“TO HELL WITH SYMBOLS!” Men, Pigeons, and the Violence of Interpretation

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A friend recently sent me a video he took in a busy Surabaya alley of a man stitching closed the chest of a racing pigeon cut open by electrocution from an overhead powerline. The video reminded me that Surabaya’s racing pigeons are only observable in the busy alleys of its low-income neighborhoods (*kampung*), rather than in dedicated arenas like pits (Geertz 1973) or stadiums (Bubandt 2024). Racing pigeons were only observable to me because I lived in those alleys, studying the city from the inside out through what some call its interior frontier, its back blocks, or its *kampungs* (Stoler 2022; Peacock 1968; Kusno 2015; Newberry 2006). This article continues such study through the lens of men and pigeons. It is supported by regular periods of ethnographic fieldwork, totaling thirty-five months since 1998, archival research, and a reading of *Koong: The Story of a Pigeon*, an Indonesian novel that presents pigeons as equivocal.[1] The equivocality of pigeons is a quality that I argue protects poor and underemployed *kampung* men from what they call the “violence of interpretation” (*kekerasan interpretasi*)—a violence that gives dangerous meanings to things they do. As I explain below, it is a violence they articulate through the story of a man who was killed for speaking up against colonialism, and a violence against which they protect with pigeons.

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Violence loomed for these men in May 1998 when Indonesia's authoritarian government collapsed. They were too scared to join the anti-government protests on the streets outside their *kampung*. As far as they were concerned, they lacked the privilege to speak up like the protesters, fearing that if they did, they could die like their forebears had during earlier waves of political violence (Peters 2013). Rather than protest on the streets, they raced pigeons in the alleys, where they looked out at the city from the safety of their rooftop pigeon coops. Pigeons kept them in the *kampung*, protected from the political violence outside. They likened this protection to that afforded the prophet Muhammad by the thicket of undisturbed pigeon nests across the entrance to the cave where he hid, which, according to legend, made his enemies think it unoccupied. But as these men kept to the safety of the *kampung*, an Australian expatriate who visited me there had a different interpretation of what pigeons did for men. In his view, pigeons were public-facing animals through which men made clear statements. Pointing to the pigeons in the many rooftop coops, he said, "Men here are showing to the world outside that they are in control by controlling those birds." His interpretation felt seductive. It appealed to the commonsense cliches that birds are symbols and that men like to show control, often through animals (Morris 1967; Geertz 1973; Connell 1995; Marvin 1988; Evans, Gauthier, and Forsyth 1998). Based on my observations, however, these men sought neither show nor control. Instead, they sought to live quietly and equivocally in a postcolonial city where pigeons made meaning impossible.

This impossibility of meaning proved impossible for my visitor to accept. He was concerned with what was "getting said" by men through birds (Geertz 1973, 10). My neighbors shared no such concern. They preferred the doctrine that—as they would say—you must "never let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." Originally espoused by the disciple Matthew, and in similar terms by the prophet Muhammad, it is a doctrine known to my neighbors for its devaluing of things that get something said and its valuing of those that do not. Like the opacity doctrine outlined by anthropologists of the Pacific, this doctrine about the dissonance between one's hands accepts that what gets said means little (Robbins and Rumsey 2008; Schieffelin 2008). Unlike more recent iterations of the opacity doctrine, however, it shows that opacity does not result from a lack of government leaving people illegible (Bovensiepen 2023; Stasch 2023; Buitron and Steinmüller 2021), but from an excess of it forcing people to make themselves so (Scott 1990; Mbembe 1992; Stoler 2022). This is particularly the case for men who race pigeons in Indonesia, where government crackdowns raze pigeon coops and jail gamblers (Bubandt 2024; Peters 2013).

It is in this context of excess government that I set pigeon racing—an illegal activity that has attracted the persecutory power of the police and the army since colonial times (Frederick 1989; Peters 2013). Without understanding this persecutory power—or what James Scott (1990, 183) called "the reality of persecution"—it is not possible to understand pigeon racing as an equivocal activity that demands what Ward Keeler (1987, 257) calls a "dissembled self" that blends in and avoids taking clear positions on things. One does this not by hiding from sight but by blending into the thickets of entangled interaction that happen in plain sight in the open space of the *kampung* alley around pigeons. Blending into the thickets involves the established Javanese practice of accepting (*nrima*) what comes (Hefner 1985, 154–55) and being in equanimity with it (Geertz 1960, 13) by going "with its flow" (Keeler 1987, 227). Yet it is not done as a matter of "customary protocol" (Hefner 1985, 107). Rather, it is done in response to the long-standing threat in Indonesia of state-sanctioned violence, and done with the help of non-human animals like pigeons and the unknowability that surrounds them (Neimanis 2023; Chao 2026).

