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Subjects to freedom: The entanglements of desire in Upland Indonesia

Aurora Donzelli

Abstract

This article draws on fieldwork in upland Indonesia to explore how discursive genres mediate political and affective transformations. Since the millennium, IMF-driven governance reforms have disseminated novel ideals of transparent accountability, representative democracy, and individual entrepreneurialism, which at once presuppose and generate a market-oriented subject endowed with the freedom to express desires and choose among multiple options. Transnational discursive genres play a key role in these transformations by foregrounding a consumerist notion of desire as a site of emancipatory imagining. These discursive technologies are, however, only partially successful. By describing their partial uptake I discuss the predicaments posed by the ethnographic scrutiny of reformist rationalities emerging in post-authoritarian contexts. Indeed, while the emancipatory promise of democratic reforms irradiating from transnational lending agencies undermines entrenched social hierarchies, the emphasis on individual aspirations may also conceal new forms of subjection to capitalist valorization, whereby individuals are turned into bundles of measurable desires.

KEYWORDS

academic audit cultures, neoliberal discursive genres, post-Suharto Indonesia, self-reflexivity, uptake

This article examines the role of discursive genres in contexts of regime change and thus reflects on the complex interplay of subjection and emancipation that underlies desire, understood here as a cultural apparatus that structures individual subjectivities, mobilizes social forces, and organizes intersubjective relations. I draw on two decades of intermittent fieldwork to explore the novel forms of moral reasoning and political rationality that have emerged in the Toraja Highlands of Sulawesi following the collapse of three-plus decades of authoritarian regime and the demise of President Suharto, arguably “the last of the great Cold-War capitalist dictators” (Hadiz and Robison 2004, iii).¹

Since the early 2000s, the implementation of governance reform in Indonesia has disseminated novel forms of agency based on a market-oriented model of the political subject. The end of the New Order—a term commonly used to designate Suharto’s regime (1966–1998)—prompted substantial institutional and

economic changes, resulting in a gradual but drastic process of administrative devolution coupled with the privatization of large sectors of the country's economy. In Toraja (and in Indonesia at large), these structural transformations were accompanied (and enabled) by a new ideology of transparent accountability and representative democracy and by a new morality of personal aspirations and individual entrepreneurialism (Donzelli 2019, 2020; Rudnyckij 2009, 2011; Tidey 2016). These ideals presuppose what anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2006, 4) calls an "autological subject" endowed with the individual freedom of exercising choice within a market of multiple options.²

In what follows, I offer an ethnographic account of how the cultural consolidation of these new forms of moral and political rationality has entailed the rearticulation of local notions of desire through the diffusion of transnational discursive genres that pivot on self-discovery and on the assertion of one's aspirations. My analysis will focus on how Toraja villagers are being socialized into new discursive technologies such as training workshops, feedback surveys, and debriefing sessions, as well as motivational cheers, customer satisfaction surveys, log charts, and checklists. As we will see, the reception and incorporation of these new discursive technologies within the local genre repertoire has encountered various forms of recontextualization and reformulation.³

By documenting the *partial* uptake of some of these genres in Toraja, I aim to provide some ethnographic snapshots of the global diffusion of (neo-)liberal concepts of contractual governance and individual freedom (Brown 2003; Gershon 2011; Povinelli 2006; Rose 1990, 1999) in a highland region of Indonesia that is peripheral to Euro-American centers of capital and corporate culture. In so doing, my analysis will reveal ephemeral (but always meaningful) acts of noncompliance with the autological rationality underlying what Matthew Hull (2010, 257) has called "democratic technologies of speech" and will offer a reflection on a delicate predicament (and political dilemma) faced by ethnographers working in post-authoritarian contexts. That is, if, on the one hand, the discursive emphasis on individual choices and aspirations may prove effective in undermining entrenched social hierarchies and autocratic modes of power; on the other hand, the emancipatory promise of democratic aspirations irradiating from metropolitan centers and transnational lending agencies may conceal new forms of subjection to capitalist valorization. These *neoliberal* technologies of speech reimagine individuals as bundles of measurable desires and treat citizens as customers within the political marketplace. The present ethnographic account is thus also a reflection on the moral and epistemological predicament entailed by any exercise of ethnographic deconstruction of a foundational concept of both Western liberalism and utopianism: freedom (for a similar conundrum, see Povinelli 2005). Before developing these points, an account of the recent rearticulations of Toraja notions of agency and desire is required.

