ISSN 2624-9081 • DOI 10.26034/roadsides-202501304

Wounded Landscape:

Ambivalence and Toxic Extractivism in Indonesia

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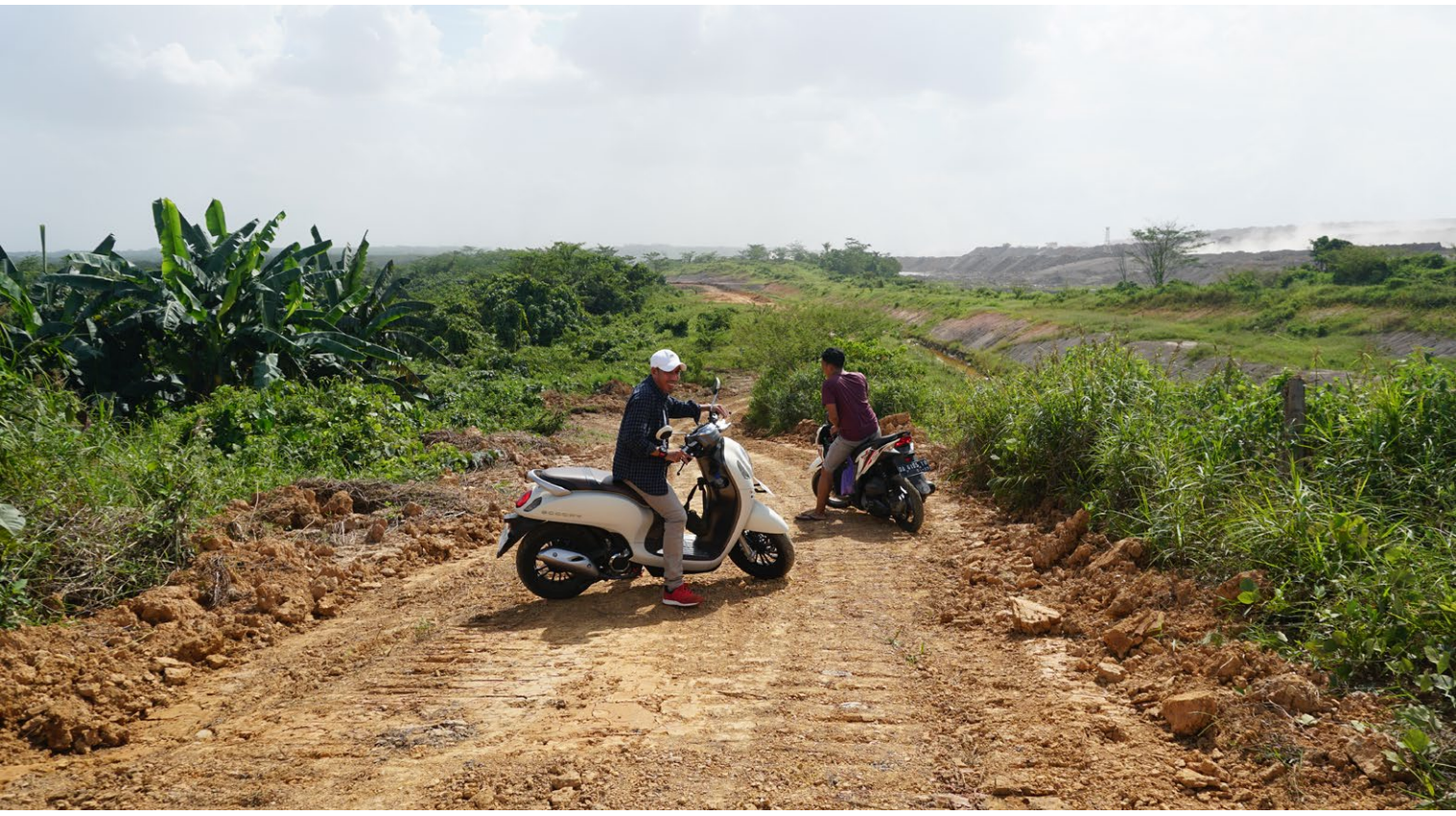
One night in June 2023, while I attempted to interview people about life in Wonorejo, a rubber-plantation village in Balangan, South Kalimantan, Indonesia, an excavator was actively digging coal out of a nearby open-cast mine managed by the Adaro Indonesia Coal Corporation. The roar of machinery was relentless, not only disrupting our interviews but also making it hard for village elders to sleep. This noise, sadly, was not a newsworthy event but an everyday norm for people living in the areas surrounding extraction sites like Wonorejo. Having a sense of normalcy about such noise is symptomatic of a broader system of dependence, where roads, jobs and other essential services in the town have been shaped by Adaro. This dependence not only normalizes the company's activities, but also obscures the environmental and social costs of coal extraction. The community's taken-for-granted reliance on Adaro is an example of "boring infrastructure" (Star 1999: 379)—a system of dependence that does not come into focus until daily life begins to break down.