The pigeon is what Nils Bubandt (2024, 5) calls cosmological because it can mean "many incommensurate things at once to different people." This could be because it is contrary, a feature that Mary Douglas (1957, 56) noticed but could not explain. She mused that the pigeon exemplifies peace for some people, possibly because of the fidelity it shows its mate—but it can also show its mate exceptional violence by stomping and pecking it to bits. Peace and violence are not its only contrary traits. It can also walk or fly, be a pet or wild, be in the crowd or high above it, and stay with its keeper or abandon its keeper. It is an elusive animal that the avant-garde author Iwan Simatupang (1986) comprehends in his novel about an Indonesian man and his mute pigeon. Unlike the peacock in Toni Morrison's 1977 *Song of Solomon*, a novel about black American men (Bennett 2020), the pigeon in Simatupang's novel has no referent other: no man it exemplifies, and nothing it gets said. For Simatupang (1986), what it gets said can "go to hell," because what that is has remained elusive.

The elusiveness of the pigeon is helped by a multispecies entanglement that happens in the *kampung* alleys and keeps things equivocal and not attuned, or what I call "dissonant." This entanglement between pigeons and men does not occur in a "contact zone," where things cohere "to make a kind of one out of two" (Haraway 2008, 219), but in a "shatterzone" (Stoler 2022), where things break apart to make a kind of two out of one. In Simatupang's (1986, 81) words, the paths that bring men and birds together in the alley "break as soon as they intersect," leaving what Patricia Spyer (1998) calls a gap between men and birds

and men themselves. This gap is not bridged by attunements (Tsing 2022) that enable those on either side to coordinate and win a competition or communicate across differences (Haraway 2008; Kohn 2007). Instead, it is striated by dissonances that make men realize why the promise of intersubjective understanding can, as Simatupang puts it, "go to hell."

A PIGEON'S-EYE VIEW

Simatupang knew that the colonial order of things that kept poor men in *kampungs* did not end with independence, nor did the dissent it caused (Stoler 2022; Aveling 2019). An enduring form of such dissent is equivocation—an elusive form of communication that Ann Laura Stoler (2022) attributes to an avant-garde of anti-authoritarian writers and that I extend here to pigeon keepers. Equivocation colored Simatupang's novels. It took the form of outsiders like tramps and enfeebled animals who live in a postcolonial world that could not decipher them while they could decipher it. They were abnormal, unpredictable, and indecipherable to that world. As Harry Aveling (2019, xiii–xiv) explains, Simatupang "contrasts the world of the outsider—who is apparently mad but has access to some imagined deeper truth—with the respectable world of those who are truly mad [or] average, . . . boring, and imitative." The respectable or "normal" man, writes Simatupang, "is to blame for every disharmony in the world" (Aveling 2019, xiv). He is blinded by an anthropocentric one-dimensionality and predictability that denies him access to deeper truths or different perspectives. The pigeon achieves this sort of deeper truth in Simatupang's last novel, *Koong,* which he wrote in Surabaya in the late-1960s. The novel presents a mute and enfeebled pigeon that makes it difficult for a man to see into and decipher the lives of other men, but easy to see outside his own life and get it in perspective, like Simatupang's pigeon did for him through its intangible "inner voice" (*koong*)—a voice without sound—that drew him outside to see (Aveling 1986; Toda 1984).

This ability to see more clearly out than in is what a pigeon keeper explained to me as the "pigeon's-eye view": a two-way-mirror of sorts for men that makes their world easy to see out of but difficult to see into. He explained this two-way-mirror effect in terms of a "pecker's view" and a "bird's-eye view." The pecker's view was a terrestrial one got by the pigeon as it waddles along the alley and pecks at debris, while the birds-eye view was a celestial one got by it as it flies across the sky (Bagus, personal communication, August 26, 2022). The terrestrial view sees the *kampung* from ankle-height through thickets of horizontally layered detail, while the celestial view sees it from the sky as a canopy of rooftops within the variegated terrain of a city. Both views are ways of *being seen*—or

blurred by thickets of detail and hidden under a canopy of rooftops—and ways of *seeing*, or looking through the thickets and rising above the canopy to see a city. They are a way of seeing and being seen but not deciphered.

This pigeon's-eye view is a type of knowing and not knowing. It is like the cosmopolitical type, which knows there are "no everyones who know, and there is nothing given to be known" (Verran 2018, 114), but it is a more skeptical type that knows that this elusive sort of knowing and not knowing can be undone by encounter and collaboration with more powerful others who seek to know (Neimanis 2023; Verran 2018; Yates-Doerr 2019; Blaser and de la Cadena 2018; Viveiros de Castro 2004). The men in this article learned through a popular story I detail below that collaboration with powerful others turned a not-so-powerful, pigeon-loving *kampung* man into what Stoler (2022) calls a user of "fearless speech," an unequivocal type of speech not meant for men like him and that got him killed. The story reminds men to deal with postcolonial power

Figure 1. Rooftop coop at junction of alley and street. Photo by Robbie Peters, 2016.

by not collaborating with it and not speaking up about it. Instead of speaking up about it and exposing the cracks in it that reveal what Stoler (2022) calls its "entrails," men use the cracks as points of dissonance through which to escape being known. The escape happens when they converge from other areas in the open space of a main alley to race pigeons. It is there and then that the city enters the kampung and its men are most exposed (see Figures 1 and 2), but it is also there and then, notes Simatupang (1986), that men cross paths that break as they meet because of the dissonance of the interactions that happen among them around pigeons.

