Coping with Protracted Uncertainty: Refugees ‘Stuck’ Waiting in Indonesia

A Thesis Submitted to
The Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology
Vrije University Amsterdam
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Science

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Word Count: 22,762

28 June 2019
Abstract: Due to various factors, transit refugees in Indonesia are increasingly finding themselves ‘stuck’ waiting in a country where they face instability and uncertainties that hinder their migration trajectory of resettlement. With no desire or safe way to return home, and the inability to resettle somewhere new, refugees remain in limbo. Many of the struggles they experience result from their protracted yet transitory status, engendering spatial and temporal uncertainties that are so crucial to understanding the lives of refugees in protracted situations. I argue that asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia may seize the opportunity to transform their liminal time in limbo and utilize different strategies to cope with protracted uncertainties through active waiting. My data analysis suggests that proactive waiting and the pursuit of meaningful activities are important coping strategies that provide refugees a sense of purpose and empowerment. Indonesia and other states hoping to alleviate the problems of irregular migration and the refugee crisis can better inform policymakers by paying closer attention to what happens to migrants in transit.

Keywords: Protracted Displacement, Uncertainty, Active Waiting, Transit Refugee, PRS
Acknowledgments: First and foremost, I want to thank my informants for sharing their lives and welcoming me into their community. Without their help and patience, this thesis would not be possible, so I dedicate this work to them. I must thank my Indonesian friends and colleagues, who gave me valuable access and contacts in the field. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Pál Nyíri, for his valuable academic guidance throughout the year. And finally, I want to express my gratitude to family and friends for their continued encouragement and support in all I do.
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## Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>ASEAN</td>
<td>Association of Southeast Asian Nations</td>
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<td>CRLC</td>
<td>Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre</td>
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<td>CWS</td>
<td>Church World Service</td>
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<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>IOM</td>
<td>International Organization for Migration</td>
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<td>JRS</td>
<td>Jesuit Refugee Services</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>OSB</td>
<td>Operation Sovereign Borders</td>
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<td>PRS</td>
<td>Protracted Refugee Situation(s)</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>United Nations High Commission for Refugees</td>
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Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 An Introduction: Stuck in Transit

The global refugee crisis today has reached record numbers, and the search for durable solutions has never been more important. However, as countries develop stricter immigration policies and strengthen border controls, more and more refugees in conflict-induced displacement are leaving their homes but unable to resettie into a new country. Incredibly, 85% of the world’s 20 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate now live precariously in developing countries (UNHCR 2018). When resettlement to a new country, repatriation to the home country, and integration into the host country are not valid options for those seeking asylum, they become ‘stuck’ in transit. More than two-thirds of the world’s entire estimated refugee population are considered to be in protracted situations, where they struggle with uncertainty and lack basic human rights and services (UNHCR 2018).

Indonesia is one such country where asylum seekers and refugees are increasingly finding themselves stuck in limbo and unable to continue their migration trajectory. The country now faces the challenge of a growing population of refugees living indefinitely within its local communities. Although Indonesia is not historically known for being a refugee hotspot, the past decade has witnessed an increasing number of asylum seekers crossing Indonesia’s borders in hopes of resettling in another country, notably Australia. However, Australia and other developed countries of resettlement in the West have all but closed their borders to irregular migrants and asylum seekers. As a consequence, refugees’ experiences in transit have become a process of marginalization and criminalization rather than protection and integration (Missbach 2015).

As displacement becomes protracted for over 14,000 reported refugees living in Indonesia (UNHCR 2016), they face daily challenges that inhibit their ability to exercise basic human rights, such as finding safe shelter, employment, and getting an education. Asylum seekers are stuck in a country that does not recognize them as citizens, and they struggle with debilitating instability that a life in transit has produced. While displacement takes spatial dislocation into
account, the temporal aspects become more important as transit becomes protracted for asylum seekers around the world. For refugees living in Indonesia, the disjuncture between understanding transit as a temporary waiting period and coming to terms with the reality of their protracted situation has produced many uncertainties.

### 1.2 Guiding Questions

“The UNHCR just told us it may take up to twenty years or more for resettlement. That’s almost how old I am. It’s crazy! How can they expect us to stay here for that long?” I found myself asking the same questions: How do refugees in Indonesia attempt to bring a sense of stability and certainty to a life in protracted transit?

I explore what protractedness means for refugees and the uncertainties that it produces in displacement. By understanding how refugees not only experience and cope with protracted uncertainties, but also recognizing how prolonged transit may provide a meaningful and transformative experience, I consider refugees to be active agents making decisions for their own mobility, opposed to a passive, immobilized people devoid of agency.

### 1.3 Thesis Outline

I have structured this paper by introducing abstract theoretical concepts that situate this research within the current literature on migration and mobility studies. My key framework includes a discussion of the spatial and temporal dimensions of protracted uncertainty in displacement and how coping mechanisms take a variety of forms through active waiting. I continue with a review of the current literature on transit refugees and the history of asylum seekers in Indonesia. Contextualizing the problems that refugees face in Indonesia, I show how a gap in the literature has motivated my own research questions and explain the urgency of this crisis. This leads to the methodology chapter where I provide a description of my field-sites and define my role and goals as a researcher, while considering the privileges and boundaries that limit the scope of my research and analysis. Here, I also provide an overview of my informants and the qualitative methods used for data collection.

I begin my data analysis with two chapters on the spatial and temporal dimensions of protracted uncertainty, respectively. First, I explain why it is that refugees are stuck in Indonesia
and the challenging consequences of living as unwanted immigrants in a place where they have no aspirations or desire to be. The next chapter on temporal uncertainty takes a more theoretical, yet still concrete, approach with the concept of ‘existential mobility’, as refugees experience a suspension in time during protracted transit that leads to psychological problems and agonizing feelings of boredom and meaninglessness. In the final data analysis chapter, I explore how refugees maintain hope and cope with protracted uncertainties. I argue that ethnographic immersion suggests that protracted transit for asylum seekers in Indonesia is characterized by active waiting, where refugees re-appropriate their time and transform spaces of transit into ones of productivity and empowerment. In my concluding remarks, I address the broader significance of my findings and provide a recommendation to states and policymakers looking for durable solutions to the problems of protracted refugee situations (PRS).

1.4 A Note to the Reader

Throughout this paper, I make frequent use of the terms migrant, immigrant, displaced person, noncitizen, asylum seeker, and refugee, along with classifiers such as illegal or irregular. My intention is not for these terms to be used interchangeably, but instead to delineate the nuances of definitions and make note of a certain person’s or group’s standing in a particular – often political – context. Language is a powerful tool, and defining or categorizing people has numerous consequences, whether it is intentional or not.

I personally have translated all interviews into English, and quotes will be made discernable in the paper through “italicized” text within quotation marks.
Chapter II: Theoretical Framework

2.1 (Im)Mobility and Waiting

The ‘New Mobilities Paradigm’ (Sheller and Urry 2006) shift in the social sciences has increased focus upon all that is mobile in today’s globalizing world. This perspective of mobility focuses on an outlook of global flows and networks as key features in society. However, Turner (2007) argues that “while there may be an increasing global flow of goods and services, there is emerging a parallel ‘immobility regime’ exercising surveillance and control over migrants, refugees and other aliens” (289). The ability to be mobile today is experienced unequally, and globalization has unequivocally contributed to the immobility of many populations. Turner (2007) writes, “as the economy becomes increasingly global… states and their bureaucracies have in many respects become more rigid in attempting to defend the principle of sovereignty” (288).

Drawing from the work of Malkki (1992), Hyndman and Giles (2011, 365-367) describe how nation-states still hold a dominant sedentarist bias that considers ‘place’ as a central notion for the ordering, management, and controlling of ‘peoples out of place’. Today, we see an ever-increasing policing of borders and the externalization of migration control, along with an alarming number of displaced people throughout the world (Frellick et al. 2016; Hyndman and Mountz 2008). By focusing on those who are dispossessed of access to mobility, Hyndman and Giles (2011) argue that “mobility, or lack thereof, is political. It is a useful tool for analyzing displacement and asylum because it recognizes the disparate access to movement of refugees and other migrant subjects” (364). Placing attention on the displacement and immobilization of populations within the mobilities literature provides a more nuanced view of these mobile disparities.

Clark (2018) describes how transit spaces where asylum seekers must wait for resettlement “become places of passive waiting where all thoughts of meaningful existence are suspended” (35). And asylum seekers themselves “are represented and understood as living in limbo, passive in their longing for the past and consequently devoid of agency. They are fixed both temporally
and spatially” (Brun 2015, 22). Horst and Grabska (2015) argue that experiences of displaced populations are often dismissed within the mobilities literature, by not recognizing the power dynamics within different forms of movement. “In academia as well as in policy and practice, refugees are increasingly understood as a subcategory of migrants, as if physical mobility is the most defining aspect of the refugee experience” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 3). Mobility becomes the focus and desirable goal for those experiencing immobility, who are seen as stuck waiting in limbo. Analyzing the experiences of displaced populations through a theoretical lens of (im)mobility often considers immobilized people to be passive and without agency.

“Waiting is a banal and ubiquitous practice that is linked in myriad ways to mobility and (im)mobility in the contemporary era. Yet, to date, experiences of waiting have received scant conceptual and/or research attention among scholars” (Conlon 2011, 353). Bissell (2007) critiques the productivist rendering of (im)mobilities when analyzing experiences of waiting—“instead of focusing on the relative velocities as the differentiator when considering im/mobilities… it may be more fruitful to consider relative embodied activity or inaction” (278). He “argues that the event of waiting is not the immobile being in-the-world that it has perhaps traditionally been characterized as” (Bissel 2007, 279). These ordinary ‘non-events’ of waiting are often overlooked within the literature on (im)mobility, with the assumption that “nothing (of interest) happens during this time” (Rotter 2016, 7). “Waiting is not always a negative or empty experience, however” (Griffiths 2014, 1996). As asylum seekers are spending longer times in transit, periods of engaged waiting are capable of creativity, transformation, and change (Clark 2018). Rotter (2016) argues for an understanding of “a more complex lived experience of waiting as affective, active, and productive” (3).

2.2 Protracted Uncertainty: Spatial and Temporal Dimensions

Horst and Grabska (2015) “argue that protracted uncertainty is characterized by a great level of predictability with regard to the everyday present, but by an equally great level of unpredictability when it comes to people’s perceptions of a future solution for their problems” (14). Passivity may be characteristic of long-term waiting, however, everyday time continues for those who experience “permanent impermanence” (Brun 2015, 19). In other words, the daily life events of those in protracted displacement may become normalized or routinized, even while waiting for an uncertain future remains a constant struggle where hope must be maintained.
I argue that we should change our approach to understanding how people live in protracted situations by focusing our attention on the protracted uncertainties that are so crucial to the lives of displaced refugees while waiting. Horst and Grabska (2015) “argue that the concept of uncertainty, in its meaning of imperfect knowledge and the unpredictability of the future, is central to studies that theorize conflict-induced displacement, transit, and refugeeness” (1). While uncertainty may be a common condition across humanity, in situations of conflict-induced displacement, uncertainty becomes protracted and an overwhelming experience. Horst and Grabska (2015) call for a new anthropological understanding and theorizing of concepts of waiting and coping “by focusing on the temporal and spatial realities of uncertainty created by conflicted-induced displacement and the ways that displaced individuals cope with those realities” (3).

Studying “various spatial and temporal dimensions of migrants’ encounters with waiting as a significant facet of (im)mobility” (Conlon 2011, 353) helps us analyze how asylum seekers broadly experience protracted uncertainty. Displacement considers the obvious spatial aspect of uncertainty, but time is inherently intertwined with space (Hägerstrand 1975), and temporality is key for understanding how people experience both waiting and hoping in protracted displacement. Griffiths (2014) critiques migration and mobility literature for its lack of theoretical consideration for the relationship between time and space. As waiting times become longer for refugees in transit, experiences of temporal uncertainties and their coping mechanisms become more urgent. Rotter (2016) describes how refugees explained their time in transit as being wasted, as though life had been ‘put-on-hold’, which “created a sense of paralysis or restricted, non-linear movement in time” (14-15). The imagined or felt sense that one’s life is going somewhere relates to Hage’s (2009) term ‘existential mobility’. “This sense of existential mobility is diametrically opposed to what Hage labels ‘stuckedness’, the state of inertia one experiences when one is lacking in agency” (Clark 2018, 35).

‘Stuckedness’ and lack of control over one’s own mobility greatly impact the lives of asylum seekers in transit. Temporal uncertainties arise “as a result of time frames that are unpredictable and beyond individual control” (Griffiths 2014, 2001). Horst and Grabska (2015) “argue that people’s relationship with the future and how much they ascribe to destiny are to a large extent driven by the level of control they feel that they have” (7). Asylum seekers struggle with the constant tension between fearing indefinite ‘stuckedness’ in transit and also having to anticipate constant change, which compounds their uncertainty and contributes to feelings of
powerlessness in the asylum process. “When people feel trapped in a ‘never-ending present’... where alternative futures cannot be reached, it may seem meaningless to work to achieve future goals because the future lies too far ahead” (Brun 2015, 24). Displaced populations in transit countries become a people ‘out of place’, which “creates an expectation of temporariness in situations that can only be described as chronic, where various actors have an interest in holding on to this expectation of temporary exile” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 7). The implications of spatial and temporal uncertainties cause urgent problems for asylum seekers in transit.

A deterioration in mental health, including depression and other psychological conditions are notably evident in populations stuck in indefinite temporariness (Mansouri and Cauchi 2007; Flaherty et al. 2005). El-Shaarawi (2015) describes the experiences of people living in protracted exile, where uncertainty produced profound consequences and “Instability rendered life necessarily problematic with implications for health and psychological well-being” (49). Boredom and instability become major factors that influence the uncertainty of people living in protracted displacement. Feeling powerless in the ability to influence one’s future “may be experienced as boredom, as the slowing down or stillness of time” (Anderson 2004). Brun (2015) writes about the agonizing costs of boredom for asylum seekers and how meaninglessness is then experienced through boredom: “Boredom becomes a symbol of protracted displacement and represents a feeling of being stuck in a meaningless present” (29). While acknowledging the psychological, physical, material, and emotional suffering of refugees in protracted situations, we can analyze how some have pursued strategies to manage life in protracted uncertainty.

