in Cirebon, West Java, one of the union’s largest subdivisions. The language of the report, as of all the other texts in the journal, is very correct Indonesian. The strike, indeed, had failed long ago. The activity as reported is smooth. The meetings in the report are fleeting encounters at the railway stations.

It was, so it seems, the only kind of optimism that the culture and the language could give. The union ran as well on time and oily, as the colonial trains did:

At 2 A.M., train no. 2 from BTB-SB has arrived. The comrades were already waiting on the platform. But the train in the direction of KTS was 15 minutes delayed. . . . We missed the connection to BL and TA, the regular departure at 6.30 P.M. We arrived at TA by the next train, yet it was too late [for the meeting], and, therefore, we had to continue directly to Trenggalek in order to catch the connecting train. We could not stay long in Trenggalek, and we left for the *Westerlijnen* [the Western Rail Lines], stopping on the way in TA for about 1 1/2 hours to hold a meeting with the comrades at the TA branch. . . . At 11.29 P.M., we boarded the train to KTS, and there we had to wait for 2 hours for the connection. . . . [The next day] at 3 P.M., we boarded train no. 17, toward DK, and we arrived at DK at 6.30 P.M. As it was already late, it was the rainy season, and we had just 1 1/4 hours left, we could not make it to the meeting with the comrade chairman of the branch in DK. . . . Next day in the morning, February 23, 1939, we boarded train no. 23 to PWT. . . . At 4 P.M., we boarded train no. 19, back to Cheribon . . .

Warm greetings. Kartodiwirjo, Chairman of the Cheribon branch²⁰⁸