THE ALLEY

These men exemplify those who Abidin Kusno (2015) calls the Indonesian city's "internal others." They spend much of their time racing pigeons in *kampungs* that are as hidden inside the city as they were in decades past. The anthropologist James Peacock (1968, 18) described those *kampungs* as hidden "within hollowed out areas that grow inside downtown city blocks like cavities in teeth," while the historian William Frederick (1978, 190) described them as "literally greyed out or cordoned off" by the "newest buildings" and "broadest boulevards." A good example is Dinoyo, the *kampung* I discuss in this article. Frederick (1978) described it as the city's most working-class *kampung*, housing its pedicab drivers, factory hands, maids, and coolies in a maze of narrow alleys hidden between the city's main boulevard to the west, its garden suburbs to the north and south, and its industrial estate to the east. About a kilometer long and half a kilometer wide, it remains one of Surabaya's most densely populated *kampungs*, with about 10,000 people crammed into crumbling concrete houses along narrow, flood-prone alleys.

Men converge in these alleys to be with each other and their pigeons. They typically build coops on the roofline, where they spend much time caring for their pigeons, feeding them, spraying them with water to cool them, and pairing them with mates they return to in races that happen from dawn to dusk every day. By loving pigeons, a man has reason to be outside. He is raggedy, underemployed, and out of place on the streets or in the parks or malls or workplaces of the wider city, but he has a place in the alley where he meets other men and their pigeons. In the alley with pigeons was the only place that most men could comfortably be. Their homes were hot and stuffy, the factories that employed them were shut down, the malls that replaced the factories were intimidating, and the motorbike-taxis they drove to earn income were no longer profitable. Being with pigeons was—in one man's words—how men came "face to face with the city" without leaving the *kampung*.

Through pigeon racing, the city enters the *kampung* and the *kampung* enters the city, a convergence that AbdouMaliq Simone (2015) says crowds-men-together and gives them perspectives from beyond their *kampung*. It achieves what Jane Guyer (2004) calls a convergence of dissonant scales of the near and the far, the familiar and the foreign, or what James Siegel (1986, 131) calls "a series of planes" that converge in Javanese impressions of the *kampung* and the world beyond it. This convergence is motivated by what Simone (2015) calls a person's "interest in exteriority," which they realize by being with other people in the alley, rather than traveling to other places. Reliant on a meeting point where people cross paths, it brings the city together in one place, but it is not a place of understanding. The alley is instead a place of equivocation that a pigeon keeper explained to me through reference to Surabaya's ribald clown theater (*ludruk*), where it appears through a door, gate, or window that divides a *kampung* setting from a wider urban or rural setting. This sense of inside and outside in *ludruk* captures the alley as a meeting point where dialogue races back and forth between dissimilar people who are drawn into dissonant interactions (Bagus, personal communication, September 20, 2013; Peacock 1968; Supriyanto 1992). In Simatupang's (1986) terms, this meeting point is that point of dissonant interaction where the paths that bring men together break as they intersect, and where pigeons as symbols can go to hell. It is where men and pigeons come together and are most seen yet least understood.

PLAIN SIGHT

Dinoyo's alleys are where men race pigeons in plain sight. Despite this, I only noticed pigeon racing after living in Dinoyo for some months. It happened when a young man holding a fistful of cash called out to a boy on my neighbor's roof and asked him to stop flying his kite because it was scaring the racing pigeons. The cash he held suggested that he was a bookkeeper with the money that men had wagered on a race the boy had disrupted, but I could not be sure. As I would learn, what men do around pigeons is never clear.

More recently, a man with a fistful of cash was arrested in the alley by undercover police, but released after the neighborhood head told the police he had given the man the cash to buy paint to repaint the alley gateway. The police could not disprove this and released the man, who went and bought the paint with the cash the police had returned to him. The neighborhood head then paid the men at the pigeon races for work he said they had done to repair a drain. He was not replacing money they had gambled, since, as he attests, nobody really gambles on pigeon races. Instead, pigeon racing is just a hobby that the police

often agree is good for men because it keeps them off the streets and busy with the many income-earning opportunities that converge in the *kampung* (*Surabaya Post*, September 13, 1998; Peters 2013). The neighborhood head added that pigeons were being raced in preparation for Independence Day celebrations, when men will race them for the prize of outdated coins that they can sell to metal recyclers. Whatever the case, one thing complicated another thing and, as one man put it, "nothing is clear despite it being clear to see." The detail was just too thick and entangled—or too busy (*ramai*)—for the police to make sense of it.

The alleys where men race pigeons are places where things happen in plain sight through the "co-presence" of people in open space (Widlok 2017, 60–77; Edwards 2022), but they are also places where those things get obscured by the many other things that happen, or what might be called the *co-happening* of things (see Figure 2). They are places that remind me to be cognizant of Oscar Wilde's (2013, 19) line that the "true mystery of the world is the visible," and of the caution by Keeler (1987, 248) that the Javanese perceive great risks in the Western practice of interpreting what the visible means. Eric Wolf (1990, 593) considered such interpretive practice as common to "shamans, *tohunga*, or academics," while Matt Tomlinson and Matthew Engelke (2007, 1) blamed it for the "deadly confusion" that plagues the idea of meaning in anthropology. For Webb Keane (1997, 680), such practice derives from the "commonsense view of language [as] point[ing] to things in the world," but when applied to postcolonial Indonesian settings, where language serves to obfuscate things, the commonsense view leads to misunderstanding.