2.3 Coping with Uncertainty: Active Waiting

When uncertainty becomes the norm, we must reconsider our understanding of how people cope. For displaced populations facing protracted uncertainties, “successful coping strategies are based not merely on cognitive capacities and the availability of information, but also on learning to deal with the fact of not knowing through a range of strategies” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 10). Other research has explored how people facing extreme uncertainties are engaged with a variety of coping mechanisms (Finnström 2008; Jackson 2008; Pederson and Højer 2008). For asylum seekers waiting in transit, navigating uncertainty entails active waiting and engagement with possible futures. Brun (2015) theorizes ‘agency-in-waiting’, by focusing on how people ‘move on’ with life despite the ‘stuckedness’ of their protracted situation. “Agency-in-waiting denotes the capacity to act in the present, in everyday time, based on the experience of
displacement…and a critical reflection of the future possibilities framed as waiting and hope” (Brun 2015, 24). Active waiting involves anticipation and the belief or hope that some future event will occur. Therefore, “despite boredom and anxiety, feelings of hope and anticipation surface, allowing one to carry on with the present without giving up on the future” (Biehl 2015, 69).

Apart from exploring how people come to terms with uncertainty, it is equally important to recognize how uncertainty is affective and transformative. Horst and Grabska (2015) use the concept of social navigation to explore the active nature of waiting and coping in conflict-related displacement. Through social navigation, individuals may “move under the influence of multiple forces or seek to escape confining structures” (Vigh 2009, 419). In protracted displacement, “waiting is socially produced, imbued with geopolitics, and also actively encountered, incorporated and resisted amidst everyday spaces that migrants experience” (Conlon 2011, 353). Uncertainty may be a force for political innovation and personal development, as it “creates spaces for negotiations between individuals and between individuals and states, ultimately leading to transformations” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 6).

Therefore, I also argue that waiting is dynamic, active, and productive in spaces of transit. In order to better understand the active waiting of those living in protracted displacement, it may be helpful to view these protracted situations in terms of ‘liminality’ rather than ‘limbo’ or ‘stuckedness’. According to Horst and Grabska (2015), “liminality in protracted conflict and displacement can be seen in light of the dynamic nature of the waiting that accompanies it” (2). The protractedness of conflict-induced displacement has been shown to create liminal situations with multiple uncertainties – both spatial and temporal (Mountz 2011; Agier 2011, Horst 2006, Malkki 1995; Turner 2004). Focusing on protracted uncertainty, through both its spatial and temporal dimensions, is a helpful tool through which to analyze the liminal experiences of displaced people who wait in transit. During this time, asylum seekers utilize different coping strategies to overcome their suffering and uncertainties, thereby transforming ‘waiting’ into a proactive event. This paper seeks to enhance our understanding of waiting (often associated with immobility) and its various dimensions by attending to the complexity and comprehensive ways that displaced people cope with uncertainty in protracted transit.
Chapter III: Literature Review

3.1 Refugees in Indonesia: Past and Present

Throughout its history, Indonesia has experienced many migrant flows. With thousands of islands, the archipelago’s vast coastline has been difficult to control. The first documented asylum seekers in Indonesia were Indochinese refugees fleeing the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Indonesia was pressured to set up a refugee camp on the secluded island of Galang, working together with the UNHCR for the first time. Although the situation is now considered a success for Indonesia’s human rights achievements; Indonesia, however, holds uneasy sentiments about what happened in Galang and would discourage a similar situation from happening again (Missbach 2015). By 1996, the Indochinese situation had ended. After the fall of Indonesia’s second president Suharto in 1998, the nation was ushered into a reform era with new commitments to human rights. The country signed international conventions and agreements that would informally protect asylum seekers. In 1999, the Indonesian Constitution for the first time included a right to asylum into national law, but it has yet to be implemented (Tan 2016).

After 1999, a new inflow of refugees started arriving in Indonesia; first from the Middle East and then from Africa, and more recently since 2009 are Rohingyas fleeing persecution in Myanmar and Bangladesh. Irregular migration is not a main priority in Indonesia, but Australia’s concern has made it an important geopolitical issue in the region. Indonesia has not ratified the UN 1951 Refugee Convention, although the government has repeatedly stated it will do so (Tan 2016). In 2013, Australia pushed even stronger border controls and migration policies. Operation Sovereign Borders (OSB) was designed to “stop the boats”, which has successfully discouraged and blocked many refugees from reaching Australia by sea. This has left Indonesia to host an increasing number of asylum seekers now stuck in transit. Currently, there are more than 14,000 recorded asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, but the actual numbers are expected to be higher, as many remain in the country undocumented or unreported (Brown 2017).
3.2 Current Literature

Research on refugees largely focuses on the departure and arrival aspects of the migration process and generally ignores the pre-arrival experiences of transit migrants. Studies that do discuss transit migration of asylum seekers are largely Euro-American centric, and there is little information about transit refugees living in developing parts of the world. More attention should be placed on these transit experiences, in order to alleviate the many problems faced by the displaced people living there. This research is particularly important now, as understanding the current situation in Indonesia can help inform institutions and policymakers who create regulations and legislation that directly and indirectly affect transit migrants, local communities, and countries of origin, transit, and resettlement.

Previous literature on the refugee crisis in Indonesia has focused on international law and protection frameworks (Taylor and Rafferty-Brown 2010; Tan 2016); refugees in relation to the Australia-Indonesia bilateral relationship (Kneebone 2017); people-smuggling (Missbach and Crouch 2013; McNevin et al. 2016); and refugee detention (Nethery et al. 2012; Missbach and Komnas 2016). Sampson et al. (2016) have written on refugees managing their life in transit, but their research was conducted in 2009, before Australia had placed new suppressive policies (Brown 2017). Missbach’s book, Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia (2015), is the most comprehensive piece of literature on Indonesia’s refugee situation. Only recently has the literature started to explore the protracted experiences of asylum seekers in Indonesia and how they manage to build a life for themselves in the face of instability and uncertainties during transit (Brown 2017; Zheng et al. 2018; Clark 2018).

3.3 Indonesia’s Response to Refugees

Whereas the European Union (EU) and other Western countries have regional frameworks for handling refugees and the flow of migrants, Southeast Asia and its regional intergovernmental organization, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which currently hosts more than one million asylum seekers and refugees, lacks such a framework (Tanu et al. 2017). Because Indonesia is a non-signatory party to the UN Refugee Convention of 1951, it does not have any set requirements or regulations in terms of their treatment towards asylum seekers. Indonesia has transferred all responsibility to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).
Other organizations such as Church World Services (CWS) and Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) also hold a role in helping asylum seekers in Indonesia (Missbach 2015).

The UNHCR takes the role as provider of protection and assistance for asylum seekers. In 1979, the UNHCR established an office in Jakarta, when it laid out its responsibilities and roles in Indonesia. Indonesia is not a member state of the IOM, but it has been an official observer in the IOM council since 1991. The IOM must renew its contract with Indonesia every six months to be able to work within the country. The IOM nevertheless does a substantial amount of work in Indonesia. The IOM claims it acts on behalf of the Indonesian government to help offer care and services to refugees and also to develop and implement policies regarding immigration issues (Missbach 2015).

Indonesia tolerates refugees, but its approach has been characterized as “benevolent neglect” (Missbach 2015), as there is still no formal commitment to asylum seekers, and its obligations towards refugees have been simply “patched together” under Indonesia’s other human rights agreements and international law (Tan 2016). Furthermore, ASEAN is far from developing a cooperative approach towards solving the regional refugee crisis (Tanu et al. 2017). As the number of transit migrants stuck in Southeast Asia continues to rise, it is becoming increasingly important that Indonesia and its neighbors find a solution to the growing problem.

3.4 A Future for Refugees Stuck in Indonesia

The UNHCR considers three durable solutions for asylum seekers in protracted refugee situations (PRS): resettlement to a new country, voluntary repatriation to the home country, and local integration that leads to permanent settlement in the host country (UNHCR 2018). None of these solutions are viable in the near future for refugees in Indonesia. As their protracted time in Indonesia reaches unbearable lengths, temporary solutions should be considered. State governments, policymakers, institutions, and aid organizations must acknowledge the protracted reality and lived experiences of refugees in Indonesia. More contextual in-depth analyses into the lives, needs, and capabilities of refugee communities in protracted situations are needed to enhance our understanding of their unique struggles and uncertainties, but also their strengths and abilities. Exploring how asylum seekers and refugees experience and cope with protracted displacement has never been more important. The urgency of this situation led me to Indonesia in motivation to ask these questions and learn about a forgotten people in transit.
Chapter IV: Methodology

4.1 Entering the Field

Upon arrival in Indonesia, I immediately felt at ease. I was just returning from a short four-month stint in Amsterdam. With two and half years of living experience in Indonesia, I was able to transition with few difficulties. Although this was my first time living in Jakarta, I have many friends there and quickly adjusted. I came to Indonesia to work with a local NGO to conduct research about refugees. I found a place to stay in South Jakarta that was close to my office and nearby refugee-focused centers.

4.1.1 Jakarta

Jakarta is a bustling, hot and humid, overpopulated city with over 10 million people winding through its tiny alleys and traffic-jammed highways. This Southeast Asian hub is the largest city and capital of Indonesia, situated on the country’s most populated island of Java. Java is just one of over 180,000 islands in the world’s largest island-nation that sits between the Indian and Pacific oceans. The people populating these islands come from hundreds of different ethnic and linguistic groups. Java is host to a Muslim-majority population, made up of Indonesia’s two largest ethnic groups—Javanese and Sundanese.

Jakarta has been nicknamed “The Big Durian” after the large, spiky, and notoriously smelly fruit native to Southeast Asia. Like its fruity namesake, Jakarta can be a bit shocking, or even repulsive, at first glance; but after opening it up and peeling through the layers, an unforeseen joy can be found inside. Perhaps the most relevant characteristic that ‘the king of all fruits’ shares with this city is that people claim to either love it or hate it.

I vividly remember my first bewildering experience in Jakarta in 2016. I had already lived and worked in Indonesia for a few months before in an underdeveloped region near Sumatra. Arriving in Jakarta was an attack on my senses. From my limited experience in Indonesia, Jakarta looked nothing like the Indonesia that was familiar to me. The richest of the rich and poorest of the poor seem to be living there. The malls, skyscrapers, and crisscrossing roads are littered
across the city’s landscape without any noticeable order or design. Compared to its metropolis counterparts in Europe and America, Jakarta lacks proper infrastructure, and there are almost no parks or open spaces for people to comfortably walk around the city. Life has therefore been pushed-out into the already crowded streets, creating a vibrant sense of chaos and community.

Living amidst this urban community is an unexpected yet sizeable population of asylum seekers and refugees. And unlike other regions hosting asylum seekers, there are no refugee camps here. Refugees in Jakarta are unmistakably woven into the fabric that makes daily life in the city so dynamic and diverse. Despite the numerous barriers associated with asylum and living in Indonesia, refugees in Jakarta are finding ways to live there while they wait during the asylum process.

4.1.2 Bogor

Located just 60 kilometers south of the nation’s capital, which translated into an hour train ride from my place in Jakarta, lies Bogor, another major Indonesian city that sits in a basin surrounded by volcanoes. Further southeast of the main city leads a road climbing up the mountain into smaller towns and villages. As the elevation increases, there is a noticeable drop in temperature. On the main road connecting Bogor and Bandung lies Cisarua—an area known for its cool climate and scenic views. Remembering my first trip to Cisarua, I recall looking outside the window at the terraced fields of tea and cassava plants, admiring their shapely, geometric aesthetic across the green volcanic mountainside ridges.

Along the 20 kilometer stretch of road in Cisarua run side-roads that spread further into the mountains and valleys. The area has become a favorite holiday spot for nearby city dwellers looking to spend a weekend in a cooler spot and explore nature. Interestingly, Cisarua is also host to many Arab tourists, mostly coming from Saudi Arabia, who are also there to enjoy the weather, cheap amenities, and a more liberal lifestyle, including drinking and prostitution. The Arab tourists usually stay for a month at the minimum, occupying the many villas and hotels that scatter the mountainsides. This influx of Arab tourists has transformed Cisarua with a growing economy, and now there are restaurants, shops, and marketplaces catering to foreigners. I was surprised when I first saw signs and posters in Arabic lining the road, overtaking the usual Indonesian ones. Many Indonesian shop-workers in Cisarua have even learned to speak some Arabic.
What might come as a surprise to many visitors and tourists to Cisarua is that hidden in the pockets of these mountain valleys is a large population of refugees from the Hazara ethnic group of Afghanistan. Like the tourists, the refugees came to Cisarua for its cooler climate, but also because the rent is considerably cheaper in the village compared to its urban neighbors like Bogor city and Jakarta. Refugees first came to Cisarua in hopes of spending a short transit there on their way to Australia. Now, with Australia’s restrictions on asylum seekers reaching their shores by boat, this intended short-term transit has become protracted. As a result, a growing community of Hazara refugees are making a life for themselves in these mountain neighborhoods. Impressively, there are currently seven refugee-run learning centers in the region that help provide educational programs and activities to asylum seekers. Nearby these centers are a few shops that cater specifically to the Hazara refugees. In Bogor, asylum seekers are caught living between a discrete yet noticeable presence.

4.2 Access to the Field

Because processes of migration and asylum are political and so often controversial within state governments and international institutions, it was important for me to connect with a recognized organization in Indonesia working with refugees. The local NGO where I volunteered as a researcher sponsored my time in Indonesia and provided me with the necessary access to various events and locations. Being a student researcher from a university and a volunteer at a local NGO usually sufficed as adequate credentials to gain access and people’s respect in the field. With a few exceptions, I had freedom and access to all places within my research sites.

