

## **Styling the Revolution: Masculinities, Youth, and Street Politics**

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### **Homo Jakartensis:**

That is Homo Jakartensis, a Jakarta human, a character that wanders in search, in a city that has become a market for discourse, with choices that are ever-changing.<sup>1</sup> (Seno Gumira Ajidarma: 2004)

Jakarta and its inhabitants must be talked about in the same breath, because one without the other would be incomplete. A bit of colour, a fragment of life, would be missing from the equation that would decide; is Jakarta a metropolitan symbol of the best of Indonesia, or are its excesses closer to the megaslums described by Mike Davis as the most modern development in our understanding of urban living<sup>2</sup>? The urban poor have long been viewed as a potential source of danger, of a disturbance to the social fabric of “good” society that rests above them. They are decidedly, the underclasses. Yet another category of danger and resistance has become commonplace: activists. Since 1997, student activists have been openly organising and agitating the people (workers, farmers, and the urban poor) in the city of Jakarta to cultivate their revolutionary potential. The underclass grows daily, with fresh influxes from the villages and cities increasingly marked as satellites to the constellation of Jakarta’s capital. They prove, through their daily existence, the difficulty of sustaining a living in Jakarta. Radio stations regularly broadcast reports of these marginalised people dying of poverty. The student activists in Jakarta, inhabitants in their own right, mediate between the masses (*massa*) and the elite, positioning themselves in the middle of the glass pyramid of social and economic privilege. Yet within this broadly cast middle, the mostly-middle class university students who created the student movement had to recast their own class positions, siding with the oppressed social groups. Who were they, if they were not ‘elite’? What could they become, as students? How did they experience Jakarta, as a site for their struggle? In the process of politicising their student identities, student activists acquired a social standing couched in terms of moral purity. They represented the people, yet,

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<sup>1</sup> Seno Gumira Ajidarma. *affair: obrolan tentang Jakarta*, Buku Baik, Yogyakarta: 2004. “Itulah para Homo Jakartensis, manusia Jakarta, sosok-sosok yang mengembara dalam pencarian, dalam sebuah kota yang telah menjadi situs pasar wacana, dengan pilihan yang terus menerus berganti.”(Seno Gumira Ajidarma, 2, my translation)

<sup>2</sup> See Mike Davis, “The Urbanization of Empire: Megacities and the Laws of Chaos” in *Social Text* 81, Vol.22, No.4, Winter 2004.



overwhelming, students felt their history was special. In her research on the use of images by the student movement, Karen Strassler notes, “An image of youth as idealistic, ‘pure’ actors had long been fostered in New Order narratives identifying “youth struggle” (*perjuangan pemuda*) as the motivating force behind Indonesian history.”<sup>3</sup> Students stand in tension to the other youth who enter this category of *pemuda*, but who do not have the privileges associated with it.<sup>4</sup>

If my paper is as much about the city of Jakarta, and its undecided self, as it is about the students and activists living in and with this alter ego “Jakarta”, then it should be forgiven, because at the interface of these two fields lie the ephemeral struggle of alternative politics in Indonesia. Jakarta, and the activists agitating within its city-space, represent none other than their own exemplary otherness in the politics of Indonesia.

### **Time and Space: 1998 and Beyond**

“Stories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places. They also organise the play of changing relationships between places and spaces.”(de Certeau, 118)

In 1998, the resignation of Suharto was a landmark event for the student movement. Their sustained attempts at the mass mobilisation of protestors across Indonesia provided the visual images to a political crisis that soon was formalised by the advent of *Reformasi* (reform). Dave Mcrae’s paper on the 1998 Student Movement gives a sense of the formative impact of these events upon those involved:

Suharto’s resignation left students with an impression that they had been a part of something monumental, not as witnesses, but as agents of history. Some students who had not taken part in earlier demonstrations displayed an obvious elation over their involvement in the final stage of their president’s fall. All negative connotations were lost from the word ‘activist’...For the time being, the student movement was ascribed the identity of the central actor in the cause of *reformasi*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Karen Strassler, “Material Witnesses: Photographs and the Making of Reformasi Memory”, in *Beginning to Remember: The Past in the Indonesian Present*. Ed. Mary S. Zurbuchen. Singapore University Press, NUS Publishing, Singapore: 2005. pg. 279.

<sup>4</sup> The Student Movement (*Gerakan Mahasiswa*) stood in name for the efforts of a much wider movement encompassing farmers, workers’ unions, lawyers, NGOs, women’s rights activists, artists, (street) musicians, professionals and *pemuda* involved in the pro-democracy movement in Indonesia. Unless specified, most people refer to the movement simply as “*gerakan*”, dropping the possessive noun “*mahasiswa*”(student). In my paper I employ both “activist” and “student” interchangeably, because of the connotations that have occurred since 1998, in linking the identity of “student” to activism. However, in reality the activists I discuss belong to the wider pro-democracy movement because of the wide range of issues, political affiliations and networks deployed in their actions, not merely to the narrow field of student activism. Furthermore, there are important class differences that mark the self-identification of activists who are not students.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Mcrae, “The 1998 Indonesian Student Movement”, Working Paper 110, Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, Victoria, Australia.