For Dinoyo men who fear the authoritarian political violence that has infected their city for decades, interpreting what things mean is dangerous. When studying these men, one should not look for what things mean, but for how meaning is made impossible. It involves appreciating that there are, writes Siegel (1986, 137), things that one "knows to be not understood" and that the not understood works through various forms of equivocation like facades, fakes, dubs, and puzzles that make it impossible to know what something means (Keeler 1987; Spyer 1998; Boellstorff 2005; Strassler 2020; Gibbings 2021). Keeler (1987, 103) put it more simply in his study of central Javanese men in the decade or so after the anti-Communist purge had silenced them. They coped, he wrote, by "falling back on safer models" of behavior that treated as stupid and dangerous the more direct and fearless modes used by Communists and revolutionaries in the 1950s (see Peacock 1968; Aveling 2001). They had good reason to fall back. Many who had marched under the Communist banner, displayed its logo, or consorted with its members suffered violent interrogations that the

security forces learned from the Japanese during the Second World War and the Dutch during the revolution, and that they would repeat during the killings of 1982 and 1998 (Robinson 2018; Peters 2013; Barker 2024). The interrogations involved using spies and torture to discover things about people that were used against them, and it became what Geoffrey Robinson (2018, 34) called "part of the institutional repertoire and culture" of the Indonesian security forces. It was an unfortunate aspect of what Clifford Geertz (1973, 235) called "the realities of postcolonial social life in Indonesia," and it reminded people of the protective power of survivalist forms of equivocation that help people escape definition.

In Dinoyo, equivocation works through the co-happening of things. These co-happenings help men with what Keeler (1987, 48) calls their need to escape "the definitions ascribed to a person in interaction." Men escape definitions by escaping into thickets of interaction that happen in the alley around pigeon races. A person's presence at a pigeon race is incidental. They are there for reasons other than pigeons. They are fixing a bicycle, slaughtering a goat, sorting scrap, minding a child, selling food, or passing though. While doing such things, they happen on a pigeon race and stop to watch it or talk to someone. I would happen on a pigeon race in this way too. Not happening on a pigeon race would mean not living in the *kampung*, where going anywhere requires going through alleys that are full of people doing things. Those things are dissonant—a quality that saw them satirized in the clown comedies that would perform in the main alley where men race pigeons (Peacock 1968; Peters 2013). Simatupang captured this dissonance through his portrayal of men as so close yet so far from each other when around pigeons. Whatever brings them together comes apart around pigeons. They are together but elsewhere with their own thoughts. This intersubjective dissonance is an example of when, in Achille Mbembe's (1992, 8) words, "meaning is impossible in the postcolony." It is an impossibility that happens around pigeons and other ambiguous figures like clowns and animals, but it is a productive impossibility that men exploit to confuse the postcolonial order.

EQUIVOCAL ANIMALS

The power of animals to confuse the order of things inspired combatants at the outbreak of the Indonesian revolution in 1945. Beneath the pigeon coops in the Dinoyo *kampung*, men prepared to confront British troops that had entered the city to safeguard the Dutch. As they prepared, they thought of releasing the animals from the nearby zoo to join them in the fight (Abdulgani 1974). The idea made sense in the area around Dinoyo, where the colonial order had been inverted through a redistribution of light. The electricity that lit the surrounding

European neighborhoods had been diverted into the *kampung*, where residents ran cables to lights taken from European homes and streets (Abdulgani 1974; *Siaran Kilat*, November 3, 1945; Heru, personal communication, January 21, 2010). This redistribution of light achieved a real inversion of a popular anticolonial depiction of Surabaya as a city where Europeans dined in restaurants along streets flooded with electric light, and Indonesians ate at rickety stalls along alleys lit by the flicker of kerosene lamps (Kartodikromo 1981). To make it more real and bring the "poetics of dissent" in literature into urban space by shattering the boundaries of the colonial order (Stoler 2022, xxx), the men who were preparing to confront British troops could think of nothing better than shattering the colonial city's most interior boundary—the imprisonment of animals.

Pigeons are the animal most adept at shattering boundaries. They fly messages across enemy territory during war, or race between neighborhoods during lockdowns and curfews, blurring the boundaries between places (Shell 2015; Tawil-Souri 2022). But they also blur boundaries between species by cohabiting with *kampung* men. Men spend much time with pigeons, and much of the day covered in pigeon droppings and feathers. This entanglement with pigeons and its behind-the-scenes labor of cleaning and repairing coops is the most characteristic feature of pigeon keeping for anthropologists who study it (Jerolmack 2013; Kavesh 2023). Another feature of it for those who study it is its ability to bring together men from different backgrounds while leaving their differences intact (Kavesh 2023; Bubandt 2024). This gathering of men typically happens on rooftops or in temporary venues for cliques of bird lovers. In Dinoyo, by contrast, it happens in the alley in plain sight of all who converge there, not least women and children. It happens at the edge of houses near the kitchens, where ladders lead to pigeon coops, and it continues into the alley, where neighbors fetch water, wash clothes, repair things, chat, mind children, and come and go from the market, mosque, or communal toilets. Instead of happening on rooftops or venues away from the alley, pigeon keeping and racing is tangled up with life in the alley (Figure 2).