By working with a local NGO, I was fortunate to be included in many different activities. I taught English classes for refugees three to four times a week in South Jakarta. These classes were informal, and I was able to learn about the refugee youth’s views on living in Indonesia. Attending different meetings and events was one primary advantage of being involved in a local NGO. Often, Indonesian government officials, delegates from the UNHCR, IOM, and other organizations would be in attendance. There, I could network and make important contacts to help contextualize my research. However, most of my relevant data was collected outside these formal events, where I could engage with my informants in an informal manner. Although I was connected to a local NGO, it was easy to clarify that I was there as an independent researcher and not working under a political agenda or with the UNHCR or IOM, which I was often asked.
4.3 Limitations

My original plan was to research refugee-host relationships in Indonesia, but I quickly discovered an important limitation to my research when I reached Jakarta. When I was previously there in August 2018, I had visited housing areas where refugees were living. I was hoping to frequently visit these areas as my primary research sites. However, I was informed that some housing complexes were recently shut down to refugees, due to rising tensions between refugees and their local Indonesian landlords. Consequently, many refugees in Jakarta are not living in close, compact communities with each other. This added a level of difficulty for me, as I had to navigate many different areas in Jakarta to visit people and refugee centers.

Language was another limitation, because I cannot speak Arabic or Farsi, which are the first languages of most refugees in Indonesia. Therefore, my informants may not have been able to fully express themselves to me, or there may have been misunderstandings in our communication. Despite not being able to speak Arabic or Farsi, I speak English and Indonesian. Many refugees are fluent in English and Indonesian, so I conducted my fieldwork in these languages. However, speaking to informants in English and Indonesian may have created a self-selection bias in my research, where respondents were more likely to have received prior education with more opportunities.

4.4 Informants

Most refugees in Indonesia are willing to talk, as many try to raise awareness about a relatively unknown crisis and believe that more local and international attention may have the possibility of improving their situation. Therefore, it was relatively easy for me to connect with refugees and organizations.

My primary informants were asylum seekers and refugees from different regions in Africa and the Middle East (e.g., Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Iran, Afghanistan) living in the Bogor area and the greater Jakarta region. Most had come to Indonesia with their families. Speaking to both men and women, the age groups I found easiest to connect with were children and young adults. Besides our proximity in age, it was also easier to connect with younger informants because many of them have learned to speak both English and Indonesian. I found it harder to connect with elderly people, partly because there was a greater language barrier. Many of my informants
were students from my English classes. Refugee learning centers proved to be incredibly valuable places for my data collection. There, I could talk with refugees attending the center, as well as the leaders, teachers, and volunteers.

Other informants included local Indonesians living in Jakarta and Bogor. I networked and connected with refugees, officials, and other experts and researchers on multiple occasions. As I met many of the same people at different refugee-related events in the city, my brief conversations developed into relationships, many of which became key informants. The snowballing technique expanded my network of informants in Jakarta and beyond. I had many single encounters with people, while also being able to develop closer relationships with others throughout my fieldwork period. I remain connected to many of my informants through social media platforms.

4.5 Scope

Throughout my time in the field, I tried to gather many stories and diverse experiences of refugees living in protracted displacement. I found that refugees engage in a variety of strategies to cope with protracted uncertainty, and that these strategies were sometimes dependent on one’s geographical location, ethnic background, religion, or a number of other factors. Rather than compare and contrast why some groups engage (or not) in different activities, my goal in this paper is to present a wide scope that captures the different experiences among asylum seekers in Indonesia. Therefore, I present a range of strategies that refugees use to navigate uncertainty. Because these strategies are context-specific, I will provide necessary background information where needed.

4.6 Methodology and Data Collection

My investigation is drawn from qualitative data collected from ethnographic fieldwork conducted during December 2018 through April 2019 in Jakarta, Bogor, and surrounding regions. My data was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and participant observation. All communication was conducted in English or Indonesian.
My primary informants were refugees who have been living in Indonesia for at least two years. In my English classes, I taught around twenty students between elementary and high school ages. I was able to conduct many focus group discussions in the classroom, where I encouraged the students to share their views on a certain topic. This was important because I heard a range of opinions and their reasoning. My most developed relationships among my informants were with my students, primarily because we had regular meetings throughout my fieldwork period. I connected to five of my students’ families, and I was able to visit their homes for interviews. In total, I visited ten family homes and three housing areas where refugees live together. I visited some of these places more frequently as I became closer to my informants.

Many of my informal conversations morphed into semi-structured interviews, as I was able to gauge the appropriateness of the setting. In my trips to Bogor, I primarily visited the refugee-run learning centers in Cisarua, where I conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders and volunteers, and I had the opportunity to engage informally with the students and members of the community. I have approximately 15 extended recorded interviews. Most of my data was collected through daily field-notes, consisting of reflections, descriptions, and quotes from unrecorded interviews and conversations.

As the refugees became my primary informants during my fieldwork, I tried to learn as much as I could about their lives and the daily issues they face in Indonesia. Therefore, my data analysis and conclusions largely result in what I had learned through ethnographic immersion, participant observation, and daily interactions. Most of my time in the field was spent in informal settings with people at home or out in public. I found it important to develop these relationships that allowed me to ask further questions about their lives and time in Indonesia.

4.7 Ethical Considerations

Research involving asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants requires a high level of ethical consideration and privacy. I tried to be as transparent as possible, explaining why I was there, who I was involved with, and the purpose of my research and questioning. Most of my informant encounters were open, but I have excluded their names to protect the identities of everyone involved in my research. In my data analysis, my use of quotes from interviews do not require personal information, so I did not create pseudonyms or share in-depth biographies for particular informants. I have also chosen not to disclose certain organizations or locations to
minimize any risk of exposure. Sharing others’ personal stories requires a sensitive approach, especially given the vulnerability of asylum seekers. Although increasing awareness of an urgent humanitarian crisis is important, there is a risk that it can bring unwanted attention and negative consequences for the very people we are trying to protect.
Chapter V: Spatial Analysis of Uncertainty

5.1 Introduction

Protracted uncertainty plays a major role in governing the lives of asylum seekers in transit. Biehl (2015) describes the uncertainty experienced by transit refugees in Turkey: “the multiplicity of actors and of regulations… serves to create an additional web of structural ambiguities and uncertainties that asylum seekers in Turkey are forced to cope with during their not-so-temporary stay in the country” (68). Living with these structural ambiguities within such liminal spaces can be understood as “inhabiting ‘zones of exception’, where the state creates a sense of living on the border even within places located at great distance from the actual physical boundaries of the nation-state” (Biehl 2015, 68). Agamben’s (1998) ‘zones of exception’ at threshold sites between states “serve as spatial expressions of the struggle between state and migrant” (Mountz 2011, 387). In protracted displacement, exploring how both migrants and the state – embodied through a multiplicity of actors and regulations – negotiate these liminal sites is of great importance.

Refugees are neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’ in sites of transit. “We don’t have a home. We can’t go back and we can’t move somewhere else.” This idea of being stuck in limbo with nowhere to call home is prevalent among refugees in Indonesia. The UNHCR’s solutions for displaced populations are either repatriation to the country of origin, integration into the host country, or resettlement to a new country. Although these solutions should by no means be seen as the only possible response to the global refugee crises today, transit refugees living in developing nations often cannot attain any one of these three solutions. “Displacement and liminality are written onto the bodies of asylum-seekers by states of origin and destination, transit states in between, and intermediary institutions that broker detention and regular movement” (Mountz 2011, 387).

5.2 Return Home?

When talking with the refugees in Indonesia about possible plans for the future, they made it clear to me that the possibility of returning home was not an option. Safety, as opposed to other
circumstances (i.e., financial issues), was their primary reason for seeking asylum. Hazara refugees in particular would explain how the situation is getting worse for them in Afghanistan. The internet and social media has allowed asylum seekers to stay connected with people worldwide, and there is a constant stream of news coming from other countries. Somedays, I would hear or be shown news of the most recent tragedy that was circulating within the refugee community. The refugees would distribute these tragic stories and news of attacks back home and try to raise awareness about the plight of their people. Most refugees whom I met knew at least one person who had been killed in their home country, so seeking asylum and resettlement became their only hope. Understandably, repatriation is not seen as a viable solution for refugees in Indonesia.

5.3 Move Onward?

No refugee came to Indonesia planning to stay there long-term. Indonesia, similar to other developing countries now hosting thousands of asylum seekers, is merely a transit site for refugees on their migration trajectory to being resettled in a new country. The first influx of refugees originally came to transit in Indonesia as a launching point for a boat journey to claim asylum on Australian shores. My informants told me that before Australia had passed the new laws on migration, the ‘buzz’ within the refugee circles in Indonesia centered around finding information about people smugglers and boat departures to nearby Australian islands. Although many ultimately failed to reach or claim asylum in Australia, the refugees explained that this period was characterized by quick mobility and rapid decision making.

After the ‘off-shoring’ of Australia’s migration policies had effectively stopped asylum seekers trying to reach Australian islands by boat, this spirit of quick mobility and the possibility of reaching new lands had vanished. The refugees had essentially become immobilized in a nation where they had no intention of staying. “Externalization efforts may not cause protracted refugee crises, but they certainly reproduce them” (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 364). Similar measures to curb irregular migration have proliferated in force around the globe, where we see a shrinking of spaces for asylum. Whereas Western nations have become hypermobile and its citizens encouraged to travel, their borders are becoming more impermeable to certain populations seeking refuge and better opportunities.
Countries enforcing stricter migration policies have been relatively successful at keeping out large numbers of irregular migrants. After so many years spent stuck in transit, refugees in Indonesia feel forgotten by a world that has closed the door on them. Hyndman and Giles (2016) describe long-term exile: “People who are displaced from their home countries and live in long-term exile become largely invisible to the outside world. Once refugees are ‘saved’ from violence, hunger and imminent death, an assumption is often made that the humanitarian crisis is over and human suffering ends. For most refugees, this is not the case” (1). My informants would tell me how hard it has been to raise awareness about their protracted situation in Indonesia, especially as new conflicts arise and the refugee crisis intensifies around the globe. “The news talks about Palestine and other refugees, but I think no one knows about us. Or maybe they forget about us—that we can’t stay here in Indonesia forever.”

5.4 Stuck in Transit: Why Indonesia?

While externalization measures and migration controls have largely hidden the refugee crisis and render millions of asylum seekers invisible to Western nations; inversely, refugees have become hypervisible as foreigners in local communities and urban neighborhoods of developing countries (Mountz 2011). Western dialogue of “burden-sharing” regarding the refugee crisis has become a shameless act of “burden-shifting”, where resources have been poured into developing countries – like Indonesia – to retain the crisis there (Missbach 2015). Although Western nations may no longer see the crisis on their own shores, the problem still exists and has now become the responsibility of developing countries that severely lack sufficient resources to offer any help, which leaves refugees in an extreme state of vulnerability.

Although refugees have now stopped trying to reach Australia by boat, more asylum seekers still continue to come to Indonesia for different reasons. Compared to other countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia has some attractive qualities that brings in refugees. Interestingly, my informants told me that Malaysia offers somewhat better pathways for integration (although permanent settlement is also denied in Malaysia), regarding the living situation and opportunities for informal work and education. However, many transit refugees in Malaysia traveled onward to Indonesia, where the wait times for resettlement are supposedly shorter than in Malaysia or other countries in Southeast Asia. The fastest possible resettlement is the number one goal for asylum seekers in the region.
However, as refugees remain stuck in transit for longer periods of time, their patience wanes and the desperate desire for resettlement intensifies. One informant told me, “I think I would like to go to Canada, but of course we’ll go to any country that takes us first.” Australia is no longer the dream destination for transit refugees in Indonesia. They are looking for the first option that can save them from a life stuck in limbo. “I’ve never had a place to call home. When I’m resettled, I can start my life in my own home. It can be anywhere; we don’t care. I just want to give my family and children a home that is safe, because I never had that.” Once again, safety and the ability to live out one’s life as a full citizen are their main priorities for future settlement, whereas prior wishes for choosing a particular destination country have been forgotten.

5.5 Living in Indonesia: But at what cost?

El-Shaarawi (2015) explains that one reason Iraqi refugees choose Egypt as a transit destination over countries like Jordan is because the cost of living in Egypt is more affordable. However, “As time passed and their savings diminished, life in Egypt began to feel expensive” (El-Shaarawi 2015, 44). Similarly, refugees living in Indonesia also told me that Indonesia was relatively “cheap” compared to other countries; yet, as time in transit lingers on, protraction drains their financial resources. To reach Indonesia, the refugees had to sell everything they owned in their home country. With these liquidated assets and some remittances from friends and family abroad, the refugees try to survive in transit. Some of my informants seemed to be well connected with a diaspora abroad, including people from their home countries and others who have been resettled in countries such as Australia, the USA, or Canada. There is a substantial amount of sharing of information between these groups, which can be vital for the refugees’ survival. One informant told me a story from last year, when a young Hazara boy in the village needed medical attention for his leg. Through social media, the community was able to raise enough money for the boy to get treatment at a hospital in Jakarta. This transnational movement of money within refugee communities should not be overlooked.

My informants told me that it costs on average around $80 a month to live in Indonesia. If they run out of money, refugees risk living in one of Indonesia’s few immigration detention centers, where conditions are reportedly appalling (Missbach 2015). There is no way out of the detention centers until resettlement; essentially, they are imprisoned indefinitely as they wait for news from the UNHCR, which never seems to come fast enough. I did not have the chance to enter an immigration detention center, but I did visit the premises of one center in Jakarta,
where a number of asylum seekers are living on the streets outside. Many of them have already run out of money and were begging to be let inside. “We don’t have any money left. And my dad can’t work. Now we are here on the streets. But inside [the detention center] we can at least eat and sleep there.” Unfortunately, their chances of being let into the immigration detention center are slim. Even the Indonesian news media have reported on the deplorable conditions of immigration detention centers, which are already overcrowded and under-resourced (Missbach 2015).