The retelling of the narrative of student activists as agents of history gives shape and lends fortitude to the politics of the Student Movement (*Gerakan Mahasiswa*). However, the narrative remains faceless, a script full of actions and speeches filled with populist rhetoric that fits easily into the nationalist history of Modern Indonesia. Even when the student movement of 1998 caught many by surprise, its efficacy was soon explained away by the tidy conclusion that youth, and students in particular, were fated to appear on the national political stage when it was required of them. Rather than continuing to reify this image, my historicising intervention is to pay close attention to acts and stories of distinction that denaturalise the mandate of history given to the activist.

In a recent issue of “aksara” (March 2005), a leftist student publication, an essay titled “The Student Movement in Social Change” asserts that

Social mobility, responsibility, and resistance (struggle) are factors which have become the reason to involve students who are not in a class formation such as workers or even the bourgeoisie, as they are in the position of being a proto class. So that it is very likely that they will fill one of the classes mentioned above.<sup>6</sup>

In this example, the suspended social position of students and activists are the result of their not being attached to a system of production, ‘such as the workers or even the bourgeoisie’. The students see their middleness as a bridge, a mediating position, and one that is uncomfortably close to their origins in the Indonesian middle class better known for its political apathy and consumerist values. Their populist ideas and rhetoric demonstrate their own unique position and “class-consciousness” while aligning themselves to the underclasses they valorised. Paradoxically this meant erasing a number of identity markers that would identify them as middle class, while cultivating the image that students are indeed not trapped by class. Some of the characteristics they absorbed and embodied, through language, dress, and movement, became a distinct style of the student movement that was as much about popular culture as it was about alternative political sub-cultures.<sup>7</sup> Styling the way activists present themselves reflect their class-consciousness and their desire to be close and yet apart from the masses.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Mobilitas sosial, responsibilitas dan resistensi (perlawanan) merupakan factor yang menjadi alasan untuk melibatkan mahasiswa tidak berada dalam pembagian kelas, baik kelas pekerja maupun kelas borjuasi, mereka berada dalam posisi pra kelas. Sehingga sangat dimungkinkan baginya untuk mengisi salah satu kelas tersebut. (RA, ‘Catatan’ : “Germa dalam Perubahan Sosial”, Aksara Edisi 2 Maret 2005, my translation)*

<sup>7</sup> Even though activist speech is littered with leftist political jargon, offstage another register of the aesthetics belonging to youth culture is evident in the slang and fashion that signifies that one is “gaul”, ie. trendy, cool, or social.

<sup>8</sup> See Sarah Nuttall, “Styling the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg. *Public Culture* 16(3): 432. Nuttall looks at the ‘stylization of the self’ as how ‘people seek to transform themselves into singular beings, to make their lives into an oeuvre that carries with it certain stylistic criteria.’ (432)



How do activists contribute to the cultural debris of the city? In what ways do they leave behind traces through text, text messages, graffiti, slogans, costumes, film, literature, Art?<sup>9</sup> In the informal and public archive of radical student politics, the city is implicated in the staging of the historical drama of the student activist. I name the street as the partial archive that students and youth activists aim to change, and as the arena of their struggle. The archive of the street is a memory space and a cultural zone, compelling activists to remember their part in building a vibrant tradition of expression that was near impossible during the New Order years. To walk in that space is to memorialise “youth” and the gestures of song, dance, yells, slogans, and rhythms that attracted so many in the moments of 1998. Yet it is the nature of the street to open up other possibilities than those intended by its users.

The street mediates their actions that are designed to broadcast their aims to a wider audience. That the city is full of potential spectators lends a heightened theatricality to their movements. But it is the street itself that allows for the possible creation of political *moments*,<sup>10</sup> which, in the understanding of the *gerakan*, is both something extraordinary and something constructed. *Moments* are what led to Suharto’s fall, to Semanggi I, II, and subsequent leadership changes. Small victories and large, national changes attributed to their struggle. I was given this definition by K, a 1998 activist: ‘A moment is a personification or opportunity upon which we can act to achieve our goals. A moment is a matter of space (*ruang*) and time (*waktu & jarak*).’<sup>11</sup>

In this dimensional space, the *moment* contains the hopeful possibility of expressing, and therefore realising the aims of the student movement. The definition gives a metaphysical sense of revolution, an almost apocalyptic rendering of political opportunity to do as they wish. But there are hidden possibilities in the opening of this time and space; it could go both

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<sup>9</sup> See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Harlem” in *Social Text* 81, Vol.22, No.4, Winter 2004. Spivak’s experimental collaboration with photographer Alice Attie in Harlem, New York, suggests the kinds of cultural questions of collective identity and nostalgia raised by reading such inscriptions found through urban wreckage, graffiti, murals, in short, any kind of social text that may situate the present moment and its relationship to the built space (of the past). Central to the method of reading these cultural inscriptions is to acknowledge the anonymous and floating culture-space of the inscription, a ‘delexicalisation’ of the moment. In the route I follow on the streets of Jakarta, the identifiable ‘collective’ is the student movement, whose actors remain heavily invested in the archiving of this memory space.