However, noise is not the only issue here: Adaro has also been guilty of toxic exposure. In 1996, Indonesia's national newspaper, Kompas, reported that a waste pond had burst and contaminated the Balangan River. While Adaro and the national Environmental Agency immediately responded by constructing a new settling pond, reports of river pollution caused by coal-mining waste continued to emerge over the following decades. Now, only freshwater fish cage farmers continue using the river, while most residents rely on water filters, such as those provided by the Regional Drinking Water Company (PDAM). This indicates that there is another layer of infrastructure which operates beyond our view. It includes networks, installations and groundworks that facilitate coal extraction. The blaring noise of extraction signals a wider, more pervasive toxic landscape.

Meaning 'the teeming forest' in Javanese, Wonorejo was officially established in 1999 as part of the New Order government's transmigration program, which relocated people from densely populated areas like Java to less-populated regions such as Kalimantan to ease population pressure and develop agriculture. In this context, Javanese farmers were resettled in Balangan to cultivate rubber. However, the farmers' prosperity from rubber did not last long. In 2006, Adaro begun to acquire land around the village, which increasingly resulted in subtle evictions, as many transmigrants were left with little option other than to sell their land to the company. In the years that followed, the area became nothing short of a coal disposal and dump site. Adaro maintains that the company has retained its engagement through the negotiation of a corporate social responsibility (CSR) compensation fund for those affected (Adaro 2022). Nonetheless, many former residents of Wonorejo have since relocated to the neighboring village of Sumber Rejeki because they no longer had land to sustain their livelihoods. Others, facing similar challenges, moved away from Balangan altogether or returned to Java. This forced relocation was a double misfortune, since the transmigration program failed to secure the people livelihoods and resettlement. Those who remain—the subjects of this story—find that their bodies are trapped in a capitalist system which holds them captive in a wounded and poisonous landscape of extractivism.

A sign marks Adaro Indonesia's control over the former Wonorejo village, warning against entry or use of the land. Photo: Fahmi Fahroji, 2023.



Dead end: the northern boundary of Wonorejo village which is now a mining waste disposal and acid drainage area. Photo: Fahmi Fahroji, 2023.