Some of the refugees living on the streets were there for more activist reasons. On the premises outside both the detention center and main UNHCR office in Jakarta are some refugees trying to make a statement. As waiting times get longer and money runs out, some refugees have directed their anger towards any organization involved with refugees (i.e., UNHCR and IOM). After talking just briefly with the refugees on the streets, I was told similar stories multiple times about the UNCHR not doing enough for their resettlement cases, the Indonesian government not providing any help or protection for refugees, and criticism about the international community’s ignorance for their crisis. Some of my informants explained to me that many of those living on the streets are undoubtedly in a dire situation with valid complaints, but voicing objections and protesting is not always the most helpful response. They had an understanding of the complexity of the global refugee crisis and that their problems did not rest on the sole responsibility of one organization.

5.6 Relationship with Locals and Authorities

Since the majority of asylum seekers in Indonesia live in urban communities, they must learn the norms and customs of daily life in Indonesia. They must also find housing on their own within Indonesian neighborhoods. Except for the few individuals in extreme need, refugees are not assisted financially for their accommodation. Refugees have a few different housing options available to them; for example, some families rent out homes, and some individuals find shared rooms. Finding an Indonesian landlord willing to house them is not always easy. In August 2018, I had visited a complex in Jakarta housing Somalian refugees; but when I returned later in December that same year, my friend informed me that the landlord had decided to evict the refugees. All laws regarding asylum seekers in Indonesia are vague and easily misunderstood by refugees, locals, and authorities. The refugees live in constant uncertainty, not knowing if or when their landlord or authorities may come to evict them. And if this horrible situation does happen, there is almost no protection or justice for refugees.
As she describes the experiences of refugees waiting in Turkey for third country resettlement, Biehl (2015) explains, “At the local level, both the authorities and the general population are rarely informed… there is little awareness about who refugees are, why they have been made to live in their city, and why they require assistance, which in some cases can cause local resentment” (68). There is a lack of knowledge and general indifference for refugees among local Indonesian communities. In fact, my original research question was focused on exploring the host side of refugee-reception; however, I found it difficult to engage with locals and have meaningful conversations about refugees living in Indonesia. Some Indonesians even think the refugees are tourists who have money and decided to travel to Indonesia on their own accord.

I had a conversation with one of my students from Ethiopia about how he made friends with Indonesians and to what extent they knew about his situation as a refugee. He said, “I usually just say I’m from Africa or Arab. And they just say ‘okay’… I don’t tell them I’m refugee. They don’t understand.” Because Indonesia is a majority Muslim nation, it is not unheard of for there to be Muslims from Middle Eastern and African countries staying in Indonesia. I heard similar explanations, where many refugees did not find it useful to explain their situation to local Indonesians. Some Indonesians do know that they are refugees seeking asylum and understand the situation, but there is little response from the general community. I even heard stories of resentment among locals who learned that the refugees had received “special treatment” from aid organizations. Not without reason, some Indonesians feel it is unfair to help these foreigners when a large population of Indonesian citizens themselves still live in poverty. The UNHCR fears that if this resentment becomes political, asylum seekers may risk losing the only few protections they have in Indonesia, which will reinforce their vulnerable status in society.

5.7 Role of the State

I sat down with one informant at a refugee learning center in Bogor, and I asked him where the refugees positioned themselves on the scale between staying discrete and promoting activism in the community. He explained, “We try to stay on the down-low. Even though the authorities let us open and run this [refugee learning center], it’s still not actually legal. So we don’t know, because the police can come anytime and close everything we made here. So we must be careful. Now, it’s okay because we are just helping ourselves and not hurting Indonesians here or have jobs, so the police know about us but leave us alone. And the UNHCR actually told us to stay on the down-low too, because there are elections now, and they don’t want [the political campaigns] to exploit us for something.” Although this interview was in reference to a learning
center, it is still applicable to every place the refugees are able to call their own in Indonesia. Overall, the local communities seem to tolerate refugees and do not mind their presence, but the refugees understand their vulnerable situation and have heard stories of friends being evicted. This constant uncertainty of not having a safe place to call home, where the state could come in and possibly destroy everything they have built for themselves, creates a huge mental challenge for them as they wait in transit.

When governments and institutions do not address the reality of protracted transit, refugees remain vulnerable because there are no structures or regulations in place to protect asylum seekers. “[Refugees] are unable to live in the here and now, not only because they do not accept the status quo, but also because their presence is not accepted by many of the states who host them” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 14). In fact, “refugees in limbo can be, or be seen to be, a security risk to host countries or nearby neighbors” (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 368). There are numerous factors that influence Indonesia’s approach to asylum, which greatly impacts the lives of refugees living there. Biehl (2015) argues that “uncertainty can be seen as a force that governs individual behavior, mobility, and/or settlement practices in asylum contexts through fear and discourses of criminality” (70). The state plays a major role in governing the lives of refugees and in controlling the uncertainties that refugees experience. Although the Indonesian government has offered refugees some protection, it can only be described as semi-protection that neglects basic services and human rights.

Refugees are extremely vulnerable when they have no legal right to live in the host country, creating high levels unpredictability and uncertainty in exile (Horst and Grabska 2015, 10). “In a situation of long-term, unresolved displacement, a refugee’s humanitarian ‘right to life’ is maintained, but many of her fundamental human rights—to work, to move, to educate her children and herself—are suspended” (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 362). In Egypt, El-Shaarawi (2015) describes how Iraqi refugees’ “inability to exercise their rights or to establish sustainable livelihoods in exile” (45) leads to instability. Refugees in Indonesia are indeed allowed to live there temporarily and maintain this ‘right to life’, where basic provisions of survival are available, but even these basic necessities are increasingly harder to come by for some refugees. Of greater importance is the quality of life in transit, which must be considered and scrutinized in host countries, where asylum seekers struggle to live on the bare minimum.
When asking refugees about the problems they face in Indonesia, one of their first grievances is the inability to work or get an education. “How can we live here for so long if we can’t work or go to school?”—I heard complaints like this constantly. With no possibilities to work in Indonesia, adults fear not being able to support their families. Reliance upon external sources for survival is a mental strain on many individuals, especially for those who were used to being the primary source of income for their family. One father explained to me his frustration and sadness by not being able to provide for his wife and children anymore. It is upsetting to see so many well-educated adults, including doctors, teachers, and engineers, who cannot put their skills to use. It certainly does not help Indonesia to prohibit refugees from working. If allowed to work, refugees have shown that they can contribute to society, thereby strengthening the local working economy.

Regarding their children, the parents’ main fear is that they are not receiving a proper education in Indonesia. At such young ages, education is incredibly important for the development of a child’s mental and physical health. Refugees are generally not allowed to study in Indonesian public schools, and the opportunities for alternative education remain limited (Nethery et al. 2011, 93). Although some organizations and centers have established informal educational programs for children, the waiting lists are long and many go uneducated. Young adults are particularly affected by this, too. With no opportunities for higher education or certification, university-aged students have nowhere to study, as the few educations programs that are available to refugees in Indonesia are usually only open to children under 18 years of age. Many of these young adults, close to my age, explained to me their annoyance with being “left behind”. For some, this annoyance translated into a fear, where they felt as if they were missing out on the crucial and transformative years of a ‘normal’ life.

5.8 Role of the UNHCR and Aid Organizations

El-Shaarawi (2015) writes, “In Egypt, the government’s role in refugee protection is primarily limited to non-refoulement, while the UNHCR acts as a ‘surrogate state’ by taking over the administration of, and assistance provision for, refugee populations”, and she argues that “This hybrid framework of protection contributes to uncertainty in a number of ways” (42). Indonesia is in a similar position, where the government has delegated all responsibility of asylum to the UNHCR and IOM. Hyndman and Giles (2011) claim that “without a government to ensure their protection, refugees are at the whim of the international donors and UN agencies that assist
them” (362-363). Consequently, “this shift in responsibility from the state to the UNHCR contributes to keeping refugees separate from local populations. It also encourages refugees to consider the UNHCR as the primary arbiter of their fate, rendering its policies and practices concerning durable solutions increasingly salient for refugees’ experiences of displacement” (El-Shaarawi 2015, 42).

Indonesia lacks many resources and does not want to spend the capital that it already has on helping non-citizen asylum seekers. Unfortunately, the organizations put in place to help refugees in Indonesia also lack the resources and ability to improve the situation. As many refugees direct their anger towards agencies like the UNHCR for their resettlement delay, Hyndman and Giles (2011) contend that this is not simply the fault of the UNHCR and other aid organizations. In Indonesia, UNCHR representatives clearly explained to me that they want to find durable solutions for all asylum seekers as soon as possible, but the geopolitical reality of the world today has made it increasingly difficult. Aid agencies working with refugees in Indonesia are almost always underfunded and understaffed. Organizations such as the UNHCR are unable to offer adequate protection to refugees, and the little aid that is given is reserved for only the most extreme cases.

For these reasons and more, the refugees’ relationship with the UNHCR and other aid organizations has been somewhat tense in Indonesia. One informant explained his distress to me, “It all depends on them. For refugees, our world, our life, and future depends on others. [We] can’t do anything, [we] don’t have a choice.” This conversation stressed the sense of helplessness refugees feel in Indonesia, as the only organizations that are there to help have seemingly abandoned them. Another informant told me about his friend who had just been given his official refugee status from the UNCHR in Jakarta. Even after this 10-month process, his friend did not seem happier with this news. He explained, “We have been refugees since the day we left our homes and a piece of paper from the UNHCR makes no difference to him. We just want to be resettled.” Overall, there is little trust in organizations like the UNHCR, but there is no other place to turn to that offers solutions for resettlement.

5.9 Confusion and Ambiguities

Even within the context of durable solutions provided by the UNCHR, resettlement should not only be understood as a solution, but it is also a cause of uncertainty for many refugees in
transit. “While resettlement creates some hope for stability, the resettlement process itself introduces new kinds of uncertainty that could also cause suffering” (El-Shaarawi 2015, 50). For Iraqi refugees in Egypt, “lack of information was an important destabilizing aspect of the resettlement process. Refugees reported not knowing the goals of the resettlement process and not understanding the eligibility criteria, as well as lacking general information” (El-Shaarawi 2015, 51). Hyndman and Giles (2011, 730) explain international refugee law in terms of ‘soft law’, which consists of a patchwork of policies and regulations that make it difficult to access and understand the provisions of refugee law.

Moreover, “much of the debate, policymaking and financing around the externalization of asylum takes place in the global North, yet many players and tools required to enact it are based in the global South” (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 730-731). Betts and Milner (2006) argue that the “approach of the European states has so far assumed that cooperative agreements can allow Southern states to be enticed or persuaded to improve their own protection standards in order to reduce the need for the onward movement of asylum-seekers to Europe” (3-4). In Indonesia’s case, Australia has been creating policies and sending Indonesia money to curb irregular migration. However, Missbach (2015) has written how cooperation on migration between the Indonesian and Australian governments is strained, and policies and enforcement in Indonesia are often fraught with corruption—all of which contributes to the uncertainty for refugees living there.

“Geographical limbo in the form of the political status of territory where people are detained (i.e., detained by Australia in Indonesia, managed by a third party) fuels ambiguous legal status” (Mountz 2011, 384). Ambiguity characterizes the uncertainty that refugees live through in Indonesia. By the actions (or lack thereof) from various states and international organizations, “The uncertainty created by conflict and displacement is thus maintained or heightened” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 10). Asylum seekers often do not understand the bureaucracies through which they must navigate in Indonesia, and they feel as though their fate lies with organizations that are not willing to help. Regrettably, “the states that host displaced populations rarely provide them with sufficient knowledge about their situation, creating a range of vulnerabilities that they experience” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 10).

My informants often expressed anxiety and confusion about the whole asylum process in Indonesia. One family even explained how their first refugee status determination case was
rejected because they did not have an appropriate translator. As refugees decide how to spend their days in Indonesia, they are always waiting for calls from the UNHCR. “We don’t know what they [UNHCR] are doing there, and why it takes so long. We just wait for a call and go to the office in Jakarta when they need something.” Understanding and navigating this complicated network of administration and bureaucracy in Indonesia is challenging for refugees. Providing a clear explanation of the asylum process with satisfactory translators would help clear some of the confusion and uncertainties that refugees face in Indonesia.

5.10 Conclusion

“The temporariness of displacement characterized by the idea of living in transit in some ways accords with international law and the legal definition of a refugee. ‘Refugeeness’ is intended to be a temporary status” (El-Shaarawi 2015, 45), which is to be ultimately resolved through durable solutions laid out by the UNHCR. However, displacement has become protracted for asylum seekers in Indonesia, and they face many struggles that inhibit their ability to exercise basic human rights, such as finding safe shelter, working, or getting an education. “As a result, refugeeness is experienced as simultaneously temporary and protracted—conditions that are reflected in refugees’ inability to make a living and to imagine their futures in exile” (El-Shaarawi 2015, 46). As the spatial dimension of displacement produces many uncertainties, the interplay between space and time should be inquired, as displacement becomes protracted.
Chapter VI: Temporal Analysis of Uncertainty

6.1 Introduction

Critiquing the current literature on migration and mobility, Griffiths (2014) argues that the temporal dimension of migrants’ lived experiences is largely neglected. Displacement always takes spatial dislocation into account, but temporal aspects become more important as displacement becomes protracted for asylum seekers around the world. For refugees living in Indonesia, the disjuncture between treating transit as a temporary stay and facing the reality of their protracted situation has produced many uncertainties. “For asylum-seekers, temporality is often conceptualized as waiting, limbo or suspension” (Mountz 2011, 381). Governments, aid organizations, and asylum seekers themselves often assert the temporality of their situation in limbo, and this reinforcement has kept thousands of refugees hoping for resettlement as they wait in Indonesia. “In contexts where waiting and hoping are central to people’s experiences, temporality is key to understanding them” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 6).