<sup>10</sup> See John Sidel. “Macet Total: Logics of Circulation and Accumulation in the Demise of Indonesia’s New Order”, in *Indonesia* 66 (October 1998). Sidel’s brief discussion of “sa’at” (a moment) as an omen carrying a sense of political accident. By the time of my fieldwork, the word “moment” pronounced in the Indonesian way, with an emphasis on the second syllable, was the preferred word for stating this sense of potential disruption. Moments and “momentum” were interchangeably used by activists to explain the major political events since 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with K – Universitas Mercu Buana, Jan. 16, 2004. Fieldnotes.



ways.<sup>12</sup> K elaborated: the 1997 economic crisis gave the momentum to carry out an (activist) agenda, but the momentum itself carried two possibilities – it could have worked to strengthen Suharto – or it had a hidden agenda, so that the tragedies of 98 could serve as an entripoint(sic) into *Reformasi* (fieldnotes 16/1/04). The *moment* serves as bridge *and* as aporia, affirming for the activists themselves that they act because of crises that already and naturally stem from the workings of the state. Their transgressions are possible because of conditions outside their control, yet which form the context for their movement. Because the street is seen as wild<sup>13</sup>, control of the street and of the anger of the demonstrating *massa*, is always in doubt.

Stemming from this public archive of texts, images, and bodies, I aim to set in relation the series of identity representations that are always partial in their nature. Within the contested figure of the activist him/herself, I posit the nested relations between *pemuda*; student; woman. What is hidden from view when one figure speaks for an other? By calling these representations “masculinities” in my title, I point to the ways in which historical narrative has privileged the memorialisation of a male ideal of political heroism, at the expense of the complexities involved in organising a mass movement against the state. If the identity of student (*mahasiswa*) has come to stand in for all youth, it is an assumed subjectivity that eclipses the gendered and classed limits of the *gerakan*. In the sections below, I show how activists who are not students and activists who are women have experienced the historical legacy of ‘revolutionary youth’ somewhat differently.

### **The Long March:**

In beginning with an exploration of the street, and the act of walking, one can better understand the changes wrought by the student movement to recent cultures of political

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<sup>12</sup> The Bridge: “As a transgression of the limit, a disobedience of the law of place, it represents a departure, an attack on a state, the ambition of a conquering power, or the flight of an exile; in any case, the ‘betrayal’ of an order. But at the same time as it offers the possibility of a bewildering exteriority, it allows or causes the re-emergence beyond the frontiers of the alien element that was controlled in the interior, and gives ob-jectivity (that is, expression and re-presentation) to the alterity which was hidden inside the limits, so that in recrossing the bridge and coming back within the enclosure the traveller henceforth finds there the exteriority that he had first sought by going outside and then fled by returning. Within the frontiers, the alien is already there, an exoticism or Sabbath of the memory, a disquieting familiarity. It is as though delimitation itself were the bridge that opens the inside to the other.” (de Certeau, *Spatial Stories*: 129)

<sup>13</sup> Shiraishi, Saya S. *Young Heroes: The Indonesian Family in Politics*. Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University. Ithaca, NY: 1997. pg.26.



expression. What exactly, is so subversive about walking? “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper.”<sup>14</sup>

The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place – an experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place but is only a name, the City.<sup>15</sup>

In “The Practice of Everyday Life”, Michel de Certeau draws a circuitry of relationships and non-relationships that define the City. The experience of the city is one of lack and displacement. The city is a place in name only, but the space of the city exists as a “social experience”. In particular, in de Certeau’s City, the social experience is achieved by the practice of walking. Through the countless variations of paths walked by the city’s inhabitants, the act of the pedestrian is akin to a speech act. It is an act of appropriation, a “moment” in which one makes contact with the city, unknowingly engaging in the process of weaving a larger urban fabric.<sup>16</sup> “To walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper.” (Walking in the City, de Certeau: 103) Similarly, Seno Gumira Ajidarma, a prominent Indonesian writer, notes in the preface to his book of essays on “Jakarta” (2004), that the species of urbanite known as the Jakarta human (*Homo Jakartensis*) is forever in search of something elusive, in a city of ever-changing possibilities. In the urban fabric of Jakarta, that lack of something proper propels the motion of demonstrators on the street. Their marginal identities as migrants, workers, the young, the urban poor, or as yet unformed “students,” and their even more marginalised claims to the city, inform their search for the politics that they seek to represent them. Each time they walk in unison, but also each performing an act of singularity, they are engaged in a historical action.

When activists march together in a demonstration, whatever the distance they actually traverse, any significant amount of walking is called a Long March. The allusion to Mao’s historic march is deliberate, assigning a sense of achievement and struggle to the student movement. The long march has a physical destination (also symbolic), and declares its revolutionary intent; it designs to overthrow the existing order. The long march usually involves a route through the golden triangle area of Thamrin and Sudirman, although the focal point of the action is never at the economic hub of this continuous avenue. The objective of a march more commonly is to reach the symbolic sites of political power, the presidential

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<sup>14</sup> Michel de Certeau. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press, Berkeley: 1984.

See “Walking in the City”, pg. 103.

<sup>15</sup> de Certeau, pg. 103.

<sup>16</sup> de Certeau, pg. 97.



palace (*istana presiden*), or the parliament building (MPR/DPR) for instance. The economic centre does not represent the aims of the student movement. However, it is equally important that the march be witnessed by the office workers, and the urban poor who populate this street. It is an act of defiance to stop traffic where capital flows, precisely through the streets from which Jakarta derives its reputation as a metropolis.<sup>17</sup> The congregation of demonstrators at the Bundaran HI (a decorative fountain at the Hotel Indonesia roundabout) or on a toll road flyover make possible the act of civil disobedience that causes *macet total*, or total congestion. While *macet* is a common enough occurrence in the busy streets of Jakarta, it is more often naturalised by Jakartans as an attribute of the city, a breakdown occurring without provocation. That is, *macet total* ought to be beyond the control of humans, subject to the laws of accident. By taking over the streets, student demonstrators symbolically reorder the causal laws of the city.