To (not) Entangle with Toxicity

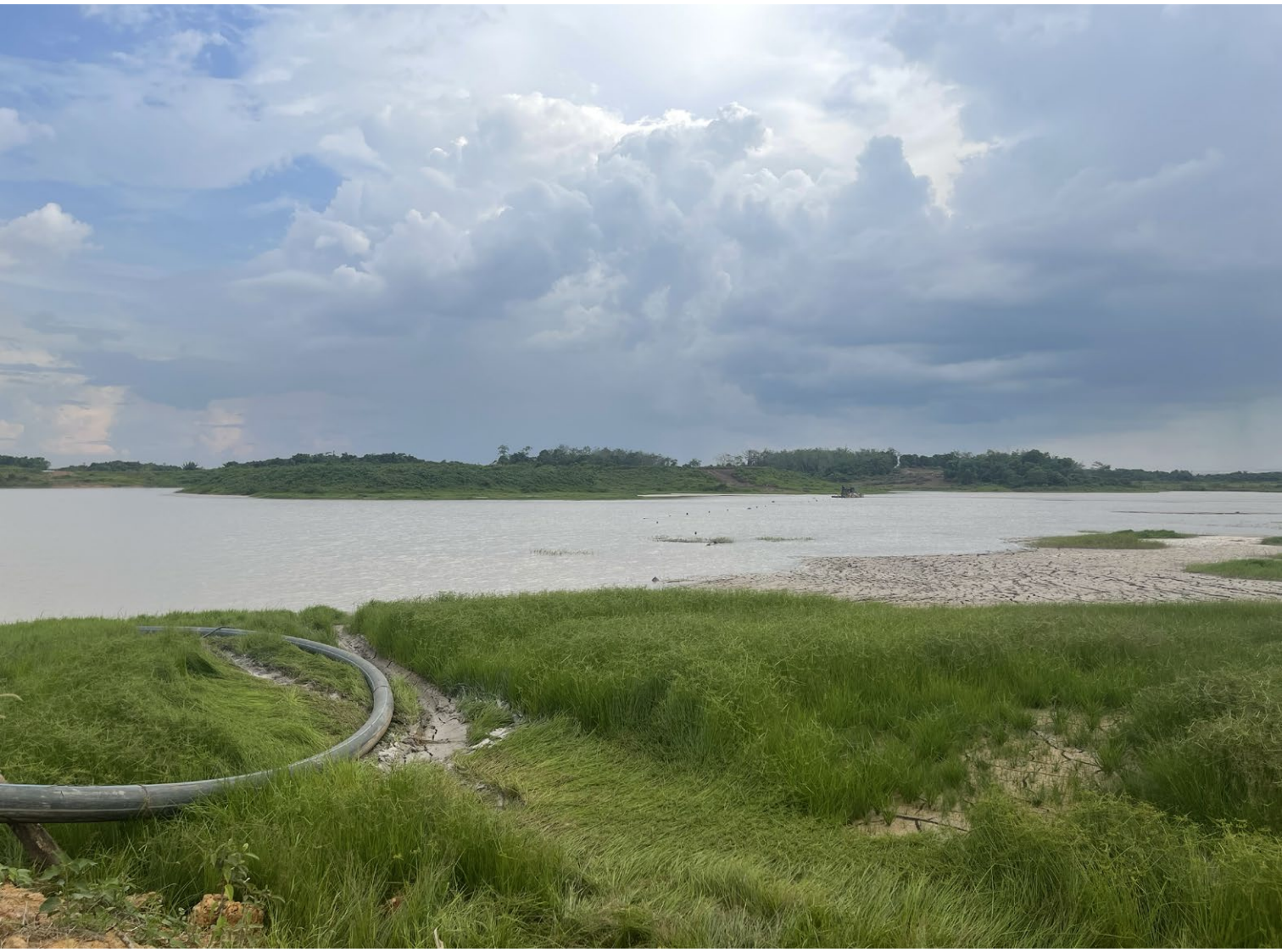
This captivity extends beyond physical displacement to an ongoing, often mundane entanglement with the toxic effects of coal extraction—both on residents' bodies and in terms of their sense of place within a changing environment. In addition to the intrusive noise of wheel loaders, people are exposed to air pollution and ground shaking due to the strip-mine blasting which occurs at the pit during the day. While the community regards the ceaseless racket as a critical warning of environmental hazards, Adaro instead blames the residents who have remained in the village. As part of its long-term plans, the company has officially slated Wonorejo for relocation because of its proximity to the existing pit and planned quarry expansion. The company dismisses people's concerns, claiming that CSR initiatives are already in place to address any economic impacts. Many locals, however, view these CSR efforts as inadequate and superficial, merely a token gesture which aims to deflect criticism (Welker 2014).

Almost all of my interlocutors hoped to sell their assets (a standard two hectares of smallholdings, a house plot and yards) to Adaro and relocate to a new place. Tukiman, a former resident of Wonorejo who eventually relocated to Sumber Rejeki to live with his son, was part of one of the first groups of transmigrants from Java. Unlike many of his neighbors who quickly agreed to sell, he initially resisted. Yet, as all his neighbors had gradually moved away, he now had no choice but to sell. However, by the time he agreed to sell his land, Adaro was no longer interested in acquiring it. The company