THE ENTANGLEMENTS OF DESIRE

In the relatively remote and primarily rural region of eastern Indonesia where I conducted my fieldwork, new forms of volitional imagination—which elsewhere I refer to as a reformulation in the local methods of desire (Donzelli 2019)—have played a key role in the transformations of the post-Suharto era. Desire has shifted from being a primary idiom of relatedness and an ideological tool for naturalizing power relations to becoming the key locus for the articulation of a new metanarrative of individual emancipation and democratic reform. Let me clarify this crucial point.

In Toraja, a vernacular notion of desire framed as *kamamaliran*—a local term that can be variously translated as melancholic longing, collective yearning, sense of lacking, and homesickness—has long provided a core idiom to represent, naturalize, and legitimize the moral-political economy of patron-client relations and the stratified structure of the local caste system. Indeed, the highlanders would use the term *kamamali-ran* to describe the social bonds of hierarchical relations and mutual obligations that structure their main forms of sociality, which are based on a complex set of share-cropping arrangements, payments in kind (or free labor), and, most importantly, on the highly structured gift exchange system characterizing local ritual life (Volkman 1985; Waterson 2009).

My Toraja interlocutors would often evoke *kamamaliran* as the explanatory affect underlying local forms of hierarchical reciprocity. In this sense, the notion operated as a structure of intersubjective engagement:

people would carry heavy water buckets to the house of a local aristocrat or perform household chores without compensation because they felt *kamamaliran* for their masters. Likewise, nobles and landlords would regularly feed their clients from their kitchen or pay the school fees for their subordinates' children because of unavoidable feelings of *kamamaliran* for these lower-ranking individuals. Understood as the core idiom of Toraja vernacular sociology, *kamamaliran* is the affective tie that binds the highlanders together, what drives them to travel from afar to celebrate festivities and spend time together in their ancestral villages, and, most importantly, what compels them to devote remarkable amounts of money to buy pigs and buffaloes to sacrifice at the funerals of relatives and acquaintances (see Mauss [1923–1924] 1990; Hollan and Wellenkamp 1994; Nooy-Palm 1986; Volkman 1985; Waterson 2009).

Although still prominent in contemporary narratives and conversations, *kamamaliran* is gradually being displaced by (or coming to coexist with) a new discourse of individual aspirations (I: *aspirasi*), purposeful desires (I: *mimpi*; *cita-cita*), forward-looking goals (I: *tujuan*, *misi*), and commitments (I: *komitmen*).⁴ According to this new volitional framework, the path to both virtue and success entails a process of self-discovery aimed at unearthing one's aspirations. Individuals should *first* learn how to express their dreams and desires and *then* make them happen. Desire has thus ceased to be the primary affective substance that keeps the social fabric together to become a new technology of self-discovery, self-promotion, and self-liberation. This new affective ethos has spread across different domains of discourse and practice: from the political arena—now proliferating with a new rhetoric of personal aspirations—to the public sphere, which has become saturated with cover stories (appearing on popular magazines and digital platforms) about individuals who fulfill their fantasies.⁵ Over the last two decades, the social life of the highlands has become animated with NGO workshops aimed at unearthing people's personal dreams and with political rallies in which candidates are expected to “convey their vision and mission” (I: *menyampaikan visi dan misi*) and be receptive to their constituency's needs and aspirations (I: *aspirasi masyarakat*) (Donzelli 2020).⁶