The demonstration, an irregular event created by the demonstrators, nevertheless takes place near the city centre, intended for very different uses. The demonstrators interrupt the regular life of the streets they march through or of the open spaces they fill. They ‘cut off’ these areas, and, not yet having the power to occupy them permanently, they transform them into a temporary stage on which they dramatize the power they still lack.<sup>18</sup> (Berger, 248)

The interruption that John Berger remarks on has the power to transform the street. In the case of Jakarta, it also contains the power of memorialisation. The route followed re-enacts the original, not that of Mao, but the first remembered “long march” in Indonesia. The stage is at once a disruption of “regular life”, but also a reminder that the space of normality is not “empty”. The traces to which contemporary demonstrations allude to are that of the namesake, the historic 3-day ‘long march’ that culminated in the deaths of 5 reformasi heroes on November 13, 1998, and named Semanggi 1.

In answer to my question of when the first “long march” in Jakarta was, activists point to the 3-day journey to the parliament building to protest the extraordinary parliamentary assembly session. They began the march from various starting points, but most groups began with speeches and assemblies at one of the centres of activism in Jakarta, the UI Salemba campus. Activists remembered the difficulties of getting to the designated protest site. Jakarta was in a state of emergency, so instead of *macet total*, the streets were empty, with no public

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<sup>17</sup> Sidel, *Indonesia*.pg. 161.

<sup>18</sup> Berger, John. “The Nature of Mass Demonstrations” in *John Berger: Selected Essays*. Ed. Geoff Dyer. Pantheon Books: NY, 2001. pp.246-249.



transportation available.<sup>19</sup> Army and police troops guarded various government buildings in the city, armed with anti-riot gear, tear gas, and tanks. Parliament itself was guarded by paramilitia groups armed with sharpened bamboo stakes.<sup>20</sup> The walk from Salemba to parliament took three long days, because at various points students clashed with police, retreating and advancing again. As activists walked through neighbourhoods, they passed out leaflets, sang songs, and urged ordinary folk to join them. By one activist's account, a demonstration he was heading through a working class neighbourhood grew phenomenally, so that by the time he merged with another group, they had amassed over 100,000 'massa'<sup>21</sup>. The journey ended in chaos, as troops opened fire at dusk at the Semanggi cloverleaf, killing at least 5 students, and injuring many other protestors. The telling of the event has since fashioned a historical legacy for the student movement, which matches the slow pace of the march (3 whole days of battling for the streets) to the commitment of the demonstrators to reach their destination. Without that politicised calling of reaching an endpoint, the naming of the event would not have happened. While Semanggi I remains important to the narrative of the student movement, it is the tradition of the long march that re-presents the "symbolic capturing" of the city.<sup>22</sup>

### **Street, City, and Poverty for *Pemuda*:**

What is the street? And what are the qualities that belong to it? In her ethnography "Young Heroes," Saya Shiraishi describes the street as a dangerous place where "Exposure to the sun's heat on the street is a sign of impending calamity."<sup>23</sup> Popular children's magazines warn about the prevalence of crime and the risks of exposing oneself to a world of strangers.<sup>24</sup> Recognising the discomfort and displacement people feel by putting their bodies on the street, activists view the level of discomfort tolerated by demonstrators as a sign of their commitment to radical politics. Many continue to feel that demonstrating at a protest is not

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<sup>19</sup> Fieldnotes Jan.9 2004. Excerpt: After that it became tradition (tradisi) to choose a target (sasaran) to begin a long march. He smiles and says that was bright (cerdas) of me to ask when that term began, because they just started using it themselves after the first one was christened.(S, former Famred activist, Jan 9)

<sup>20</sup> Pandjaitan & Tanuredo. *dari Trisakti ke Semanggi: Perjalanan Menuju Indonesia Baru*. (From Trisakti to Semanggi: The journey to a New Indonesia) Pg.86.

<sup>21</sup> Fieldnotes Jan 2004. Oka. The numbers may be greatly exaggerated here but ordinary people, the "rakyat", did come out to join the student activists, filling the streets until the activist's field of vision consisted entirely of the massa behind him. The unprecedented mass of followers contrasted with his early experiences as a demonstrator, when it was difficult to convince even 10 people to join him.

<sup>22</sup> Berger, John. "The Nature of Mass Demonstrations" pg.248.

<sup>23</sup> Shiraishi, pg.26.

<sup>24</sup> Shiraishi, pg.26.





enough; a statement has to be made through a long march to maintain the awareness of the *gerakan* itself. It is one small taste of how the poor *rakyat* survive the harshness of Jakarta.