Such entanglement is contrary to more strictly defined gender relations in Java, where men are said to occupy a public domain outside the home and women a domestic one inside it (Geertz 1961; Smith-Hefner 1988; Sullivan 1994). It is also contrary to generational relations in Java, where men are said to be disengaged from children (Geertz 1961; Koentjaraningrat 1967; Keeler 1987). This entanglement of genders, generations, and species is better documented for certain birds that choose to live with rather than apart from other species. A good example told to me by a pigeon keeper, and supported by ornithologists, are

Figure 2. Men, women, and children at a pigeon race. Photo by Robbie Peters, 2024.

birds like warblers that nest around aggressive insects like wasps, ants, and termites, which neither attack nor flee the bird but provide it cover (Sparks 1969, 132). Pigeons are the more well-known example of such *living with* (Haraway 2016). But Surabaya's pigeons do not just live with men; they attract men to them. They draw men into the alley where they are, which is also where women, children, and neighbors are, blurring gendered boundaries, generational boundaries, and species boundaries.

This blurring makes the alley what Stoler (2022) calls a "multiplex" site of things that are not in accord with the colonial ordering of species, ethnicities, genders, and generations into separate domains. Multiplex sites are actual and virtual for Stoler—existing in works of fiction like Simatupang's novels, and in alleys like those of the Dinoyo *kampung*. Donna Haraway (2016) coins the term *terrapolis* to conceptualize such multispecies sites of mixture that are rooted in a place but draw from the world around it. Haraway (2004, 308) likes the multispecies story that such sites convey "because of its impact on the fortifications

between categories of nature." Pigeons defeat these fortifications through a coexistence with humans that blurs boundaries; but for pigeon-racing men in Dinoyo, the blurring achieves something more: inscrutability.

THE VIOLENCE OF INTERPRETATION

Inscrutability was a central theme in Simatupang's novel about a man drawn out of his *kampung* in search of his pigeon. The man and the pigeon become reflective once outside the *kampung*. They are apart yet united by the same problem: the meaning of pigeons. The man concludes, "To hell with symbols! To hell with pigeons," while the pigeon concludes that men do not know what they see in pigeons (Simatupang 1986, 87, 77). Both find that pigeons mean nothing but do something: they draw men outside and into interaction. The idea that pigeons mean nothing but do something challenges Geertz's (1973, 418, 443) premise that birds are "symbols par-excellence" and that they "make nothing happen . . ., they do not even redistribute income in any significant way" for men who bet on them. For Geertz, all birds do is symbolize things for men, and all the observer does is interpret what birds mean. Below, I flip this premise about birds and men by advancing the opposite one by Simatupang of men wanting pigeons as symbols to go to hell because they do not know what pigeons mean. Through this idea of *not knowing*, I show that pigeons make a lot happen.

For Simatupang (1986, 81), pigeons make things happen by drawing men outside to cross paths that break as they intersect. This breakage at intersection is a form of contact that refers to men when they converge around pigeons to observe them, care for them, train them, trade them, and race them. It highlights the subjective dissonance between men, or in Simatupang's (1986, 81) words, it highlights how the "distance between one human heart and another is both the shortest and the longest distance imaginable." This distance is not one that men fill with meaningful webs of shared understanding, but one that is emptied of understanding, making men "more confused when they leave than they were when they arrived" (Simatupang 1986, 82).

The confusion protects men, enabling them to escape what they call the "violence of interpretation" (*kekerasan interpretasi*): a term they use to refer to the interrogations, beatings, finings, jailings, destruction of property, and even killings that result from behavior that the police or the army deem illegal and that pigeon enthusiasts most recently identify with the new mayor's attempt to make Surabaya "free of gambling" by razing pigeon coops and fining and jailing those who bet on pigeon races (Peters 2013; Yono 2025). Pigeons help men deal with this violence by making what they do around them impossible to know, as a pigeon keeper explained:

> Who knows what men and pigeons are doing here? The pigeons in the sky might not be racing, the men sitting beneath them might not be betting on them, the teenager mingling among the men might not be taking bets, and the boy gazing into the sky might not be keeping time. They might be doing other things: the men might be discussing the price of a watch that one of them wants to sell, the teenager might be taking money for some cigarettes he will fetch for them from the store, and the boy might be daydreaming. Or they might be doing all those things. Who knows. More likely, each man is occupied with his own thoughts and is there doing his own thing. (Jono, personal communication, August 20, 2022)