Although the new method of desire as personal aspiration did not entirely replace the old notions of desire as longing, the differences between the two are glaring. While the Toraja *kamamaliran* is anchored in the retrospective temporality of long-standing patterns of reciprocal exchange and points to complex webs of societal interdependencies, the Indonesian *aspirasi* originates in the interiority of the individual's consciousness and pivots on a new emphasis on individual choices and futurity. Contemporary Toraja discourse is thus crisscrossed with the interplay of collisions and collusions between *aspirasi* and *kamamaliran*. But when I speak about “entanglements,” I do not simply refer to the coexistence and intersection of different types of affective ethos. Rather, I gesture toward the theoretical intertwinement of subjection and emancipation underling contemporary formulations of desire, and I refer to a more practical predicament: how to capture both the promises and the delusions of a seemingly new era of freedom and democratic reforms. Indeed, the institutional and socioeconomic transformations that have occurred in Toraja and in Indonesia at large over the last two decades have entailed a somewhat ambiguous outcome. On the one hand, they have contributed to weakening a long-standing moral–political economy of agrarian clientelistic relations (traditionally legitimized through the idiom of *kamamaliran*). On the other hand, they have been instrumental in producing a reflexive desiring subject conducive to a neoliberal articulation of human agency and a market-oriented political rationality (Brown 2003; Gershon 2011).

In light of these ambiguous outcomes, ethnographers working in post-authoritarian contexts are faced with a dilemma: how to describe the political changes ensuing from the collapse of a dictatorship without dismissing or celebrating them. Although I cannot offer an ultimate solution to this predicament, I would like to use this ethnographic case to develop a broader reflection on the entanglements of desire (and freedom). My argument is threefold. First, I suggest that one of the key features of our contemporary moment concerns an increasing difficulty in distinguishing between liberation and liberalization; empowerment and consumer choice; customer satisfaction and pleasure (Godani 2019; Loomba et al. 2005). Second, I propose that this conflationary logic is a function of neoliberal capitalism, whose modus operandi is based on the production and dissemination of highly standardized and replicable protocols of speech and action (training and debriefing sessions, log books, flowcharts, institutional mission statements, feedback and customer satisfaction surveys, etc.). Contemporary capitalist valorization relies primarily on a radical form of pragmatic regimentation whereby specific discursive genres are simplified and turned into rigid templates

meant to travel across a wide range of geographic contexts and pragmatics domains (from the financial to the intimate, the private realm to the public sphere, management to politics) with the aim of optimizing production and disciplining people's conduct. Third, I argue that given the key role played in these processes by language, there is great analytic promise in the close-textured study of discursive genres and how they are actually deployed: by attending to apparently negligible instances of misunderstanding and failed uptake, we may be better equipped to understand the role of situated interactions in the production of the complex forms of alienation and resistance that characterize our present.

To put it another way, if, as I argue, the neoliberal configuration of discursive genres is marked by a strong centripetal pull and by a radical limitation of "free creative reformulation" (Bakhtin 1986, 80), then the efforts of critical ethnographers should focus on how speakers actually "align and mis-align" with the new repertoire of neoliberal genres (Gershon and Prentice 2021, 112). Indeed, by analyzing how rigid discursive protocols derived from the corporate world are spreading across different parts of the globe, we may achieve a better standpoint from which to undo the difficult entanglements mentioned above. Following the lead of Cuban poet and revolutionary José Martí quoted in the epigraph, I thus would like to suggest that liberation lies in our critical capacity to understand how neoliberal protocols of speech are transforming our relationship to the world and to each other, not only in the Toraja Highlands of Sulawesi but also in our metropolitan academic environments and university classrooms.