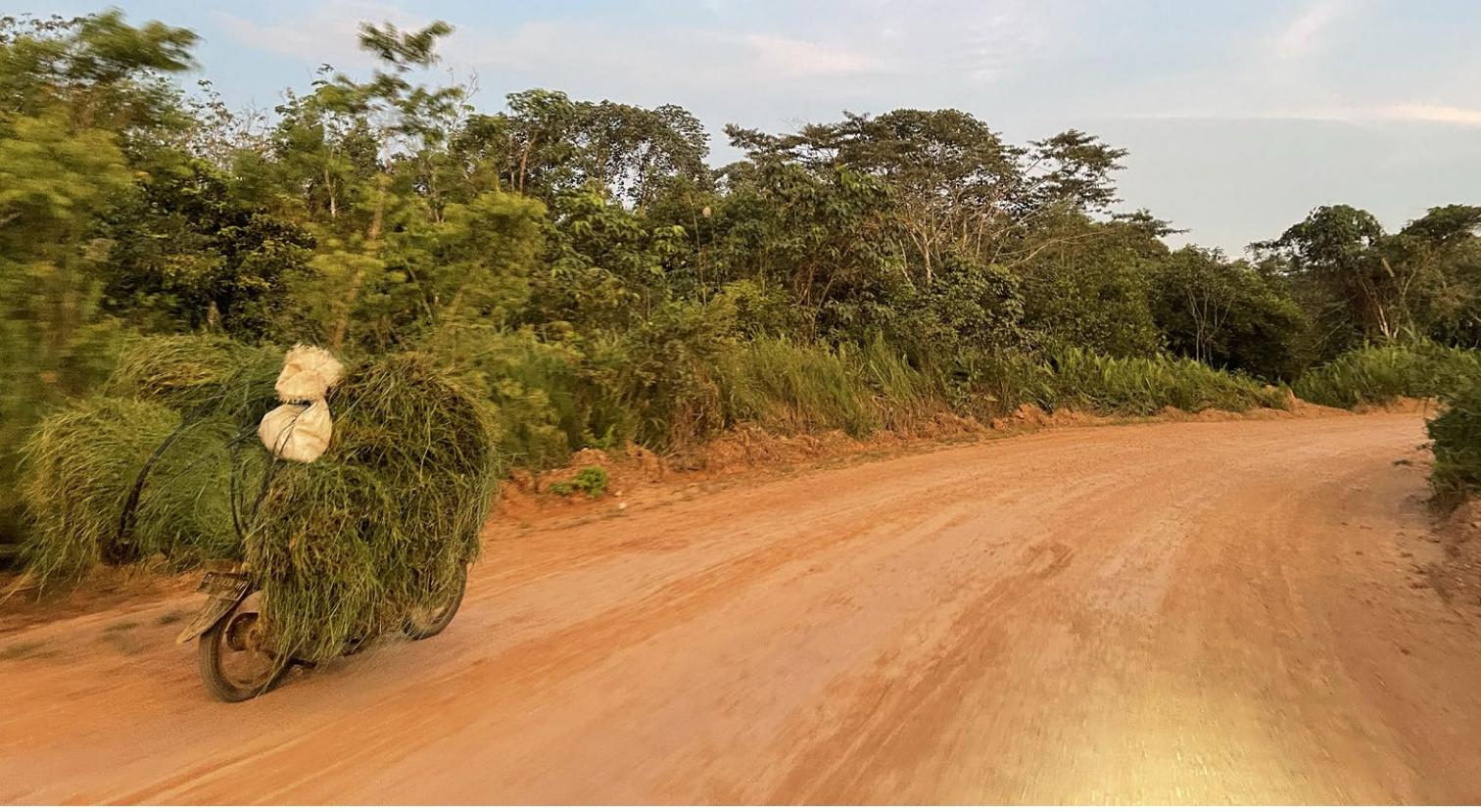
had moved on, and it seemed like it was playing games with Tukiman in the hope that he would accept a very low price. When I asked why he eventually decided to sell his land despite the original reluctance, he explained:

