Foreword

Of fat white buffalos, dirty dogs, and sleazy machos – A tender hoo-ha on swearing, mocking and belonging

Well he’s not very handsome to look at
Oh he’s shaggy and he eats like a hog
And he’s always killin’ my chickens
That dirty old egg-suckin’ dog

(Dirty Old Egg Suckin’ Dog, by Jack Clement/John R. Cash, 1966)

“Wow. You are big now! Big Thomas! Who would have thought? Biiiiig!”, Habib greeted me, a few months ago at a street intersection in the center of the Javanese court city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia, where we had spent so many nights, days and significant parts of our lives between 2001 and 2015. Habib was an outspoken young man that I had befriended over the last decade through my research on the coming of age on the streets of Java. The now 35-year old had spent over twenty years as a ‘street kid’, wandering elegantly back and forth between local ostracism or neglect and transnational NGO attention. “You are fat now, bro! Crazy!”, he assured me, with a big grin on his face, pinching my belly, raising his eyebrows, taking a puff at his thick clove cigarette, before bursting into laughter with a loud (and rather “un-Javanese”) “huhuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!” Passing motorbike drivers, bus conductors, customers at a mobile chicken skewers stall, and a few pedestrians, many of them dressed in senior high-school uniforms, had “inconspicuously” turned their gaze and attention towards the odd spectacle at the street corner.

I had learned over the years that public cursing, swearing, joking, mocking and insulting was an essential part of collective identification with street-related communities and a bold performance of communicating one’s desire for belonging. Such “rituals of obscenity” could at times resemble staged cursing competitions, where two or more young men insulted each other with obscenities until one of them ran out of words, idioms, or modified proverbs. By means of such rhetorical contests, hierarchies could be subtly questioned and newcomers socialized into (sub)culturally valued speech and interaction practices. The otherwise sanctioned raising of one’s voice in public, or the penalized public articulation of swear words and other made-up vulgar expressions, was particularly celebrated during the nightly sit ins at crowded street corners. Since public swearing was considered inappropriate in a local context in which refined speech and reserve, deference and devotion were the dominant and appreciated way of interacting and communicating in public, the young men created their own “happy language” based on a subverted form of the Javanese alphabet, in order to camouflage their mocking of cultural elites and political
authorities. Furthermore, the Indonesian language’s abundance of everchanging acronyms was adapted to new meanings. For example, SH, originally the academic title for *Sarjana Hukum* (Bachelors of Law) became *Susah Hidup* (hard life); when the protagonists spoke of SMP (*Sekolah Menengah Pertama* ‘Junior High School’), they were actually referring to those NGOs that provided food and other supplies without any restrictions or further demands for reciprocation (*Sudah Makan Pergi* ‘leave after you eat’). When they said they attended *UGM* or *Universitas Gajah Mada* (one of Indonesia’s leading universities), they actually meant *Universitas Gelandangan Malioboro* (*University of the Malioboro Homeless*), referring to their “home” in the public spaces.

“Like a big fat white buffalo! I wonder how your meat tastes – huhuuuuuuuu!” Habib continued to challenge me. I felt that he was not only waiting for my counterattack; he was testing my loyalties to the community that I had once so proudly embodied through style and speech during the heydays of my previous fieldworks. I had not returned either to Yogyakarta or the street corner in a couple of years. That morning, I had bumped into Habib as I made my motorized way through the crowded streets to one of the city’s many campuses. He knew that I had become a lecturer at a German university, and I had heard that he became a carpenter in a renowned wood carving workshop, as well as creating extra income by busking at street junctions and in restaurants. Back at the formerly familiar street corner, I felt observed by the passersby in the immediate surroundings. Habib had publicly and raucously called me a “big fat white buffalo”, after all. Probably adding to the spectacle was the fact that I wore clean shoes, long pants, and a rather formal shirt. My hair was neatly combed. This style was not only different from the days we had spent years together on the city’s streets, but my “fashion” was also different from Habib’s sandals, his muscle shirt covering only parts of his tattoos, and worn-out jeans. I felt embarrassed in quite a few ways, yet I was hesitant to respond adequately in his terms. I felt that swearing back at him, as I used to do, might have been perceived as highly disruptive to my own appearance towards the surrounding public and their assumed normative social, cultural and linguistic expectations regarding the well-dressed foreigner. How would swearing and cursing affect Habib? For better or for worse? I remembered this feeling of “being torn” from my previous fieldwork in the city. Whereas I had initially quietly withdrawn from such awkward situations, I had learned through the years that they could tip me off into subversive and affective forms of communicating my solidarity with street-related communities, who were socially and morally positioned at the city’s margins. Habib’s grinning face kept testing me as to whether I was willing to testify to my ongoing desire to belong to the “street community”, or not. I had translated his emotive ways of addressing me in public into a challenge: “Whose side are you on?”
“You dirty dog, you criminal, where did you steal this filthy cigarette?” it burst out of me. “I am sure you tricked some poor old lady, huhuuuuuuu!” I continued and started laughing loudly. Habib threw his arms in the air and made obscene dancing moves with his hips and upper body. He burst into laughter. “You..., you dirty German tank, you bulldozer! You, ... you ... , you sleazy macho ... You funny-faced fish, who I love more than my egg-sucking dog!” – and so forth. After a few more exchanges of laughing, shouting and swearing at each other we hugged and wandered off to the nearest food stall, where we ordered iced tea and cigarettes. None of the onlookers asked any questions or addressed us. We were inconspicuously ignored by the public, its ears and eyes. They looked through us. After catching up at the crowded food stall in the center of Yogyakarta for an hour, Habib and I parted. Once back on the streets again, already making our ways in different directions, we turned around one last time with grinning smiles. “Criminal,” he hissed. “Coward,” I replied, and I made my way to the air-conditioned library at the other end of town.

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