In the demonstrations, actions, and performative aspects of the student movement that have coloured the streets of Jakarta since the late 90s, songs of “revolution” are being sung. Leftist publications are easily found in major bookstores, and t-shirts emblazoned with changing icons and up-to-date political slogans are being made and sold every day. Che Guevara has gone a little to seed in these shirts. He now belongs to the urban poor, and does not mark a “student/activist” as much as he used to.<sup>25</sup> The lines are increasingly blurred through the dissemination of certain symbols of the *gerakan*, with Che and Lenin as popular pin-ups on clothing, tattoos, and murals. Recalling the typical activist look of the early 1990s, former students laughingly describe the long hair, grungy t-shirt with slogans, torn jeans, and rubber sandals (*sendal jepit*) that immediately marked them as *radikal*(read: left) in the formalised white-collar atmosphere of Indonesian campuses. Their cultivated dishevelled appearance borrowed the *sendal jepit* aesthetic of the urban poor everyman, wearing to the campus as it were, their critique of New Order developmentalism that sought to make middle class office workers of them all.<sup>26</sup> If by wearing a certain street style student activists sought to appropriate the legitimacy of the *rakyat*, in the post-1998 world of the *gerakan*, the widening networks of youth organisations in Indonesia have made such tropes familiar to the public imagination. The act of affecting a rugged masculine look as a sign of political sentiment is no longer a domain dominated by students. Increasingly, activists who consider themselves *pemuda* claim the greater authenticity of their political awareness as children of the street (*anak jalanan*) precisely because the social issues activists protest stem from their urban poor backgrounds.

The exclusionary nature of Jakarta is expressed by the Indonesian saying that “Jakarta is crueller than a stepmother” (*Jakarta lebih kejam daripada ibu tiri*), an opinion offered up by Dani<sup>27</sup>, a young activist from Aceh. I asked him, what are your impressions (*kesan*) of Jakarta so far? He claimed to have none at all. It is almost as if Dani has had no contact with the “Jakarta” of Indonesia’s imaginary. He lives in a crowded slum area in East Jakarta, in a neighbourhood infamous for its crime rates and petty criminals. Dani slips in and out of any

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<sup>25</sup> Student activists agitating in the early 90s told me stories of how they were often harassed by police or intel if they were seen wearing ‘subversive’ t-shirts. Fieldnotes, Jan. 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Taped interview, Jakarta, April 3, 2004. Former PRD activist active in UI.

<sup>27</sup> Taped interview, Jakarta, March 2005. Not his real name.



formalised kind of employment. Rather, to raise money for his living expenses, he is a busker on public buses, singing songs and making political speeches criticising the government's policies in exchange for the pocket change given out by passengers who have a destination to go to. Once the speech is over Dani disembarks with his fellow buskers and they board another bus, destination unknown. Circumnavigating Jakarta on this unintended tour bus, Dani knows Jakarta well, seeing it from the mobile body of a bus that is his workplace. Yet, he rejects this knowledge because his experience of Jakarta has left no impressions on him. Unlike many other newcomers experiencing the cruelty of Jakarta, Dani has chosen to situate his difference through his political activities, resisting the stereotype of the mindless angry young man "easily provoked into violent actions on the street."<sup>28</sup> As an activist, through his actions and speeches, Dani increasingly identifies himself with the urban poor of Jakarta, a world that is far from the insular world of the university campus. Thus, when A, another activist from his group, claims that everyone is included in the category *pemuda*, including students, they continue to specify their meaning of activist as a reflection of themselves, ie. as the *rakyat* (the people) that has come to consciousness. I had asked the question, is there a typical stereotype that comes to mind when you think of the term "activist"? In answer, the group of six young men I was talking to looked at each other and replied, "People like us!" In affirming this likeness of radical politics (the world of activism) to themselves, the *pemuda* implicitly reject the *reformasi* narrative of history that memorialises students as the agents of history. The nation is poor, and only through the bodily knowledge of hunger and poverty can this politics of poverty be represented.<sup>29</sup>

### **Beneath the Skyline:**

A city is not only landmarks – and that means Jakarta is not just Monas; to the extent that for me, even though the National Monument is a symbol of the city of Jakarta, it does not represent Jakarta at all. Jakarta is not tall, tough, strong, immovable. (SGA, 1)<sup>30</sup>

The centralising bureaucratic and political power of Jakarta can sometimes be erased. Seno writes Jakarta through a series of cancellations. He writes what it is not, erasing the monuments and phallic signs of physical prowess that adorn postcards and tourist guides to

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<sup>28</sup> Shiraishi, pg.153.

<sup>29</sup> To illustrate this point the GPK activists said that often they did not even have *ongkos* (expenses) to take a bus to demonstrations, or even to eat beforehand. They would demonstrate for hours in the hot sun, feeling their hunger. They said this to differentiate themselves from students, whom they imagined came from happy middle-class homes, with parents who fed them in the morning. (Fieldnotes March 2005)

<sup>30</sup> "Sebuah kota bukan hanya landmark – dan itu berarti Jakarta bukan cuma Monas; bahkan bagi saya, meskipun Monumen Nasional adalah symbol kota Jakarta, tidaklah merepresentasikan Jakarta sama sekali. Jakarta tidak tinggi, kokoh, kuat, dan tak tergoyahkan." (SGA, 1)



Jakarta. Jakarta is a series of contradictory opposites; it is not tall, tough, strong, or immovable. If Jakarta only resembles Jakarta from a distance, that is, from the curious and unknowing gaze of the provinces (*daerah*), then Seno implodes that view with an alternative text of the city. Resistance in this case takes the form of defacement. Activists are often arrested for “insulting the symbols of the state”, damaging pictorial depictions of the president or the flag.<sup>31</sup> Happening art are performance pieces derived from the tradition of mime, and mainly practiced by art students and theatre groups that became incorporated as a standard part of demonstrations.<sup>32</sup> Using the term “Art” expresses the activists’ cultural creativity and artistic licence to perform political satire in what otherwise may simply be taken for bad theatre. Worker’s groups, the urban poor, slum evictees, and students write their own scripts for happening art to great effect, denuding themselves in public, wearing nothing but body paint, or shrouding and shackling themselves in chains. An activist I consulted explained that happening art in theory represented a narrativisation that is meant to be easily digested by both the public and the demonstrators themselves, even if the visual aesthetics of the art appeared unappealing.<sup>33</sup> The visual narrative, like graffiti on a wall, attracts the eye because its performance and message are jarring.