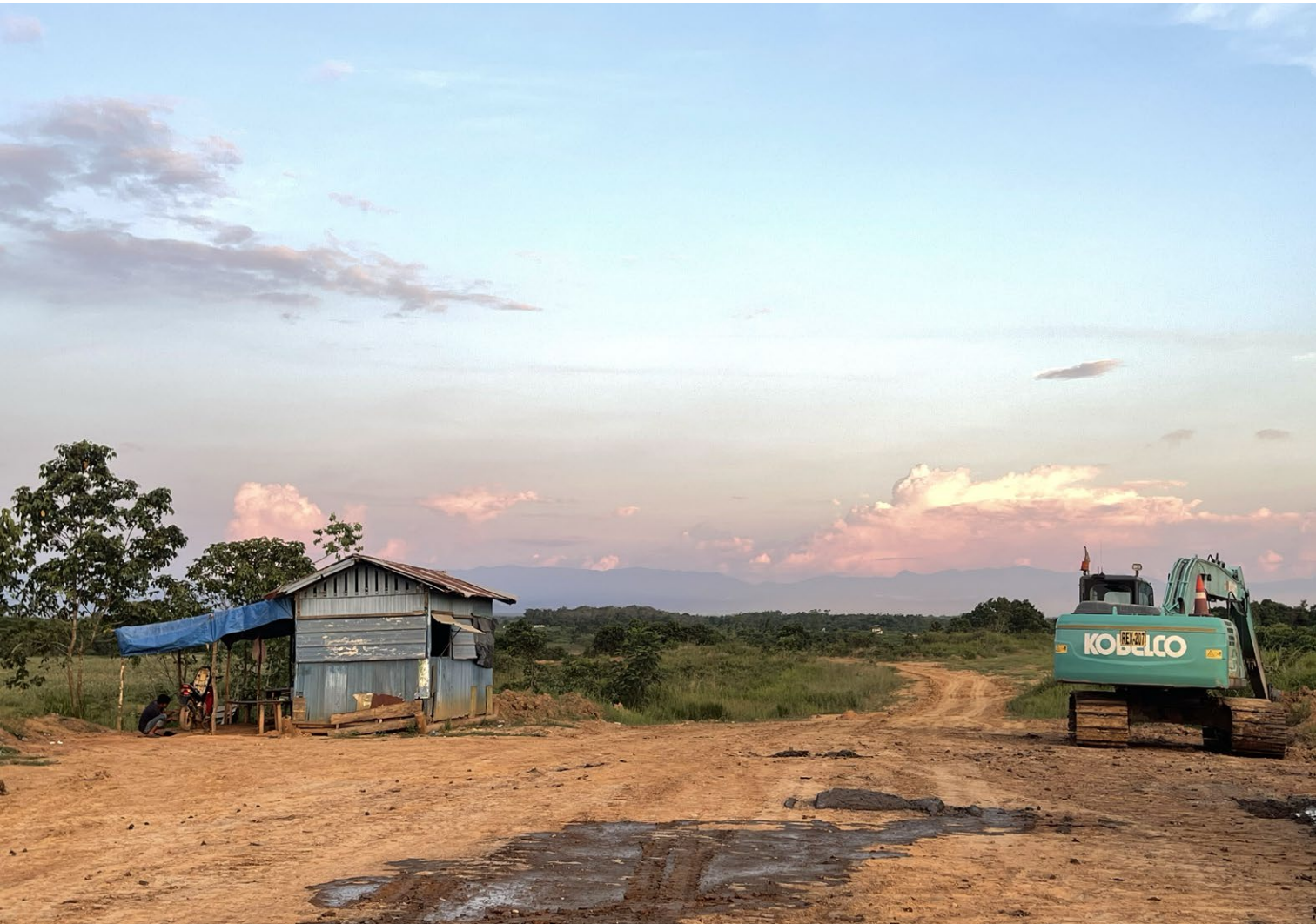
> *I have nothing else here. I have even experienced insomnia, I can't sleep at night. I can't enjoy my days either. This is because of the noise from heavy equipment and blasting. So, what to do, then, when nothing's left?* (Fieldwork interview, June 2023)

Tukiman's story reveals the ambivalence that shapes his life and that of others in a similar position. His experience is useful for understanding a profoundly melancholic process, which captures the sense of loss and disconnection engendered by landscape transformation in coal-mining areas (Dahlgren 2022). Under such an extractivist regime, villages become uninhabited spaces, while the villagers themselves are entangled in



The toxic pond on the former site of part of Wonorejo village. Photo: Fahmi Fahroji, 2023.