Pigeons make things happen: they bring men together to do things that are equivocal. To illustrate the deadly danger of the interpretive violence done to people who do things that are by contrast unequivocal, Dinoyo men recite the lines of a fatal rhyme spouted in 1943 at a public performance by Surabaya's most famous *ludruk* clown, Durasim. Within days of the performance, Durasim was dead from interrogation by Japanese military police, who tried to beat out of him the meaning of his rhyme. The rhyme was mostly equivocal and safe. It mentioned a random dreamlike association of things that included spinach in a market, the Indonesian flag, the nationalist leader (Dr. Soetomo), a trouser strap, a fermented snack, lightning that splits people apart, an eggplant that grows on the riverbank, a coop that houses pigeons, and suffering that increases under the Japanese. Until the last line about suffering, this rhyming sequence of random details mimicked the Japanese army's wartime news broadcasts, which spewed reports from public loudspeakers about things like rice prices, petrol requisitions, traffic accidents, and rabies infections, inserting after each sequence of information an interlude about Japan being the liberator of Asia (see the wartime newspaper, *Kan Po*). These benign sequences of information before the interludes were a safe way of speaking that offered no interpretations and revealed what was already known: food and petrol were expensive, and roads and dogs were dangerous.

An unsafe and more remarkable way of speaking was the last line, which went: "The coop is the pigeon's home, joining the Japanese increases suffering." Like the interludes in wartime news broadcasts, it shifted from reporting things to interpreting things, with the first, more benign interpretation about pigeons opening the way for the second, more aggressive interpretation about the Japanese. This last line killed Durasim, reckoned an old man: "Durasim's words about suffering under the Japanese were fearless words, but they were also fatal

words": If you speak them you die, or more specifically, he reiterated, "if you speak them *fearlessly as a* kampung *person* you die" (Joko, personal communication December 18, 1998).

Durasim's words were fearless but fatal. Fearless speaking was the privilege of elite spokespeople like Dr. Soetomo, the nationalist leader who Durasim mentioned in his fatal rhyme. Durasim, an illiterate clown from the *kampung*, made the mistake of speaking like Soetomo, a foreign-educated doctor from Surabaya's medical college. Durasim epitomized a provincial Indonesian who reached people through rhyme, while Soetomo epitomized an urbane Indonesian who reached them through reason (Frederick 1989; Anderson 1990). These very different men met years earlier when Soetomo had asked Durasim whether he or his fellow clowns knew the meaning of the white sarong and red cap they wore on stage and the torch they carried to cast light on it (Frederick 1989; Abeyasekere 1972). When they replied that they did not know, Soetomo interpreted for them: the costume symbolized the red and white of the Indonesian flag, and the torch symbolized the Indonesian people's enlightenment (Frederick 1989, 78). This communicative exchange between the intellectual and the clown was the first of many interpretive interventions by the intellectual that would transform the clown from a rhymer of things to an interpreter of things. The transformation made the clown's tens of thousands of illiterate fans from the *kampungs* accuse him of elevating himself above them and having "become one of those intellectuals" who interpreted things for them, whether they liked it or not (Frederick 1989, 66). The clown had learned to speak fearlessly and unequivocally: the privilege of few people.

Men at the pigeon races thought the rhyme reminded them to be equivocal and to stay in the thickets rather than to take the stage and pronounce things. If men are to speak, as one explained, "they must speak figuratively through a dreamlike chain of associations—a weed, a sarong, a pigeon, a coop, a market—that can lead anywhere" (Bakori, personal communication, August 22, 2022). This directionless chain of associations finds expression in alleys that bring men, birds, and things together in a mixed-up way that confounds interpretation. When the man quoted earlier said, "who knows what men and pigeons are doing?" he was telling the truth. More than gambling was happening, if it was happening at all. In Simatupang's terms, men were crossing paths: a form of equivocal interaction that protects them.

PERSPECTIVE

Pigeons fly out of the *kampung* for men who are stuck down in it, giving them an "eye-opening" (*melek*) sense of scale. This sense was much needed during the fall of the authoritarian New Order government (1966–1998) when the political violence made men too scared to leave the *kampung*. Stuck in the *kampung*, they made a living in the alleys and raced pigeons. It was during these hard times that pigeon racing intensified, noted a perplexed journalist, who did not realize that the more stuck men became, the more preoccupied with pigeons they became (*Java Post*, May 13, 1998). Like the poor in the poem, "Eyes of the People," who pulled out the poet's eyes and used them to see out of the authoritarian world they were stuck in (Aveling 2001), men pulled their pigeon out of its coop and cast it into the sky.

Men gained perspective by watching pigeons fly into the distant sky and fly back later from the same distant sky. At that point in the sky beyond what they could see—the point at which the pigeon faded from view or just before it appeared into view—men wedded themselves to their distant bird as it crossed the *kampungs*, traffic jams, political demonstrations, roadblocks, gated communities, industrial estates, and shopping malls below. In these places, a man could be assaulted by *kampung* guards if he entered a foreign neighborhood unannounced, evicted by security guards if he entered a shopping mall in shabby attire, ushered away by student guards if he got too close to a political demonstration, or moved on by police if he lingered on the street. These places striated the city for men, but not their pigeons, which flew from place to place to win a race or deliver a message in even the most dangerous of times when the city was under siege through war, curfew, or rebellion.