Graffiti action usually takes place late at night, safe from the watchful eyes of the police. It is common to wake up the next day to see the protest tags to the latest news headlines sprayed across buildings, gates, floors, on main roads and in front of university campuses. It is an act of defiance that is also a nod to urban gang culture that marks territory by labelling it with their signature graffiti. This anonymous form of protest has an uncertain expiration date. Some graffiti stay untouched for months, denouncing price hikes, the 2004 election, slum evictions, while others pertaining to more sensitive subjects are whitewashed fairly quickly. The street as archive is unstable, the evidence of its authors’ existence subject to the level of surveillance by authorities. Graffiti action and happening art both make use of the demo’s borrowed time on the street to create their temporal impact. They broadcast the internal dialogue of the demo, leaving word with the other inhabitants and potential spectators of the

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<sup>31</sup> GPK members claimed that they started the trend when two activists from their organisation, Nanang and Muzakir “performed a dance” on a poster with the face of Megawati, then president of Indonesia. They claimed their happening art was straightforward and obvious to the poor, that their actions symbolically reversed the way Megawati’s policies were stepping on the little people. See Kompas Coverage – Sept. 4, 2002. and GPK document of an accountability speech presented at their trial hearing on August 28, 2002 at the Central Jakarta District Court.

<sup>32</sup> Fieldnotes – April 2, 2004. Conversation with Fajar at a happening art event.

<sup>33</sup> Conversation with Reiner, March 2005.



city. If the changes wrought by activists upon the visual culture of the city are impermanent, this sometimes works to their advantage.

I return to Dani, the young activist from Aceh. Charged with assault on the state (*pasal makar*), Dani was actually arrested for a graffiti action that happened quite spontaneously. He had had no intention of writing what he did, that is, the politically sensitive “Cancel the Military Emergency in Aceh” (*Cabut Darurat Militer di Aceh*), but when they got to the Bundaran HI, the clean, white walls beckoned. Attracted by this empty space, he set to fill it with many slogans, but the original slogan that inspired him to write was the one he got arrested for. *Kebetulan*, coincidentally, they had brought markers, and with the tool of a pilox marker, he scrawled his message in plain sight for everyone to see. However, a guard at the exclusive high end shopping center Plaza Indonesia, came over and asked him to stop. Don’t do that here, kid. Dani had a feeling he was reported by this security guard who witnessed and tried to stop his misdemeanor. He was interrogated for hours by police who tried to force him to admit to his Acehnese identity. He resisted, claiming to be Isai, an indigenous tribe, and then from Medan. His Acehnese identity couldn’t be proven because he didn’t possess an identity card, even though the police were certain of his ethnicity. They took him for a ride at 2 in the morning, accompanied by his lawyer, to the site of his crime. Alhamdulillah! Thank god, the writing was gone. Someone had erased it, probably the security or the *lurah* (neighbourhood watch) there. I was so relieved, Dani said, to see that clean wall, because now there was no evidence of my action. The police who brought me there were silenced. He was released the following day.

Dani got off because there were no traces of his actions or his origins. Even when his authorship had been identified by the presence of a guard, the actual graffiti that had threatened his freedom was gone, erased by one of the claimants tasked with guarding their perceived portion of this territory. The walls became empty again, the message of the activists erased. To have no identity in this city, like Dani, is to live in a state of invisibility, where one’s words are subject to erasure without accountability. As one of the potentially “wild” young men of the street, Dani is free to coast through Jakarta, without having to pay for his bus fare.

### ***Mahasiswa/Mahasiswi: To be Victor or Victoria***

Something else the street forgets to capture: How is the street gendered? After Semanggi I, discussion groups which had been the mainstay of the student movement in the 1980s and in



the underground days of the early 90s, were no longer in vogue.<sup>34</sup> The dominant model was the *aksi* model, which featured large demonstrations with crowds reaching tens of thousands of demonstrators on the streets. Activists at the time were held to a standard of aggressiveness found lacking in women; one was judged either radical or not, militant or not. Students who participated to a greater degree in campus activism rather than “national” politics epitomised by street demonstrations were feminised by the mainstream *gerakan*. Women were considered incapable of being brave enough and radical enough to be trusted to do well on the street.<sup>35</sup> Activism continued to be modelled along the lines of what was popular at the time; to conform to the “radical” model, and to be a little closer to the street in the search for the voice of the authentic *rakyat*.<sup>36</sup>