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unsolicited new relations and social practices (Skrzypek 2020). This melancholy is reflected in Tukiman's growing sense of dependency. He left behind rubber production a decade ago and has since been reliant on his son, who works for Adaro. It might be seen as contradictory that Tukiman has become an accessory to the Adaro machinery, especially given that villagers view the company's CSR efforts as mere window-dressing. He sees no future but to endure in a state of dependency: his bodily strength weakens and his rubber-tapping skills decline, meanwhile his anxiety grows. The only option as far as he can tell is to give in to extractivist growth—selling his land and relocating, not out of desire but necessity—or to let his son remain with the company that has brought him to this position.

↑ ***A farmer, barely visible under the fodder for livestock, rides a motorcycle on a road that leads now to the coal mine's settling pond area.*** Photo: Fahmi Fahroji, 2023.

↑ **Wakar *('minewatcher') hut and excavator by the dirt road*** Photo: Fahmi Fahroji, 2023.

In contrast to Tukiman, Sulastri, a fellow transmigrant farmer formerly of Wonorejo, has sustained a livelihood by joining Adaro as a *wakar* ('minewatcher') overseeing the settling pond area which was once part of his village. Wastewater from the disposal area and slag piles is channeled through pipes before being discharged into Balangan River. Standing on the edge of the pond, you can readily smell the gas of chemical liquids in the wastewater. This area also functions as a parking lot for trucks, excavators and the company's amenities. Although Adaro has put up signs nearby telling people not to swim, bathe or fish, I caught sight of villagers fishing. Amidst the poisoned ruins, people continue to seek fortune within misfortune. Strange to say, this extractivist landscape reveals a haunting beauty—a "beauty of wounds" (Kurniawan 2016).

Even as most farmers remained trapped in hardship, Sulastri's patronage by the company transformed what was once purely toxic into a source of wealth. He did not mind working as company security despite having to deal with the toxicity of coal blasting and the pungent odor of chlorine from the settling pond, as long as he got paid and had a place to live. Sulastri's connection to Adaro soon deepened, as both his sons were able to secure jobs with the company too. In this context, people can view toxicity as an acceptable risk, a paradoxical balance between the reality of a harsh environment and the hopes of job security for themselves or their children.

A Paradoxical Relationship

Claims regarding pollution have gained political weight, as the Regent of Balangan has argued that the region should receive 75 percent of Adaro's net profits due to its role as the primary coal asset holder (Fahroji 2023). This ambitious request aligns with the coal deposits that Adaro controls in its concession, estimated at 3.3 billion tons across a 34,000-hectare coalfield as of 2022. Such an interpretation also aligns with the idea that the longer Adaro remains, the more potential there is for continued environmental degradation and increased toxicity. Adaro, on the other hand, claims to be fulfilling its responsibility through CSR guarantees, from which some villages—like Sumber Rejeki—benefit in terms of financial support.

This paradoxical relationship is deeply embedded in the ambivalence that characterizes the community's ties to Adaro. The dependencies binding people and the local government to the company cultivate a harmful reliance, which in turn fosters a tendency to turn a blind eye to ongoing issues, such as the persistent pollution of the Balangan River.

This pollution, which has continued for almost three decades, often goes unnoticed or ignored. Today, Adaro's infrastructures are an inseparable part of local people's everyday life. Both Tukiman and Sulastri's experiences encapsulate the ambivalence embedded in the toxic infrastructure of coal extraction in Wonorejo. Their bodies are captive; they are anxious, melancholic and uncomfortable, they rely on Adaro but are somehow still fueled by a sense of hope.

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Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by the Association of Southeast Asian Studies (ASEAS), United Kingdom, through the Research Impact Awards 2022. The research for this article was part of my Master's thesis, which was funded by the Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education (LPDP) Scholarship. I am deeply grateful to my interlocutors, Tukiman and Sulastri, in Balangan for generously sharing their stories and allowing me to interview them. My thanks also go to Nikolaos Olma and Janine Hauer, the organizers of the special issue workshop, as well as the editors and other participants, for their constructive feedback. I extend my gratitude to Martin Saxer, the reviewer, for his critical and practical suggestions, which have greatly improved this article. Finally, I would also like to thank Abby Kinchy for her insightful comments on earlier drafts.

Cite as:

Fahroji, Fahmi R. 2025. "Wounded Landscape: Ambivalence and Toxic Extractivism in Indonesia." *Roadsides* 13: 23–30. https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202501304

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ISSN 2624-9081

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