LANGUAGE IN THE REFORM ERA AND DISCURSIVE GENRES IN A THEORY OF PRACTICE

When, in the early 2000s, I moved to the Toraja Highlands to conduct my doctoral fieldwork, I was confronted with the discursive epiphany of a new "era." A few years earlier, an unforeseen financial crisis had interrupted an extended period of prosperity, prompting social unrest and political turmoil across the entire Indonesian archipelago. Major metropolitan centers erupted in public protests and student demonstrations quickly led to President Suharto's resignation in May 1998. Geographically remote and economically stagnant, the Toraja region remained somewhat removed from the events unfolding in Indonesia's urban centers, where the streets were taken over by protestors demonstrating to bring about political change and demanding a less corrupt and more accountable political leadership. Yet, even in the highlands, the end of Suharto's regime produced a generalized climate of optimism and effervescent anticipation.⁷

The Reform Era (I: *Era Reformasi*) appeared as an almost present future ripe with hopes and opportunities for change, a new paradigm of democracy and transparency, a drastic rupture with the censorship and authoritarian repression of a military regime that had emerged out of a bloodbath and had been consolidated through draconian anticommunist legislation, capillary forms of dissent control, and a pervasive indoctrination of the citizenry to a nationalist and modernist ideology. Suharto had seized power in 1965 after blaming an alleged coup attempt—that left six generals dead—on the Communist Party. His rise to power was followed by a campaign of anticommunist violence and collective terror during which, between 1965 and 1967, an undetermined number of alleged communists were killed (estimated to be between half a million and a million and a half), while hundreds of thousands were tortured and imprisoned without trial.⁸

In the summer of 1997, while I was conducting my first three-month fieldwork stint in Toraja as an undergraduate student, I woke up one morning and discovered that the exchange rate had overnight gone from roughly 2,000 to 14,730 rupiah against the dollar. The financial crisis that had begun in Thailand in early July spread like wildfire to the other countries in the region, causing a currency meltdown that later became known as the Asian Financial Crisis. After Indonesia announced the float of its currency in mid-August, the rupiah plummeted, dropping over the course of a few months to a low of 16,800 rupiah per dollar. Despite the central bank's interventions to prop it up, the Indonesian rupiah fell more than 30 percent in two months. Consequently, public and private debt spiraled out of control, pulverizing the state's revenues, paralyzing national banks and financial institutions, and crushing the country's major

business groups (Hadiz and Robison 2004, 6; World Bank 1998). The Indonesian government was forced to request the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) intervention, which entailed the unconditional acceptance of a package of institutional policies and reforms in exchange for a \$43 billion bailout (Head 1999; Rudnyckij 2009).

The following years were characterized by a number of distinctively neoliberal reforms. Aside from economic liberalization implemented through a series of policies directed at market deregulation, fiscal austerity, and the privatization of public services and state-owned enterprises, the post-Suharto era saw a combination of radical administrative decentralization and the growing political influence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Thus, unlike the highly centralized state of the New Order regime, the new articulation of political power entails multilateral agreements between international development and transnational financial institutions (i.e., the IMF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank) and local actors (i.e., the Government of Indonesia, local NGO leaders, and the private sector).⁹

An important yet largely overlooked aspect of this institutional shift has been the proliferation of new discursive genres: personal or institutional mission statements, training workshops, customer satisfaction surveys, cheering chants, checklists, flowcharts, and workflow diagrams. These new genres are congruent with liberal notions of contractual democratic governance and the capitalist market. Unlike the entrenched forms of Toraja sociality centered on reciprocal obligations and collective longing, Reform Era modes of speaking hinge on an ideology of personal choice and aspirations and promote an ideal autonomous self, imagined as a markedly entrepreneurial, self-reflexive, and accountable individual (Donzelli 2020).

Genre is both an elusive theoretical category and a powerful device for typifying and organizing the multifariousness of human communication (Bakhtin 1986; Bauman 1999; Briggs and Bauman 1992). In his landmark essay on the topic, language philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1986) identifies three main features of speech genres. First, genres are (largely implicit)¹⁰ pragmatic metastructures embedded in "human activities" (60) and aimed at making communication possible.¹¹ Second, genres are characterized by "*extreme* heterogeneity," that is, they range from the "brief standard military command" to "the multivolume novel," from "the business document" to "the proverb," from short greetings to "every-day narration" (60–61, emphasis in the original). Third, genres are at once "plastic" and "compulsory," they combine fluidity and rigidity: they are "*relatively* stable and normative forms of the utterance" (81, emphasis mine). Indeed, while recognizing their necessary coefficient of normativity, Bakhtin highlights the continuum from more rigid genres to more changeable ones. This last point is essential, as one of the distinctive features of late capitalism is, in my view, a hypertrophic tendency to pragmatic and generic regimentation.