### **Women: Challenging Masculinities?**

Women in politics has become an increasingly common idea in Indonesia, a worthwhile challenge posed by the discourse of democratisation.<sup>37</sup> The term “gender” has come to be understood in lay terms as promoting women’s participation in politics and society, rather than a deep exploration of the unequal relations between men and women. Linking sexual politics to nationalism, Saskia Wieringa shows how the New Order state had based its policies for women upon the *kodrat*, the restrictive moral code that dictated a woman’s behaviour:

The *kodrat* of Indonesian women prescribed that they should be meek, passive, obedient to the male members of the family, sexually shy and modest, self-sacrificing and nurturing. To this end, their main vocation was wifehood and motherhood.<sup>38</sup>

Students who were radicalised through exposure to leftist and feminist literature deplored this traditional and stuffy New Order segregation of women. The modern Indonesian woman had

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<sup>34</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on flourishing student groups and their respective political styles, see *Penakluk Rezim Orde Baru: Gerakan Mahasiswa '98*. Muridan S. Widjojo et al. Pustaka Sinar Harapan: Jakarta, 1999. However, this book never once specifies the identity differences and specific difficulties encountered by women student activists (mahasiswi). In the essays featured, mahasiswa is discussed as a historical subject undifferentiated by gender, nor are the developments of the student movement contextualised by the skewed gender-ratio within groups and in leadership positions across coalitions. Mahasiswa comes across as a non-gendered category, when in fact, it is overwhelmingly gendered, eclipsing for language and assumptions of subjectivity that mahasiswa and mahasiswi experienced the politics of the movement in the same way.

<sup>35</sup> Fieldnotes – March 24, 2005

<sup>36</sup> See Forkot leaflet, March 2005. The Forkot flier targets the urban poor by profession, but also calls out to the men specifically, *bang tukang ojek* (brother motorcycle taxi-driver), *bang satpam* (brother security guard), etc, male professions of the street, while the women worker, the *mbak* is literally an appellation for a domestic servant, trapped within the confines of the middle and upper class Indonesian family, unable to be a part of the massa cair (floating masses) that spectate from the sidelines of the street.

<sup>37</sup> This is evident in the run up to the 2004 elections, where each contesting political party attempted to fill a 30% quota of their candidates with women. However, most failed to reach this target in the nominations alone.

<sup>38</sup> Wieringa, pg.75.



to be freed of such limits and be brought to (class) consciousness. Yet it is a leap to think that anti-New Order rhetoric prevalent in the *gerakan* brought a new consciousness to bear upon the practices of the movement. Gender became a separated-out issue much the same way in which workers' rights were championed. That is, the inequalities of capitalism and Suharto-style development were judged to have victimised women, especially poor women. In response, many organisations in the student movement, and other *pemuda* organisations built a women's wing to the organisation, relegating the women members to their own sphere<sup>39</sup>. The joke was often made within the leftist organisations that their women's groups were *Gerwani*, the name for the women's wing of the Indonesian Communist Party. The allusion is telling, evoking as it does, the particular fear and fascination that *Gerwani* has in the national mythos, as hypersexualised and politically treacherous women<sup>40</sup>. Yet in this case, the reference was proudly made to point to women activists' bravery and resistance. J, a KBUI activist, made the critique that this in fact replicated New Order politics, that made women wives of civil servants, soldiers, teachers, rather than allowing them to share within the same political space as the normative male organisation.<sup>41</sup> In a few cases, a number of the women's wings folded within a short period of time. The non-sustainability was usually blamed on the inherent pettiness of women's "lipstick" issues and the volatility of grouping women together to organise themselves. Women, it appeared, were not capable of engendering powerful political bonds without the intervention of men. Solidarity equalled fraternity.

Rather than gendering the tightly knit issues of poverty and social justice in the Student Movement, feminist discourse became merely one of a series of analytical tools that allowed activists to jump theoretical hurdles. Because students already occupied such an exalted moral position in society, it was easy for many to assume that "gender" was mainly a class problem, overcome by education and social mobility. In a gathering of young Muslim women activists, a young woman from the State Islamic University in Ciputat sympathised with the efforts of poor rural women in East Java who were seeking leadership positions in their village community. Yet in the same breath, she claimed to have never experienced gender

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39 For example, the radical student-based organisation Forum Kota (Forkot) was a coalition of almost 40 campuses at its inception, and soon formed a women's wing for the sizeable number of women activists that joined. However, one of the leadership explained that the women's wing was shut down by the main body because of the 'usual' reasons. Pressed to elaborate, he went on to say that the women were either jealous of one another in a popularity/beauty contest, or were fighting because of who their boyfriends were, that is, power at the level of the main organisational body. To think that the largest, and most radical group attributed the failure of its women's group to catfights reveals the extent to which these descriptions of women's sexuality personalising and sabotaging politics prevail.

<sup>40</sup> Wieringa, pg.73.

<sup>41</sup> Conversation, Fieldnotes – March 24, 2005.



discrimination of the sort experienced by women in the *daerah*, because she was middle class and a university student. Never? *Never*, she reiterated. Because she was *sadar* (conscious, enlightened), and educated, and because she was active in “activist” circles, these facts insulated her from such social issues that she considered beneath her. Implicitly setting up an urban/rural divide, as well as a distinct class division, the activist in question considered it anachronistic to have gender issues in her position.<sup>42</sup> This is a crude example, but it does illustrate a point that many young women in the *gerakan* feel: that gender issues are theoretically interesting but irrelevant in real life, because they have managed to adhere to what an activist ought to be: intelligent, organised, *militan*, *sadar*, etc. They can perform in their own right (the rights of the individual, not the rights of women) the *pidato*, *orasi* (speechmaking), and other organisational talents their role as activist require. That the model activist is a masculine one is simply a given.