The pigeon's ability to connect either side of a spatial boundary matched its ability to obscure such connection by keeping what happens on either side undisclosed. The pigeon never discloses what it saw or did beyond that point at which it faded from the view of men in the *kampung*. It could have been distracted by a female pigeon, spooked by a child's kite, or shocked by an exposed powerline. This world beyond the view of men—and only available to pigeons—put things into perspective through a sense of scale that highlighted the equivocal power of the undisclosed.

This sense of scale made things ambiguous and overlapping, as in a dream. Simatupang (1986, 82) called the pigeon "an official excuse for prolonged daydreaming"—an open-ended sort of thinking that men do when they look into the sky for their pigeon. Peacock captured this sort of thinking in the early 1960s through the following train of thought by the pigeon-obsessed clown, Asmari:

> Father would be drunk . . . . Brought home women . . . . Daytime would race birds. Asmari takes after father in liking birds . . . . Always wins, people rent his birds. They win because he feeds, grooms them all the time . . . . Likes to stroke them. Dream about birds: one very high in the sky—quickly falls. (Peacock and Bouvier 1994, 13)

These lines distilled what many men did: they took after their fathers in racing pigeons, renting them, betting on them, and caring for them. Harder to distill was the last line: "one very high in the sky—quickly falls." Peacock thought it could mean that pigeon-obsessed men were obsessed with their own impotence—symbolized by the quick descent of the pigeon into its coop, like a man's limp penis that fails to rise. But Peacock knew that there was no definitive meaning to this last line and knew that he should not impose one. The last line could have various meanings: the quick descent could also mean sexual penetration as the pigeon enters its coop to reunite with its mate and win the race, profiting the men who bet money on it. The line had power: the power to inoculate itself from a definitive meaning.

EQUANIMOUS LOSERS

The pigeon too often had meaning imposed on it, argued Surabaya's police chief during the economic and political crisis of 1998–1999. He argued that the pigeon kept men in their *kampungs* and earning money, rather than on the street in political protests. "The [pigeon] is very good," he said, "men earn money by making and selling cages, breeding, renting, and selling birds and organizing races," which he deemed not a vice but a hobby that "can boost the economy of the lower classes" (*Surabaya Post*, September 13, 1999). Speaking against conservative vigilantes who threatened to enter *kampungs* and raze pigeon coops, he ordered people "not to lump everything together and think that every pigeon they see indicates gambling." Instead, he wanted people to suspend interpretation and allow men to be, so long as they were to *be in the* kampung.

As police and urban planners over the preceding decades attested, pigeon racing and other alley-based activities and pastimes were a non-violent way of containing poor men by directing their energies into the *kampung* (*Surabaya Post*, July 28, 1982; Peters 2013). Police knew that alleys full of underemployed men racing pigeons together was better than streets full of them hustling for money. They also knew that cracking down on pigeon racing never really stops it, and if it did, there would be a law-and-order problem on the streets. "Pigeon racing works. No need to kill troublemakers anymore to get them off the streets,"

noted a policeman to me in reference to a brutal law-and-order operation in 1982 that summarily executed many lower-class men thought to be in organized street gangs (anonymous personal communication, February 15, 2008; Peters 2013). The pigeon protected men like Asmari from such violence by keeping them in the *kampung*. Asmari was an abject but acceptable figure of a man—abject because he drank, womanized, and gambled, but acceptable because he did it all in the *kampung*. The traffic of pigeons, women, alcohol, and bookkeepers in the *kampung* alleys is what kept him there. As abject as those vices were, and contrary to what a composed Javanese man should indulge in (Brenner 1995; Cooper 2000), they were good because they kept men like Asmari off the street.

Pigeons keep men in the *kampung* but focus them beyond it. During a race, men stand in the alley and look into the sky to spot their bird as it descends into its coop to be with its partner and finish the race (Figure 3). A pigeon that finishes is a well-trained one that does not get distracted by food or female pigeons out in the city. Men spend much time raising such pigeons. They start by building a well-ventilated coop, where a male pigeon is partnered and procreates. To

Figure 3. Spotting a returning pigeon (top center left).
Photo by Robbie Peters, 2024.

make their male pigeon desire his partner, men keep him one week alone in the dark in a cage, one week in the cage with her, and one week locked out of the cage from her. This fills him with a strong desire for his partner, to whom he is paired and trained to return by progressively increasing the distance from which he flies back until the standard racing distance of fifteen kilometers is reached.

About one in five pigeons never return. These errant pigeons give races the high-stakes sense of deep play or looming failure that Geertz (1973) said gave cock fighting its energy. The challenge of pigeon racing and the errant pigeon is that the race will unlikely end the way one wants. To invest in a race by putting one's pigeon in it or betting on it, one must accept almost inevitable loss (*prihatin*)—a fundamental attitude that Koentjaraningrat (1967) said all Javanese parents instill in their children by teaching them to be in equanimity with a world beyond their control. Men express this attitude through sayings, such as "not everyone gets a salary, yet everyone gets lucky [*reseki*], but only if they accept that loss is part of life."