6.2 Waiting

El-Shaarawi (2015, 44) describes how the transit situation for Iraqi refugees in Egypt became more permanent after waiting many years with almost no hope for resettlement or returning home. In other similar transit regions in developing countries that host asylum seekers, the process of asylum seems to linger on with no end in sight. Exploring the asylum procedure for non-European refugees in Turkey, Biehl (2015) contends that “the procedures for seeking asylum create many uncertainties and anxieties. The application process both for refugee status determination and for third country resettlement can take up to several years, and asylum seekers often find themselves in situations of indefinite and unpredictable waiting” (58). The majority of my informants have already been living in Indonesia for many years, with no anticipation for resettlement in their near future. Indefinite waiting can easily by characterized by uncertainty and instability, and in Indonesia, time was used as a means to “conceptualize this uncertainty and disruption, and vocalize their frustration and despondency” (Griffiths 2014, 1994).
The instability and uncertainty that arise from indefinite waiting is commonly felt among the refugee community in Indonesia. My informants expressed their distrust in organizations like the UNHCR, explaining that even after years of waiting, many of them have seen no progress in their cases for asylum. As one refugee put it, “I don’t know what they’re doing in there [UNHCR office]; if they’re working or not. It’s like they don’t care.” Life in Indonesia has been superficially reduced to waiting day after day for a phone call from the UNHCR. Rotter (2016, 5) has described the lengthy bureaucratic process of the asylum process in transit states, where problems such as medical referrals, a lack of adequate translators, and ever-changing migration policies all contribute to considerable delays and the protracted nature of waiting. With little information and insight into the progress of their asylum cases, refugees are told to simply wait and be patient. “Hence, the temporal uncertainty that asylum seekers experience as a result of a procedural set up… is presented to them as a ‘normal’ aspect of displacement that they must cope with and get used to” (Biehl 2015, 60). The normalization of waiting is a common experience for people in protracted situations—“waiting among refugees has become the rule, not the exception” (Hyndman and Giles 2011, 361).

Therefore, “Living in transit is not a brief sojourn on the way to somewhere else, but rather an indefinite and potentially permanent state of precariousness” (Sampson et al. 2016, 1135). The precariousness of waiting is commonly bound up in power relations; Griffith’s (2014) argues that “the imposition of waiting, always with a glimmer of hope for eventual change, is part of the technique of control that sustains the marginality and compliance of undocumented migrants” (1996). Waiting is a form of temporal uncertainty that “keeps deportable migrants in a passive and desperate state of continual transience and uncertainty” (Griffiths 2014, 2005). Transit states become places of passive waiting, where refugees are expected to wait patiently and be thankful to hosts, despite the suspension of all forms of meaningful existence (Clark 2018, 35). While expected to navigate time as passive victims with little hope and almost no rights or protections, protracted transit becomes incredibly difficult for refugees in Indonesia to sustain. My informants painfully described a life of waiting as having been stopped and put-on-hold. Describing their time in transit as being ‘wasted’ and having nothing to do as they wait “specifically relates to restrictions imposed by asylum policy… it suggests that waiting involves passivity, idleness and subordination” (Rotter 2016, 13).

Prohibited from typical life activities, such as work and education, and having little to do while being made to wait, is a form of enforced idleness. When life has been usurped by waiting,
a lack of meaningful activities can suddenly become debilitating. This was evident in how the refugees described the lives of those who have succumbed to depression. Many refugees close to my age in Indonesia spend the days sleeping and fill their nocturnal hours by playing on their phones. Without the ability to go to school (only offered to younger children) and no familial or social activities (especially for those who came alone), their routinized days lack meaningful content and depression can easily take over. “Without any idea how long they will have to wait, people struggle to imagine a future or invest in themselves” (Griffiths 2014, 2002). Many of the refugees in Indonesia looked at those who were uninvolved and stuck in their homes all day with pity and something to be avoided at all cost in order to “survive mentally”.

Interestingly, I found a disconnect between refugees complaining about having nothing to do but also lacking the interest to become more involved. Biehl (2015, 60) describes a similar situation with refugees in Turkey, where they describe how life would have been different if they knew how long they would be in transit. With constant uncertainty about the future and the expectation of transit being temporary, refugees often lack the motivation to invest in the present and become involved. If their waiting would have been given a definite time limit with the realization that time in transit will take many years, they would have been more apt to learn about the local culture and connect with people. One of my informants explained, “If I knew I was going to be in Indonesia for four years, maybe I would have tried to learn Bahasa. We never expected it to take this long. We just told ourselves it wouldn’t take this long.” Other refugees expressed similar sentiments, where they felt they would have liked to have been more proactive and involved in the community. Unfortunately, this regret is always discovered in hindsight, as a result of temporal uncertainty in transit.

6.3 Suspended Time

Waiting during protracted displacement is often considered to be a state of static being, and for asylum seekers and refugees, it absolutely feels like this, where they are stuck in the unwanted present and dream of an unpredictable future that is uncertain and out of reach (Brun 2015, 19). The common trope of a ‘life-on-hold’ in protracted transit suggests that there has been a suspension of movement in time. Temporal suspension is generated when refugees see no purpose or progression in life, especially when no time limit is given to their indefinite waiting. “Time is often imagined to exist on a trajectory, progressive even if chaotic” (Griffiths 2014, 1997). However, refugees in protracted displacement experience a directionless stasis, or
“psychic limbo that only ends with third country resettlement” (Clark 2018, 35). As one of my informants explained, “I've already been here [in Indonesia] for eleven years, and it’s like nothing has happened. Everything is the same; I’m just older.” I heard many similar stories of refugees voicing a sense of temporal suspension, explaining the lack of progression over the years. When protracted uncertainty becomes chronic for refugees, time continues to move on, “However, their status does not change, and consequently they still cannot choose their future” (Brun 2015, 33).

With the feeling that one’s life has been put on hold, my informants felt that they were stuck in the present and unable to escape. This suspension of movement in time and space where refugees experience never-ending imprisonment can be described as “constituting a liminal space, one that maintains entrapment between firm legal categories, rights and countries, with restricted access to work, education and marriage” (Griffiths 2014, 1998). Stuck in between, refugees find it difficult to continue life as it had once been for them. Asylum seekers had left what life they had behind when they fled their homes, and now they are waiting for a new life to begin elsewhere. However, not knowing when this new life might begin is a constant struggle in limbo. Rotter (2016) argues that temporal specificity, or knowing the deadline of an action is an important facet of the waiting experience, which “engenders a certain degree of expectation of an outcome in temporal terms” (14). However, for asylum seekers in indefinite transit, their waiting is an ‘open-ended’ experience. Asylum seekers in Indonesia have no timeline to guide their waiting, and the absence of an endpoint gives them no sense of control or influence over their time in limbo.

Despite inhabiting the same physical space, refugees in protracted situations experience a variation in temporal modes and often feel outside the normal time trajectory from those around them. Griffiths (2014) explores this refugee experience of “a timeless present, whilst the world and the people around them continue forward” (1997). For those in protracted situations, life in transit is often constrained and the disruption of life trajectories can only be described as anything but linear. The fear of being ‘left behind’ was often shared among many of my informants, as they explained how their friends and everyone around them are continuing with normal lives, while their lives, being put-on-hold, were impeded from a ‘normal’ life trajectory. Rotter (2016) describes how refugees in the UK “expressed the temporal duality of biologically aging whilst simultaneously stagnating in broader life projects” (15). As time continues and they become older, refugees notice a heightened exclusion from social aging. Younger informants
would express their disappointment about “missing out” on going to school and socializing with other children.

One day in Bogor, I was explaining my background and education to an informant, and he told me that he wanted to study and travel as well, adding “I want to be normal, like you.” Many adults would tell me about their desire to either start a family or live out a ‘normal’ life with their family. This conversation reminded me of the many times I have complained about my life going too fast and having to rush through assignments, whereas refugees in Indonesia were asking for such a life to only just begin again. Time is a commodity, and from afar, asylum seekers in protracted situations appear to have an excess of it. However, their experience with extreme temporal uncertainty means that this can only ever be known with hindsight (Griffiths 2014, 2003).

6.4 Existential Challenges

Clark (2018, 35) argues that refugees in protracted displacement not only experience physical immobility, but they are deprived of a sense of purpose in daily life as well. She writes that one of the greatest challenges asylum seekers must work to overcome is “the incremental destruction of self through the specific targeting and denial of all rights and personhood in the transit space, manifesting the state of ‘stuckedness’” (Clark 2018, 40). Hage’s (2009) description of ‘stuckedness’ opposes what he calls ‘existential mobility’, or the felt sense that one’s life is going somewhere. Following from the premise of ‘existential mobility’ is the idea that personhood can be achieved through the act of doing something. Denied basic rights and opportunities for meaningful activities, refugees are “reduced to a state of mere biological existence without purpose or meaning… it is this sense of purpose so central to human existence that the transit experience so thoroughly destroys” (Clark 2019, 40). One of my informants described his life as being completely wasted, and that his only hope was that one day his children might be able to live better and do something [purposeful] with their lives. For him, it was too late to create a meaningful life, and a denied sense of purpose in life became an unbearable burden that he did not want to pass on to his children.

Apart from the physical loss of one’s homeland, protracted displacement may also engender the loss of an individual’s agency, future, identity or social status, and more. The loss of basic human rights for refugees in Indonesia “forces individuals into a state of economic dependency
while depriving them of their sense of autonomy and dignity during this time” (Clark 2018, 40). Rotter (2016, 13) describes how work and education are often a primary source of identity or social status for people, and how the deprivation of which can be incredibly disempowering. Most of my informants associated this period of suspended time with a lack of social and personal progress, where they could not achieve personal growth or goals. “I want to do so much in my life. I want to go to university and get a good job and have a good family. I just need to leave here first.”

Going to school is the primary activity for any child growing up around the world, and the lack thereof can have serious consequences for a child’s development. And without opportunities for higher education and certification, older refugees who have taken up independent study understand the futility of this exercise (although personal education and growth should not be overlooked here). “This pointless and halted time entrenches alterity, constructing [asylum seekers] as fundamentally different from the busy people around them” (Griffiths 2014, 1998).

Crippling boredom follows from the loss of one’s identity and autonomy when denied basic rights and the ability to work or get an education. “It is the meaningless of their everyday time that gives rise to their feelings of boredom, along with the feeling of not being able to escape a stigmatized status” (Brun 2015, 30). There is a strong association between waiting and boredom, as people often view waiting to be an empty time where they are stuck in stasis with nothing to do but wait (Rotter 2016, 10). However, although boredom and waiting may involve a sense of emptiness and the idle suspension of time, it can also be incredibly emotionally demanding for an individual, especially when their waiting becomes protracted (Rotter 2016, 9). Brun (2015, 29) describes the emotional drain that boredom can have on a refugee in transit, as her informants explained their exhaustion and agonizing worry that resulted from their constant daily struggle with boredom.

Without meaningful activities to pass the day, the constant worry and anxiety is often debilitating for those in protracted displacement. The psychological and emotional deterioration during protracted transit can have as much influence on people’s lives as do policies and regulations, or lack thereof in Indonesia’s case (Clark 2018, 40). The health implications and psychological suffering of people experiencing protracted transit has been well documented (Griffiths 2014, Mansouri and Cauchi 2007, Flaherty et al. 2005). The extreme uncertainty experienced by refugees has produced intense stress, along with worry and anticipation that is emotionally and physically taxing. One woman told me, “I can’t even eat or think or anything. I’m worried all the time, worried for my children. I worry all day.”
With the more obvious physical and material deprivation of protracted displacement, the psychological effects are usually not given the necessary attention that they deserve. My informants most commonly reported experiencing depression, difficulty or excessive sleeping, and anxiety. There have also been a number of reported suicides among refugees in Indonesia, especially among those living in immigration detention centers (Missbach 2015). Psychological pressures and emotions are a doomed consequence of protracted uncertainty and play an important role in the lives of displaced people (Horst and Grabska 2015, 9). More focus should be placed on the social and psychological suffering caused by the uncertainty and instability induced during protracted displacement.

6.5 Ideas and Hope for the Future

The current situation for refugees in Indonesia has certainly produced stressful living conditions, and a considerable amount of anxiety comes from thinking and preparing for an uncertain future. Their future predicament rests between knowing that there are neither long-term nor short-term prospects in Indonesia, while still having to “prepare for an indefinite future in Indonesia as an unwanted stranger in a foreign land” (Clark 2018, 42). Imagining and planning for the future becomes difficult for refugees experiencing multiple uncertainties. Or as one of my informants said, “We know we will be here for a long time, but I don’t know for how long. Every day we are just waiting, but we don’t know what we’re waiting for, and when. The future can be anything for us.” While struggling to determine a better future for themselves, refugees are constantly negotiating their incongruent experiences of ‘permanent strangerness’ in Indonesia.

Malkki (1995) has explored how refugees are understood as people ‘out of place’ by their host society. And, “Many of those who are displaced similarly do not accept where they are, in the sense that they wish to be somewhere else and find it difficult to endure the present when the certainties of their past disappeared so suddenly and their future is uncertain and contested” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 7). Horst and Grabska (2015) explain how this expectation of temporary displacement becomes chronic, when a number of actors hold on to the idea of temporary exile, and “the protracted uncertainty that follows with long-term displacement is to a certain extent caused by the unwillingness of individuals, governments, and donors to accept the status quo as the new reality” (7). Without accepting this new reality of ‘permanent impermanence’, individuals and organizations are less likely to be proactive. “This manifests in
the disorientation of being unable to imagine even the near future and confines people to living in the absolute present” (Griffiths 2014, 2001).