So what of the disappearance of gendered experiences in the historical narrative of the *gerakan*? To speak “as a woman” is to accord one voice to atypical experiences. Tsing’s ethnography of marginality, “In the Realm of the Diamond Queen”, explores some of the possible ways of thinking about difference without resorting to the universalised figure of the disadvantaged woman.<sup>43</sup> Without essentialising sexual difference, and lumping women into their respective class categories, it is particularly difficult to ‘delexicalise’ women in the way that *pemuda* are free to be heroes of the revolution, or even students as *reformasi* heroes. There is no female counterpart to the *pemuda* (revolutionary women, anyone?). Women are mothers or wives of politics, characterised by loss and victimhood. I do not make the claim that women are invisible, nor that they are absent. No, women are *there*. At demonstrations, on campuses, *mahasiswa*(female students) mingle with *mahasiswa*(male students). Yet, their presence is not an equal presence, in numbers or in meaning.<sup>44</sup> Women are not invisible,

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<sup>42</sup> Fieldnotes, Cirebon, Oct. 2004. PMII activist.

<sup>43</sup> See Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*. Princeton University Press, 1993. Tsing’s introduction to the ethnography sets up the theoretical tensions between postcolonial readings of difference, and globalising tendencies that see gender as a separate construction alongside race and nation. Tsing proposes an exploration of the “analytic space” in between to see how marginality itself is gendered(18).

<sup>44</sup> The sisterhood of “wives” of the student movement was another telling story. N who was active in 1998 through her faculty at the University of Indonesia, recalled this experience to me. First she began by clarifying her own position, as involved, but not someone you could consider an activist. Her reasoning was that she was not involved in official campus bodies such as the senate, or extra-campus organs. But in 1998, practically the whole campus was mobilised to attend demonstrations from the main campus in Depok. N remembered a particular time when almost all the respective faculty student senates decided that the women would not attend the *aksis* for that week, which were considered too dangerous. However, they would be on “standby” at the UI Salemba campus, in charge of logistics, and being close by to the action in case more troops were needed to maximise the *aksi*. N departed with a friend from her faculty, and was put on a bus with a group of young women she called the “fashion” group. N was shocked by the preparations these trendy young women had gone through. Instead of roughing it like the other activists were expected to, sleeping on the



precisely because they are given roles to play. Their presence represents a gendered continuum of politics that makes jokes of overly-zealous feminists, paragons of ethnic dress and western theory, and women's groups that smack of the domestic. Stereotypes of women activists float through the culture of the *gerakan*.<sup>45</sup> The reasoning? Women act a certain way, because they are women. Women's participation must be evaluated by the same standards as men, if they wish to count. Women must be as militant as men. As radical, as potentially violent, and as wild as men. A new standard of self-sacrifice is being added to the layer of representation that seeks to explain women's failings in the *gerakan*.

A brief conclusion:

I end with a new set of questions than those I began with. On the one hand, there is an orthodox image of masculinity that has been handed down through a dominant historical narrative of revolutionary politics. It gives a historical mandate to students. It bequeathes to them the historical legacy of the *pemuda* as revolutionary youth. Yet *pemuda* today also refer to the urban poor, the underclasses who are left out of this narrative, and who reject the idea that students know the real Indonesia. For them poverty is a bodily knowledge that cannot be represented by others other than themselves who make their living on the street. If students and other activists have to descend to the streets to protest, *pemuda* are already in close proximity to the dangers of the street. They therefore feminise and infantilise the "Student" stereotype, whose exclusive purchase to the rights of official history delegitimises the *pemuda* experience today. *Pemuda* groups also insist that as before, in 1945, *pemuda* continues to be the overarching model for revolutionary youth, encompassing students. But does this act of encompassing include the nested relations of women students (*mahasiswa*) to students (*mahasiswa*)? The rejection of the reformasi narrative and its image of pure, moral students, is fundamentally a class critique of the discursive displacement enacted by the selective "history" that has since become official. The street is an odd space to claim, in its painted ruthlessness. Who is responsible for these erasures? What acts will memorialise the

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floor on top of newspapers or cardboard sheets, they had brought beach sarongs and the final straw – facial cleanser and cotton pads. Before sleeping, they performed another act that shocked her. N who wore a jilbab, and came from a traditional Ambonese Muslim family, observed the young women who she was sure had never done prayers in their life form a circle and pray. Some began to cry with emotion, choked up by fear for their men on the front. N made the crack that they were praying for their *suami* (husbands). Taped interview, Jakarta Jan 23, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> See Jakarta Post article: "Tips for Women Activists" (Sunday, March 13, 2005)

A sarcastic piece of an "advice column" on how the stereotypical angry, over-educated, ethnogarbed, unpopular woman activist could become more attractive by dressing better, and being more playful in their approach. Written in an issue of the Sunday Post dedicated to International Women's Day. An excerpt: "No harm could come from wearing more practical and fashionable clothes that still accentuate the strength and femininity of women. This will also make women's activists more appealing to a wider audience..."





social space of the street, and the bodies that once walked upon it? What, in the end, will open the power of this archive?