Equanimity is trained into men and pigeons through provocative situations that challenge them not to succumb to the emotion that loss arouses (Cooper 2000). That is what the pigeon locked out of its partner's cage achieves, explained a pigeon keeper: "It stays composed [*tenteram*] amid trouble" (Arief, personal communication, August 10, 2022). The pigeon conveys this composure in different ways. It always looks unperturbed, keeps the same face, and looks like any other pigeon. One never knows what an unfamiliar pigeon is up to. Perched on a fence or pecking at scrap by the roadside, it could be relaxing near its coop, off course and distracted, or a decoy distracting other pigeons off course. Whatever is going on with it, the pigeon stays composed while "staying with the trouble" by never allowing a particular mood or meaning to take hold (Haraway 2016).

CONCLUSION

Like the cockfight, bullfight, or dogfight (Geertz 1973; Marvin 1988; Evans, Gauthier, and Forsyth 1998), the pigeon race can provoke a strong representative association between the virility and determination of the animals and the men who engage them in contest. This essay challenges these seductive associations by looking not for what the pigeon gets said but for what it makes happen in a city that keeps poor men in *kampungs*. The pigeon draws men together in the alley across dissonant scales but retains the dissonance, protecting men and protecting pigeon racing. Like Franz Fanon's (1967) Aesopian take on the Briar rabbit tale as an example of slaves fooling their masters and white Americans fooling themselves by teaching the tale in white schools without realizing its

critique of white ignorance, the pigeon reveals a world that one sees but does not understand: the world in plain sight. The hermeneutical indeterminacy of the pigeon and the men around it destroys the bounds of *what is* for the boundlessness of *what could be*, but it does not end there. It finds a solid place to perch—in the *kampung*, up from the alleys below, and out to the city beyond.

This place to perch proves as important today as it did in colonial times. Municipal urban beautification campaigns by reformist mayors of recent years have made Surabaya's streets into places of passage along which people commute, rather than places of lingering along which they congregate. Like colonial-era idealizations of streets devoid of poor people, this campaign has made Surabaya an award-winning clean city that has achieved the idealized absence of disorder that motivated the authoritarian New Order government (Pemberton 1994). Ironically, perhaps, it is in the post-authoritarian democratic present that the *kampung* works better than ever as an interior frontier that keeps poor men out of the city by hiding them within it. But with the help of pigeons, these men can escape both the *kampung* and the violence of interpretation.

This escape happens by staying in the *kampung* and interacting with the men who converge there around racing pigeons, but it rarely changes the postcolonial order of things. Yet the head of a large cluster of Dinoyo neighborhoods once reminded residents that it sometimes does. Some years ago, while talking to residents after a communal meal, he pointed up to the pigeons and reminded everyone that during the revolution, the ancestors of those birds flew inconspicuously into and out of besieged kampungs with messages that helped people know what was happening in other parts of the city, so they could coordinate an offensive against the colonists. This ability to help people know what is happening outside their kampung while obscuring what is happening inside it makes the pigeon a valued bird for men who must eke out a living in Surabaya's back alleys. Whether the pigeon helped them overthrow the colonial order or just helped them live without violence in a postcolonial one, it could do these things because it was inscrutable.

Mary Douglas was right about the pigeon being a contrary and slippery animal. Meaning could not stick to it—a point the police chief made when he urged against the futile practice of attributing gambling to it given how difficult gambling was to prove and how beneficial pigeon racing was to the city by keeping men in its *kampungs*. As he said, men do many things around pigeons that keep them inside the *kampung*, which is where he wants them. "Pigeon racing works," as the other policeman I quoted earlier said. It works for the police because it keeps underemployed men in the *kampung*, and it works for those men because it gets entangled there in thickets of interaction that make it hard to prosecute.

ABSTRACT

*This article examines men who race pigeons in the back alleys of an Indonesian neighborhood amid government crackdowns on gambling. It introduces the equivocal pigeon: a bird these men present as a-symbolic, or incapable of saying things for or about them. The equivocal pigeon is an intellectually provocative animal that upsets commonsense ideas about birds and men and meaning and turns the city inside out by bringing its back alleys into view but not into understanding. The article shows how racing pigeons achieve this feat by drawing men into busy alleys while shrouding them in a thicket of opaque interactions. It views the city from its alleys, where the pigeon confounds postcolonial ways of knowing and governing people. Building on Javanese ways of not knowing, it shows how the pigeon is a meaning-defying animal that protects men from what they call the violence of interpretation (*kekerasan interpretasi*).* [pigeons; symbols; men; Indonesia; postcolony; equivocality; dissonance; multispecies; gambling]

NOTES

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1. This study includes twelve months' worth of ethnographic fieldwork in 1998, three months in 2000, and twenty months since 2010 over periods of between two and six weeks. It was supported by archival material from the Airlangga University history department library, the defunct Surabaya Post library, the Rooderbrug Historical Society, the Surabaya Municipal Archive, the Monash University and Australian National library archives, and the personal archives of Professors Purnawan Basundoro and Harry Aveling.

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