People’s relationship with the future is largely dependent on the feeling of how much control they have over it (Horst and Grabska 2015, 7), and the lack of temporal predictability means that planning for a future is usually controlled by uncertainty and instability. With an unpredictable future, a heightened sense of uncertainty can become tortuous. Griffiths (2014) writes how asylum seekers spoke of their time in transit “as a source of shame or oppression… that [their] life was an unproductive, endless present and that [they were] unable to plan or believe in a future” (1998). My informants expressed similar experiences, with their inability to realize their intellectual and professional potential. “I had a job back home, and I actually made a lot of money before. Now I can’t do that here. I’m like a baby here waiting for other people to tell me what to do. I want to work again, you know, but there is no future here.” Furthermore, the idea of a life-on-hold in transit was reinforced when my informants described how life would change after resettlement, where there was an expected shift from feeling subordinate and deprived of basic rights to being in control and autonomous once again. One child said, “I can't wait to go back to school, and I can finally do what I want again.” Rotter (2016) suggests that “It was commonly imagined that attaining a secure immigration status would deliver the ability to predict and determine the future, a release from constant fears and worries” (18). In Indonesia, refugees would often refer back to this hope for a better future when their struggles in transit became intolerable.

Referring to Bourdieu’s (2000) description of North African youth in Paris as “people without a future”, Horst and Grabska (2015) contend that “Hope can thus be understood as an emotion that mediates and creates the opportunity to act” (11), especially for those in protracted displacement. However, hope is a double-edged sword for refugees in transit. “Hope may prevent people from accepting their current situation and heightened uncertainty; it may prevent them from seeing the opportunities that currently exist and from investing in the here and now. Yet at the same time, if there is no hope, there is no reason for waiting” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 11). Holding on to hope keeps the idea of temporary transit alive, knowing that a better future is coming. For a group of Hazara refugees living in Bogor, their idea of the current situation is distinctly understood to be one that is temporary. One informant described how if they knew from the start that they would be spending so many years in limbo, “… we would have lost hope. No one wants to be told you must wait ten years here. Everyone here just hopes that it will be short for them. Even if we know it won’t, we don’t tell ourselves it, because we want to keep the spirit.” Clearly, this
dialogue between the refugees’ expectations of what transit is supposed to mean and the reality of life in Indonesia has created a number of uncertainties for them. For some, this desire to perhaps integrate more or become involved in the local community, yet doing so may equate to losing their distant hope for resettlement.

Brun (2015) describes what happens when refugees in protracted situations in Georgia become tired of waiting and lose hope. “In active waiting, there is a calculated cost that is connected to how long people are prepared to wait. As long as waiting is meaningful, people are willing to wait”, but, “The cost of waiting is becoming too high” (Brun 2015, 32). In other words, people give up hope when they stop waiting, which is a painful experience. The same informant from Bogor explained to me, “Many who graduate from [the refugee-run school] have nothing to do and give up hope. Some move to Jakarta, especially the older boys. I think most of them are depressed, because they just sit in their rooms on their phones all day and night. They’re tired of waiting and being here.” Discussed earlier, the “loss of such hope can lead to resignation and passivity, as well as to severe depression and other psychological problems” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 11). For many refugees in Indonesia, hope for a future is what keeps them going and generates a perseverance to withstand their struggles in transit. However, as they tire from indefinite waiting, it is becoming harder for some to hold onto this hope, the consequences of which are unbearable.

6.6 Conclusion

With the incapacitating instability of a life in limbo and not knowing their status or future, refugees in Indonesia are often made aware of their helplessness and loss of control over their own lives. Temporal uncertainty is a cause of extreme suffering for refugees in protracted displacement. Moreover, they suffer from a dual uncertainty of time, which simultaneously threatens imminent and absent change (Griffiths 2014, 1991). Griffiths (2014) explains this: “They have the simultaneous concern both that there will be a sudden change and never-ending stasis. This is a profoundly uncertain sense of time, in which the threat of immediate disruption extends across indefinite, but often long, stretches of time” (2005). For example, my informants feared a sudden development happening without warning, such as police raids, running out of money, deportation, or being expelled from their home by their Indonesian landlord. This anxiety is then coupled with the fear of never escaping their stigmatized situation in protracted displacement—a permanent impermanence. When these dual temporalities are experienced,
temporal uncertainty is compounded and there is a profound mistrust of time that is unpredictable and beyond one’s control.

Griffiths (2014) argues that the literature covering uncertainty tends to focus on uncertainty that is produced from a profound change in a short period of time, but she claims “that in addition to instability caused by rapid change, people’s lives can also be made chaotic through a lack of change” (2001). As asylum seekers and refugees simultaneously experience temporariness and protractedness in displacement, “Living in transit hints at the expectation of movement… and, at the same time, its absence… transit was something that was lived and felt deeply as a contradiction” (El-Shaarawi 2015, 44). Waiting for life to begin is commonplace in the refugee community in Indonesia. As argued, waiting and the accompanying boredom are anything but passive ‘non-events’ in the lives of asylum seekers. In reality, the physical and emotional challenges of being made to wait can profoundly devastate an individual leading to a complete loss of hope for a meaningful future. However, if waiting is indeed an active and emotional event, it may also be a platform that allows refugees to re-appropriate their time in transit to aid in individual and communal resilience.
Chapter VII: Coping with Protracted Uncertainty

7.1 Introduction

Although my informants typically described their waiting in transit as a stasis where time is wasted spent “doing nothing”, ethnographic immersion suggests that the lived experiences of asylum seekers that take place during transit are more complex and nuanced than perhaps once thought. Rotter (2016) contends that “the dominant notion of waiting as ‘wasted time’ is a powerful trope through which people can critique political, economic and social systems of oppression which usurp their time” (24). By saying that time in transit is wasted, refugees voice their frustration with disempowering experiences in transit, linked to protracted uncertainties. However, reducing such accounts to mere ‘wasted time’ masks the complexities of waiting as an active process. As argued, asylum seekers in Indonesia struggle to create meaningful futures and overcome ‘stuckedness’, feeling as though life is passing them by with no sense of control, due to the harsh restrictions imposed on them in transit. Nevertheless, it is their overwhelming desire to overcome this sense of ‘stuckedness’ that has stimulated the intentional act and agential process of active waiting. “Even during waiting, people move on: they get by and their lives change, yet they are still sleeping, waking up, finding food, eating, caring for children. Waiting and hope are weaved into every rhythm” (Brun 2015, 28).

7.2 Coping with Uncertainty

“Hope for the future keeps us going. If we can’t hope, we can’t survive here.” Hope makes waiting meaningful and purposeful amidst uncertainties in protracted transit. “Hope may be understood to be generative of action in that it accesses a temporal sense of potential, of having a future” (Brun 2015, 24). As hope becomes a driver of action, asylum seekers create possibilities for change and rethink alternative futures. When time in transit becomes protracted, hopes and ideas of the future may change. The distant hope for resettlement remains firm, but protraction has changed the ways in which refugees wait in transit. Time continues to pass by and it reorients people’s perception of the future. Many refugees have become accustomed to living in Indonesia, and some of their children have grown up more in this place of displacement than
anywhere else. Learning to live in the present has become just as important as preparing for a future. These life adjustments impact how hope is created, maintained, and used, as refugees cope with an uncertain future (Brun 2015, 33).

Asylum seekers engage with active waiting through several methods. Horst and Grabska (2015) write, “There are many ways in which individuals cope pro-actively with uncertainty”, and they use the concept of social navigation to ask “how do people navigate in conditions that are constantly in flux” and “how do they navigate in stable yet impermanent conditions” (12). In order to explore the range of strategies used to navigate uncertainty, one must consider local contexts and the availability of certain resources. In other words, “uncertainty is culturally situated and needs to be analyzed in specific contexts from the perspective of the people affected” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 12). Where factors such as gender, generational differences, and socio-economic conditions come into play, there tends to be variation in how coping with uncertainties is executed and experienced. In waiting, “the ability to act depends upon the particular resources available to the waiter such as the technologies at hand and the spaces in which waiting is done” (Rotter 2016, 19). The diversity of asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia contributes to the variation in strategies to overcome protracted uncertainties. Here, I will explore selected strategies taken by refugees in transit, in relation to their particular context in Indonesia.

7.3 Re-Appropriation of Time and Transformation

First, “it is crucial to identify the way in which uncertainty becomes a limiting or liberating factor for different groups of people, rather than assuming that we already know what causes uncertainty for all” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 13). Asylum seekers may re-appropriate their time in suspension and transform transit spaces into ones of productivity, where waiting becomes a meaningful aspect of life, rather than a wholly-debilitating experience (Griffiths 2014). Despite the temporal uncertainties of limbo, refugees who were able to seize the opportunity and re-conceptualize time as a resource could transform the present into a purposeful experience. Depending on their particular background and context, refugees were able to take advantage of this temporal liminality that offered a level of freedom and openness for potential innovation. While the rapid change and uprooting experience of displacement cause some asylum seekers to cling to the familiar, the same experience can provide a creative, social, and reflective space for others caught in-between “a situation where ‘normality’ and the status quo are questioned and
challenged in radical ways” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 13). Refugees in this situation are “outside the normality of both their ‘home’ and [‘host’] societies, cocooned in a stasis without the means or pressure to achieve anticipated social goals” (Griffiths 2014, 2003).

I found that young adults were most adept at reconfiguring their transit experience into sites of personal growth and productivity. A particular group of boys living together in a housing complex in Jakarta expressed an emancipating satisfaction that comes from being outside their typical familial and societal responsibilities. One boy told me, “We can do anything here. I like living with my friends. We always play and go places together, and no one cares.” Many of the older boys engage in projects and group activities, such as developing content for media outlets such as YouTube, tweaking and repairing electronic devices, and creating their own lyrics and music with make-shift instruments made from recycled objects. Overall, these boys find enjoyment in their free time by doing activities of their choice without any outside societal pressures—enhancing their sense of agency. With the inability to imagine and plan for a certain future, the boys embrace the present and take advantage of the opportunities offered to them during this abnormal state of liminality. This newfound freedom to live autonomously is largely due to the insecurity proffered during protracted transit, suggesting that uncertainty can actually be a positive force for innovation and transformation.

Women seemed to be embracing new changes to life more than anyone else in the refugee community, where they have established an open environment that contrasts greatly with the life they once had in their home country. As I was walking up to a refugee community center in Bogor, I was greeted by a group of Hazara children – boys and girls – playing together outside. They were laughing and running around in the courtyard; to me, it looked like an ordinary playground scene during school recess. What I did not know at the time, however, was that this liberty to run freely and play sports was a new experience for the girls, who had never been allowed to partake in such activities, especially with their male counterparts. For the Hazara women in Indonesia, their time in transit has been a liberating experience; where most girls were given their first opportunity ever to leave their homes and do something meaningful in life.

In addition to participating in these new activities in Indonesia, Hazara women also experienced an elevated social status in their families and community. Due to their language abilities and esteemed character, many of the women have become leaders in the community, helping their families navigate Indonesian bureaucracies and the asylum process. Other women
have taken up teaching positions at the learning centers, and there are a number of workshops and social networks that provide a space for women to come together and discuss their shared challenges. With these new leadership roles and opportunities for engagement, the women told me that they have been exposed to new perspectives and ideas, giving them a new outlook on life. Importantly, men in the community have embraced this profound cultural shift. Identity politics has played a role, as being a ‘refugee’ has leveled the playing field, so to speak, transcending gender, ethnicity, and age. One man pulled out his UNCHCR-issued refugee card, waving it in front of me, saying, “We are the same [men and women]. We have the same ID. We are refugees. We have the same unknown future.”

7.4 Daily Activities in Transit

As I spent the majority of my fieldwork with refugees, I learned how they structured their days and filled their time with various activities. Like Rotter (2016), I also found that the lived experiences of asylum seekers in Indonesia differed quite drastically from the supposed stasis of “doing nothing”. Yes, some days we were bored at home, but most of the time there was something to do, an errand to be run, or an event happening somewhere in the city. From the outside, refugees in Indonesia seem to live an almost ‘normal’ life—they socialize and host parties with friends and family at each other’s homes, go shopping together, pray together, cook traditional meals together, and volunteer or participate in community groups and initiatives. Often, these activities “could involve forming routines, in order to provide structure and ‘sense’ to the days, or developing plans for the immediate and longer-term future in order to conceptualize and feel some control over it, even if they only felt able to do so for a matter of a few days ahead” (Griffiths 2014, 2004).

“Such activities had specific goals (organizing an event, completing an assignment, attaining a qualification) and temporalities (the working week, the college semester, the academic year), which helped produce a sense of progress in time” (Rotter 2016, 19). While their transit situation could be considered anything but ‘normal’, this desire and attempt to live a ‘normal’ and structured life offering existential mobility has become incredibly important for asylum seekers in Indonesia. One informant explained, “If we think about it [asylum], we just become depressed about everything. Nothing is going to happen anyway, so it’s better to find something to do.” By keeping busy, refugees find a distraction from the worry and anxiety of waiting in transit. One woman said that taking care of children “… allows me to forget everything bad here. It’s better to worry about your children
and family than refugee things and the UNHCR.” Managing her family helped this woman bring a sense of order and control to her life, while combating the negative emotions that accompany protracted uncertainty.

Many families had developed daily routines, which often centered around preparing their children for school. There are different options for part-time education courses, and most families with children were involved in at least one program. A few NGOs and organizations including CWS offer educational programs for refugees in Indonesia, and there are a number of refugee-run learning centers, primarily located in Bogor, that offer classes to children and sometimes adults. The refugees highly value these opportunities for education, and most are committed to learning new skills to increase their chances of finding a job in the future when resettled. While waiting becomes productive and transformative, refugees seek to take control of their future and create a ‘normal’ life in the present through such “multifarious activities… to subvert oppressive state control over their lives, and to realize the desired futures” (Rotter 2016, 21).

7.5 Networking and Activism

Another method used to subvert state imposition is through the use of technology. As refugees wait in Indonesia, they are able to organize and speak out, by using technology to network internationally and within Indonesia. These “daily connections traverse the friction of distance by utilizing technology: mobile phone, email message, testimony in cyberspace… [their] use of these tools kept national and global publics attuned to their plight as they refused the silencing, isolation, and alienation that state authorities attempted to impose” (Mountz 2011, 394). Though rendered physically immobile, many tech savvy refugees in Indonesia are able to stay connected to the world, with a web presence giving them a platform to reach advocates for their cause and garner support and resources.

I met a number of refugees who make YouTube videos about their lives in Indonesia, either using their phones or more advanced equipment. “[The films] are about how we live here—what we do with our days. I want to show the world who refugees are, and that we aren’t bad people and terrorists. We want to show the world our humanity and that refugees are good people. If people watch my videos, they can learn about us and our condition here.” Watching these videos, one can see how refugees in Indonesia are making a life for themselves in a foreign place. The videos include interviews with members
from the community, and there are scenes of children playing sports, men gathering to dance and sing with music, women preparing food, and more. They depict people ‘moving on’ in life, but they also bring attention to their plight and unique struggles of living in Indonesia.

Some refugees have created websites and written articles for online media sources, also discussing their situation and life as a refugee. These articles, along with the videos, have acquired the attention of international supporters and stakeholders, and now expert film-makers, researchers, and journalists have started collaborating with refugees and sharing their stories worldwide. Such a powerful network enables asylum seekers and activists to work “transnationally to call attention to the contradictions inherent in geopolitical forces that structure mobility and immobility” (Mountz 2011, 395). Public support for the cause has led to social movements; refugees and allies are now speaking at events and participating in public demonstrations in Indonesia. Even I had the opportunity to speak alongside refugees at events attended by government officials, UNHCR representatives, and the general public. Understanding liminal transit spaces as sites of struggle and action (Mountz 2011) reveal how these networks and networking abilities are instrumental in propagating political possibilities and establishing meaningful lives while waiting for resettlement.

7.6 A Stronger Community Helping Themselves

Horst and Grabska (2015) describe how certainty is re-established socially with and through others: “social navigation does not take place primarily on an individual level. Many of the ways in which people re-establish certainty involve constant negotiations with other individuals… in some contexts, a close extended family (clan, ethnic group) can provide security” (13). Often, the common experience of ‘refugeeness’ serves to unite a diverse group of asylum seekers who learn how to not just survive in transit, but also thrive. Whether through bonding ties of ethnicity, culture, or religion, the refugee community in Indonesia has “banded together to reshape their existence and create a community capable of nourishing its members, both physically and emotionally” (Clark 2018, 42).

Perhaps the greatest example of refugees coming together as a community for a common goal is the establishment of learning centers located in Cisarua, Bogor. A number of researchers and news outlets have covered the story of Indonesia’s first refugee-run initiative—Cisarua Refugee Learning Center (CRLC)—established in August 2014 (Clark 2018). Before then, a
number of refugee families were living in Cisarua in relative hiding and avoiding public interaction. At that time, refugees understood the area to be dangerous and hostile, and they eschewed any contact with locals and authorities. There were reports of local Indonesians attacking asylum seekers, so refugees hid out of fear of violence and exploitation (Clark 2018, 46). One informant explained to me that many of the restrictions were self-imposed by the refugee community. Living in uncertainty and facing ambiguous policies and regulations inspired many rumors to spread between asylum seekers, with false ideas such as the UNHCR tracking refugees and their activity in the area.

However, a small group of individuals gathered together and decided to do something about their protracted situation. Many families were worried that their children were not getting an education in Indonesia, and they feared the depriving consequences that this would bring. They realized that they had the capabilities to teach themselves, and with a few resources, they could create a community center for refugees to come together and learn from each other. What started with small gatherings of 20-25 people soon became an organized enterprise, drawing in more refugees into the area as word quickly spread about a place for refugee children to go to school. The success of this center came from individuals who considered the needs of the community — education and employment — and matched them with their existing capabilities to help meet those needs. A leader at the center said, “We have all kinds of people here that society needs. We have teachers, students, plumbers, builders, and everyone. We can make our own school. No one can stop us getting an education, it’s a human right. No matter how vulnerable we are, we can still do something for our children.”

“Through these efforts this small group was able to fundamentally transform their immediate environment into a place of significant social belonging with the school at the center of this project” (Clark 2018, 43). Through the use of social media and networking, news of CRLC’s accomplishments reached the international community, and the learning center in Cisarua found itself becoming a beneficiary of international support that offered funding, resources, and most importantly, much-needed supplies. Inspired by the success of CRLC, refugees started to establish other learning centers and community initiatives in the region, thereby creating a unique place for themselves in Indonesian society that helps provide meaning and purpose during transit. These initiatives have rightfully instilled a sense of pride and resilience for this refugee community, where they have been able to transform a space of vulnerability into one of capability and empowerment.
“For every educational benefit the school provided there were numerous social dividends” (Clark 2018, 45). As the learning centers expand their mission into other initiatives, positive benefits seem to be reaching every person affiliated with the community. To begin, the centers not only provide education for the children, but adults are involved with the managing, teaching, and infrastructure at these sites. I was told that every person in the community is able to be involved in some way at the center. Now, as they have more resources, some centers offer language and computer classes for adults in the evenings, where they can learn invaluable skills for future employment. One man told me, “I was so bored living in Jakarta. Then one day my friend told me about this place, so I left and came here. It’s much better here, because my friends are here, and we can meet and do things together. And I’m also learning for my future.” The social interactions and sense of community that these centers facilitate provide structure and a semblance of normal life for refugees.

“Not only does the school distract people from the banality of life in transit but actually gives people the opportunity to expand and grow as individuals” (Clark 2018, 44). The same man who came to the center from Jakarta explained to me how he suffered from depression when he was living alone. After becoming a part of the community in Cisarua, he experienced an existential shift from being desperately stuck in limbo to now having a positive outlook on life with new goals and aspirations for a better future. He said, “If I’m resettled, I want to start an organization like this to help other refugees like me.” The refugees in this community shared with me an overwhelming sense of positivity in the face of uncertainty. They feel that their time waiting in transit is no longer a wasted period characterized by passivity, but rather, their determination and capabilities have transformed transit into a meaningful experience that provides purpose and dignity to an otherwise dehumanizing event. One informant summed up his gratitude: “Everything for us is uncertain. This [learning center] gives us hope and a reason to keep going.”

7.7 Local Integration?

Whereas refugees in Bogor have largely relied on the strength of their own community by developing learning centers to help themselves, others have learned to adjust to a life in transit and adapt to Indonesian society. Although their engagement with Indonesian society will always be limited, they “have challenged the socio-cultural boundaries that traditionally separated forced migrants from the broader community, allowing forced migrants to transcend their stuckedness and enter the public realm more fully” (Clark 2018, 46). The UNHCR (2018) considers refugees’
livelihoods, safety, and participation to be important indicators that support local integration. One of UNHCR’s three durable solutions, “Local integration is a complex and gradual process comprising separate but equally important legal, economic, social, and cultural dimensions” (UNHCR 2018). According to El-Shaarawi (2015), “Local integration is predicated on the expectation that refugees will be able to build livelihoods and exercise rights in their host country. In Egypt, these possibilities are limited” (50). Like the situation in Egypt, local integration leading to permanent settlement is not a viable option in Indonesia.

Indonesian policies and the lack of protection for asylum seekers hinder opportunities for local integration, since refugees are denied the ability to pursue sustainable livelihoods and economic independence in transit. Yet, in the face of protractedness, where refugees are living with their hosts for multiple years, it is essentially impossible for there to be no integration. Through self-determination and the pursuit of informal pathways, refugees have noticeably improved their livelihoods in Indonesia. Even though a number of indicators, notably legal and economic, are inaccessible, other evidence and markers suggests that local integration progressively evolves over time. Here, I consider how refugees have gradually learned to integrate and adapt in the host country in different ways. While all refugees have had to learn to live in Indonesia, I found variation between their levels of engagement and integration within the host society.

Perhaps the most noticeable marker of local integration is language acquisition. Learning to speak Indonesian is one “state indicator that refugees are moving from the fringes of society and engaging more readily with those around them” (Clark 2018, 45). Refugees can learn Indonesian through classes offered by learning centers and NGOs, but many learn the same way I did—practicing and interacting with local Indonesians on a daily basis. I was shocked by the colloquial fluency of some refugees, whose vocabulary and accent is almost indistinguishable from that of a native speaker. I had even met a few children whose Indonesian skills were advanced enough that they were attending public schools with their Indonesian counterparts.

The learning centers and NGOs stress the importance of learning English in regards to preparedness for resettlement. One of my roles at an NGO was to teach English classes, and I was surprised at first when I had to explain English using Indonesian to the children. One student explained to me that when he first arrived, he had only wanted to study and learn English. But, after a few years in Indonesia, he realized that learning Indonesian would be more
useful in his current situation, and the daily exposure made it easier. This is one example of how protractedness in a host country has unintentionally led to forms of local integration, where the ability to communicate with your host makes living in the country infinitely easier. Local knowledge may also prove to be crucial at times; some informants told me that being able to speak Indonesian has helped them navigate Indonesian bureaucracies and even resolve conflicts with locals and authorities.

I noticed a correlation between one’s length of time in Indonesia and overall fondness for the people and country. Most of my students who had just recently arrived to Indonesia within the last six months usually expressed negatives attitudes, if not hatred at times, towards Indonesia. Understandably, Indonesia has a unique culture and climate, which can incite quite a shock for many people. And in terms of ‘user-friendliness’, being a foreigner in Indonesia is no easy task. The students who have been living in Indonesia for multiple years were familiar with such negative feelings and frustrations of being in a new, foreign country. One girl explained, “I also didn’t like it when I first came here. But after maybe two years you forget that. Now it’s normal.” I heard similar accounts, where after having lived in Indonesia for a couple years, one’s tolerance for the country and its culture becomes amiable and integration becomes easier. By voicing these shared experiences, challenges, and achievements during transit, refugees are able to pass on knowledge and tips and encourage one another while they wait.

Another aspect of Indonesian culture that required an acquired taste was becoming accustomed to Indonesian foods. In Indonesia, I generally only eat local traditional foods, and I was able to share many meals at local spots with my informants. However, these shared meals were only with refugees who have been living in Indonesia for a while and can speak the language. I learned that newcomers to Indonesia and also those who lived in closer proximity with each other, such as the community in Bogor, tend to only eat traditional food from their home country. Although it costs more, considering the imported price of certain goods, many of the refugees refused to give up their normal cuisine. With high levels of uncertainty and instability, foods from home were a friendly and familiar comfort that could remain constant in transit. Still, many adapt to local tastes and enjoy the unique culinary array of Southeast Asian flavors. I have many fond memories of conducting interviews and having informal conversations with friends and informants over a local meal at a food stall on the side of a busy Jakartan street.
When I asked my informants how they felt about Indonesians being unknowledgeable about refugees, they told me that it did not bother them. Conversely, some enjoyed the sense of normalcy this brought when interacting with Indonesian locals, who did not consider them as ‘refugees’. “We can just be normal friends with them. They’re all nice to us.” Many of my informants, especially the younger generation, had developed close friendships with local Indonesians, which I consider another step forward to improving local integration. For children, many of these connections were made through sports. Futsal, in particular, brings refugees and Indonesians together; they have even established teams with formal leagues and competitions. Not only do sports provide another meaningful activity for refugees during transit, but it also acts as a bridge, allowing refugees access to engage with their local host community on a familiar and informal level.

Such activities can have a profound impact on refugee-host relations and should not be taken for granted. I met an Indonesian boy close to my age at one of the housing centers for refugee boys. He said he was there visiting his “futsal friends”, so I took the opportunity to ask him some questions. This boy had obviously developed a close relationship with the refugees living there, and he, unlike so many other Indonesians, intimately understood their struggle. With an empathic tone, he said, “I don’t think of them like refugees or something like that. For me, I consider them my friends. Even with my Indonesian friends, we treat them [refugees] like us.” As he said this, another boy in the back exclaimed, “We’re brothers!”, and they laughed together. Although observing such a close relationship was a rare experience for me, I am sure it is not unique, as my informants would frequently share heartfelt stories about their Indonesian friends and neighbors. These relationships make it clearly evident that meaningful refugee-host relationships are not only possible, but can provide support and social bridging connections between the two communities. And the cross-cultural exchange offers mutual benefits—the Indonesian boy told me how he enjoyed the opportunity to learn about a new culture, and the refugees explained how Indonesian friends made their experience in the host country easier and more enjoyable.

Refugees who seemed to be well-integrated and positively engaged with Indonesian society sometimes talked about their desire to stay in Indonesia. Although Indonesia outright rejects any form of permanent settlement for undocumented immigrants, many refugees have imagined, either out of fear or desire, the possibility of remaining in Indonesia indefinitely. Some of my informants found comfort in entertaining the idea of living in Indonesia permanently. “I’m tired of waiting; you know? I like it here, and wish Indonesia could let us stay. Then, we can finally stop worrying about
being a refugee and going somewhere else all the time.” For those who have successfully learned to adapt and enjoy living there, Indonesia becomes an attractive destination for permanent settlement, especially if it could bring an end to their unbounded transit.

Not only do many refugees feel comfortable in Indonesia, but they also feel safe. The UNCHR (2018) considers the safety and security of refugees in host nations to be necessary indicators if local integration is to be considered a durable solution. After fleeing persecution in their home countries, safety is arguably the number one concern for asylum seekers in Indonesia. Asylum seekers and refugees are not immune from the barrage of news media covering populist leaders and anti-migrant dialogue. As an American citizen living abroad, I have become accustomed to explaining American politics. One boy in my English class said, “We feel safe here. I can walk on the streets at night with no problem. Indonesia is very safe. In America, there's gangs and bad people”, as he gestured the figure of a gun with his hands to mimic the motion of shooting at people. An older boy told me that one of his friends who had been resettled to Canada experienced instances of racism. Although my informants sought resettlement in any country first offering them asylum, many had developed preconceived notions of Western countries being unwelcoming towards them.

Despite the incredible uncertainties they face in Indonesia, some imagined a life in Indonesia, with a culture that they have come to know and enjoy, to be safer, or at least less assaulting than moving to a Western country and risk becoming an outsider and considered a ‘terrorist’ or ‘threat to national security’, thereby facing more persecution. As anti-migrant dialogue and protectionist policies permeate Western nations, opportunities for resettlement become slimmer and pathways for alternative solutions are considered more seriously. After being told that their wait in transit could be extended up to twenty years or more, a discussion of at least temporary integration must be considered by Indonesian policymakers. There are many refugees who would consider starting a new life in Indonesia, but until the country addresses this protracted reality, refugees cannot rely on living there indefinitely.

7.8 Conclusion

Protractedness and waiting does not necessarily equate to a stagnant time where people are idle; Brun (2015) “argues that we need to move away from understanding protracted displacement as static and toward a notion of it as fluid” (20). In fact, waiting is often active and
dynamic during protracted situations, “in the sense that people are able, under certain conditions, to fill waiting time with a range of activities which are both present-focused (giving meaning to everyday life) and future-focused (directed towards desired future)” (Rotter 2016, 3).

For asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, waiting is not a period of stasis spent ‘doing nothing’. Despite the uncertainty and instability of protracted transit, refugees can re-appropriate their time and reconfigure it into a transformative experience, by filling their days with meaningful activities that give structure to their lives. “Whether it is improving themselves or helping others, the sense of purpose that these activities restore in people provides mental resilience and is capable of transforming a protracted wait into a meaningful life in the present and combating the slow social death that previously defined the transit experience” (Clark 2018, 47).

Navigating uncertainty can “entail great variation in the level of pro-activeness and engagement with possible outcomes” (Horst and Grabska 2015, 12). The diversity of asylum seekers living in Indonesia reflects the diversity of strategies used to navigate protracted uncertainty. Some refugees have drawn from the talents and capabilities in their own community to garner international support and respond to the needs of individuals and families by establishing learning centers and other community initiatives. Moreover, “they have not only succeeded in transforming their own daily lives, but they have also challenged and reshaped attitudes toward refugees in the broader Indonesian community, creating new solidarities and connections where once there was only fear and hostility” (Clark 2018, 46). The protracted quality of their time in transit has unintentionally encouraged the local integration of refugees into Indonesian society. Altogether, the range of strategies to cope with indefinite transit through active waiting are broad, and the level of involvement varies between individuals. It should be remembered that even in protracted displacement, “which is experienced as ‘permanent impermanence’, ‘everyday time’ continues to flow through routinized practices and survival strategies” (Brun 2015, 19).
Chapter VIII: Conclusion

8.1 Global Trends

With a rise in nationalist and protectionist ideals in the West, countries have engaged in controlling irregular migration by closing their borders and decreasing resettlement quotas for asylum seekers. While guarding sovereign territory and building walls has been an important historical phenomenon evident in early civilizations, a newer strategy of externalizing migration control is gaining popularity among developed nations. Europe has worked to extend its borders into Africa, North America into Central and South America, and now Australia’s migration policies are extending far beyond its sea borders to neighboring island-nations like Indonesia. “The targeted closure of borders surrounding traditional refugee receiving states is resulting in the creation of new migration routes, funneled forced migrants into new regions that lack the appropriate framework for their protection” (Clark 2018, 36).

Asylum seekers are being ‘funneled’ into other regions of the developing world, as Western countries respond to “illegal immigrants” by extending their presence into the Global South. Like other rich nations, Australia has used diplomatic pressure to gain Indonesia’s support in keeping migrants from pursuing irregular forms of migration and claiming asylum on Australian shores, which is cushioned by generous incentives (e.g., financial assistance, aid, and training). By putting their own security first, Australia has fundamentally distorted the language of “burden-sharing” to obscure the reality of “burden-shifting” regarding their refugee crisis (Missbach 2015). This is not a unique phenomenon; the USA-Mexico relationship provides another example of one country channeling resources to its poorer neighbor to keep unwanted immigrants from reaching its borders.

In a globalized world of travel and migration flows, asylum seekers continue to move, but they are no longer traveling directly to destinations that offer first place of refuge. The emergence of transit migration in the 21st century has been a response to the externalization measures and non-arrival regimes of the West. Indonesia, like so many other transit destinations in the Global South, is only ever considered to be temporary for refugees, who “are cognizant of
the fact that sooner or later they will either be forced backwards or have to move forward, regardless of whether migration laws in that country allow for that movement to occur” (Clark 2018, 37). Transit states become borderland regions between refugee-producing countries and nations that are signatories of the UN 1951 Refugee Convention.

For refugees, transit becomes a limbo situation where they are stuck in a place where they have no aspirations to be and no prospects for the near- or long-term future. Current trends suggest that protracted situations in the Global South are only going to increase for forcibly displaced populations (UNHCR 2018). With the global dispersal of refugees in developing countries, governments and migrants are forced to deal with temporary yet protracted displacement. Whereas countries in North America and Europe have regional frameworks outlining their response to irregular migrants and refugees, many countries in the Global South do not have such frameworks or regulations. Moreover, many governments do not consider displaced people a main concern, as they face their own issues of development. This further marginalizes refugees and complicates their uncertainties, as they remain stuck in nations that offer no resources with little protection and help. With this understanding, there should be an increased interest in developing countries that host thousands of displaced refugees in protracted situations but lack the resources and framework to appropriately respond to such a crisis.

8.2 Concluding Remarks

Due to various factors, transit refugees in Indonesia are increasingly finding themselves ‘stuck’ waiting in a country where they face instability and uncertainties that hinder their migration trajectory of resettlement. With no desire or safe way to return home, and the inability to resettle somewhere new, the refugees remain in limbo. ‘Stuckedness’ and a ‘life-on-hold’ illustrate the lives of asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia, as waiting becomes the norm. For asylum seekers in protracted situations, learning how to bring a sense of stability and certainty to the present life in transit becomes just as important, if not more, as finding durable solutions for the future. States hoping to alleviate the problems of irregular migration and the refugee crisis can better inform policymakers by paying closer attention to what happens to migrants in transit.

Many of the struggles that asylum seekers experience result from their protracted yet transitory status, engendering spatial and temporal uncertainties that are so crucial to understanding the lives of refugees in Indonesia. As long as stakeholders, including the
Indonesian government and refugees themselves, hold onto the long-overdue notion of transit being temporary without acknowledging the protracted reality, little help will be offered to transit refugees and the search for temporary solutions will be ignored. Asylum seekers in Indonesia lack access to basic services and human rights, which contributes to mental health problems among refugees who struggle with boredom, anxiety, and depression, feeling as though their lives are wasted in limbo. Transit refugees often consider their lives as having been put-on-hold, and many struggle to invest in the present or integrate based on their assumptions that they will not stay in the transit country long-term. Overall, asylum seekers in Indonesia lack adequate protection, have no access to employment and education, and face poverty and social exclusion, which has largely become a process of marginalization and criminalization rather than protection and integration (Missbach 2015).

However, I argue that asylum seekers and refugees in Indonesia may seize the opportunity to transform their liminal time in transit and utilize different strategies to cope with protracted uncertainties through active waiting. Ethnographic immersion suggests that migrant (im)mobility and experiences during transit are more complex than the commonly held notion of passive waiting. I argue that waiting takes a pro-active stance, capable of productivity and producing profound transformations. Active waiting, comprised of a variety of strategies, becomes a coping mechanism for refugees in Indonesia, especially when spending so many years ‘doing nothing’ becomes unbearable. Whether through the use of technology to create an international network, learning to integrate locally and speak Indonesian, or participating in refugee-run community initiatives and education programs, asylum seekers in Indonesia ‘move on’ and have found ways to navigate and contest their marginalized status in society.

8.3 A Cautionary Note

In this paper, I aim to give a voice to people who feel otherwise forgotten. As argued, more durable solutions should be available to refugees living in transit. And in order to alleviate some of their immediate problems, more focused attention should be placed on understanding the experiences and uncertainties they face in limbo. This paper aims to do exactly that, by exploring how refugees who live in protracted transit in Indonesia are building better lives for themselves and manage to find hope, despite the many structural challenges that hinder their ability to live comfortably and thrive in their current environment. Still, protracted uncertainties in prolonged displacement remain urgent problems for the welfare of transit refugees.
My conclusion is not to romanticize the ‘active waiting’ of refugees in Indonesia and overlook the broader geopolitical structures that induce such displacement and waiting in the first place. “The creation of a more tolerable transit space through the hard fought efforts of asylum seekers is a positive development. However, it should not be used as an excuse for governments to remain disengaged or to further disengage from their responsibilities to protect displaced people” (Clark 2018, 47-48). The fear here is that the strategies and coping mechanisms through which refugees engage with to overcome protracted uncertainty and regain a sense of existential mobility could potentially justify the lack of urgency to find solutions and the withdrawal of much needed support. Valorizing the ability to endure a crisis and ‘stick it out’ is a common narrative that can “distort the usual neoliberal order of rewarding those who seek to transcend themselves and their current conditions by equating the passivity of waiting with a nobleness of the human spirit and autonomous action with a deficiency of willpower” (Clark 2018, 48).

Even the pursuit of temporary solutions may unintentionally reinforce this narrative and prolong transit. I asked one informant what help could be done or offered to refugees in Indonesia as they wait for resettlement. I inquired, “Do you think if you were allowed to work it would be easier to live here?” After all, the employment restriction was one of the most frequent grievances I heard from refugees explaining their struggles in Indonesia. However, my informant responded, “No, if they let us work, we won’t ever be resettled.” Although one may wonder why someone would reject an opportunity to regain basic rights, the consequences of this “benefit” could ultimately reproduce the cycle of indefinite transit, where refugees risk never reaching a permanent solution.

In light of these modest improvements and transformations in transit, we should not be deterred from focusing on the broader structural challenges of protracted displacement. An American volunteer at one of the centers told me discouragingly, “I don’t have much hope or optimism for their future. They’re just doing the best they can with what they have, which isn’t that much.” Refugees cannot be expected to ‘stick it out’ and endure the crisis indefinitely. While durable solutions should be pursued in earnest with every sense of urgency, a protracted reality means that finding ways to alleviate the most pressing challenges of transit must be implemented immediately.
8.4 Recommendations

The UNHCR defines a protracted refugee situation (PRS) as one where “refugee populations have moved beyond the emergency phase – where the focus is on life-saving protection and assistance – but have not yet achieved durable solutions and, based on current trends, are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future” (UNHCR 2018). If indeed no durable solutions will be achieved in the near future, an increased attention on how asylum seekers experience and cope with protracted displacement will help inform our approach to temporary solutions.

My first argument is to shift our understanding of displacement as a temporary period of waiting to a more appropriate image that reflects the reality of prolonged, indefinite waiting. While some refugees will require immediate aid, most asylum seekers facing PRS are self-settled in developing countries. In these regions, a short-term humanitarian aid response, such as the set-up of refugee camps, is neither helpful nor practical. I argue that this is a development issue, where host countries must consider and defend the dignity and welfare for all residents, extending rights to non-citizens.

In the past, when refugees were first arriving to Indonesia in large numbers, the UNHCR had a sign posted at the office in Jakarta that discouraged refugees from participating in organized activities at risk of negatively affecting their resettlement cases. However, since then, refugees have created their own schools and community centers. These organized activities that would have breached UNHCR’s statement are, what I argue, necessary for survival and the preservation of hope for a better future, as group activities and initiatives have given refugees a meaning and purpose in life during protracted transit. The UNHCR has since retracted the original message and now encourages refugees to engage in positive activities.

My data analysis suggests that proactive waiting and the pursuit of meaningful activities are important coping strategies that provide refugees a sense of purpose and empowerment. Therefore, I recommend finding ways for refugees to remain active and engaged in the host country as they wait in limbo. In particular, opportunities for education (and certification) and employment should be prioritized. By providing new insights into the strategies that refugees in Indonesia take to overcome uncertainties and cope with protracted displacement, I aim to show how efforts for inclusive development can have a profound impact in refugee communities.
The refugee-run learning centers in Bogor provide an excellent example, where with minimal economic support from outside sources, refugees were able to establish initiatives that provided life-transforming benefits for the community. If given the opportunities and resources, even at minimal levels, asylum seekers are capable of profound accomplishments. With skills in entrepreneurship, science and technology, and more, refugees in Indonesia are highly educated but unable to realize their personal and professional aspirations. In the current situation, neither those seeking asylum nor Indonesia and aid agencies, which have provided some support to refugees, are able to benefit from each other’s capabilities. If refugees were able to study and work as a means to support themselves, reliance upon external agencies would decline and agency funding could be better allocated for other projects.

Establishing the first refugee-run learning center was no easy task, and it involved navigating Indonesian bureaucracies with the constant fear of local backlash that might negatively impact their cases for asylum. If Indonesia offered substantial protections for non-citizens and asylum seekers, refugees would not have to live in constant uncertainty and fear that their community centers, which have been so influential to the betterment of their welfare, might be at risk of being shut down by local authorities at a moment’s notice.

Indonesian policies must be amended and development goals improved to reconsider all residents, including asylum seekers. Currently, refugees in Indonesia still live with a considerable amount of uncertainty, since Indonesia has yet to expand rights and protections to these non-citizens. Inclusive development will help ensure that refugees can live with dignity and autonomy, while also contributing to the welfare of Indonesian society. Regarding aid-giving states and organizations, a humanitarian response has been the traditional position for assisting refugees, but I argue that long-term development proposals will be more effective at finding solutions, both temporary and permanent, for refugees in protracted situations.

Until all refugee-producing conflicts and circumstances cease and countries of resettlement increase quotas to address the unreasonable number of displaced refugees, asylum seekers in protracted situations around the globe will continue to live in uncertainty for an indefinite period of time. The urgency of this crisis will only increase; finding alternative solutions and engaging in a variety of coping mechanisms to alleviate the most pressing conditions of protracted displacement may be the only option. Crucially, the ability to seize such opportunities and utilize these strategies depend on the available capabilities, resources, and protections that allow
refugees to actualize their potential in spaces where basic services and human rights are granted to all.
References