To put it bluntly: whereas industrial capitalism saw linguistic standardization of national languages as a key element for optimizing production, late capitalism is mainly focused on the pragmatic standardization of how language *should be used*—that is, on the production and dissemination of highly standardized discursive genres: rigid and highly portable textual artifacts and protocols of speech meant to be easily detached from their original cultural context, linguistic matrix, and political economy. In this highly regimented genre environment, specific discursive histories and pragmatic needs become somewhat irrelevant. Customer satisfaction surveys are administered to individuals who are not customers, and flowcharts are used to represent merely imaginary workflows. They function as performative tools for the reconfiguration of social relations and practices. Feedback surveys, debriefing sessions, motivational cheers, training workshops, logbooks, and workflow diagrams thus operate as translinguistic templates capable of traveling across a wide range of contexts to discipline how people interact. As linguistic anthropologist William Hanks (1987, 677) points out, developing Bakhtin's (1986, 60) insight on the connection between genres and human activity, discursive genres have the potential to generate "fields of action . . . and modes of practice."

Neoliberal genres are varied. They pertain to different domains: workplace activities, NGO workshops, institutional procedures, and activist practice. They rely on different modalities, ranging from written documents and "graphic artifacts" (Hull 2003) to spoken modes of interaction. But they all share a tendency toward pragmatic hyper-regimentation enacted through the use of rigid templates of interaction. They all emphasize neoliberal ideals of willful entrepreneurialism, customer choice, and free market competition,

and they are all characterized by the application of a corporate paradigm of business-driven goals and best practices to the realm of political discourse and private life.¹²

However, as I will show in the next sections, the local incorporation of these metropolitan discursive protocols is never completely successful. I will focus first on misunderstandings concerning the precept of self-reflexive scrutiny and then on the apathetic indifference surrounding the uptake of a new protocol of speech aimed at boosting self-confidence and proactive willfulness, and finally I will sketch how protocols of quality assurance circulate in a more proximate context: academia.

THE MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF REFLEXIVITY

In June 2013, I was able to return to the highlands after a gap of more than five years. As usual, I spent the first week visiting my extended circle of friends and acquaintances of 15-plus years. When I dropped by the house of some of my closest friends (a couple with three kids), I found Mama Ma'busa in a state of great distress: Papa Ma'busa¹³ (her husband) had sunk back into his old problem: gambling. "Now that they play SabongTV in the back of Pong Tiku [a local *warung*, or family-owned eatery]," Mama Ma'busa explained me, "he spends more time there than anywhere else, depleting all the earnings he makes" working as a con-tractor. SabongTV, as I later discovered, was a new Filipino television channel dedicated to live-streamed cockfighting matches. At Pong Tiku's, Papa Ma'busa, of course, would not simply enjoy SabongTV shows but also bet through the various live gaming platforms for online cockfighting. Aside from the online games, Papa Ma'busa would also spend entire days at the *paramisi*, the in-person semi-clandestine cock-fighting arenas mushrooming in the highlands. A few months earlier, he had even opened an underground gambling den in his house, getting both himself and his wife arrested and sentenced to three months in jail in the town of Makale. "I'll speak to him," I promised Mama Ma'busa, not really knowing how to dissuade my friend from his gambling habit.

A few days later, I finally met with Papa Ma'busa. After some small talk, I cut to the chase: "I am worried for you and your family. Mama Ma'busa told me you are now gambling more than ever before. This has to stop. It is not a pastime, it is an addiction." Papa Ma'busa, like all the Toraja I know who spend considerable time gambling, uses the Indonesian word *hobi* (a calque from the English "hobby") to refer to his habit.¹⁴ To my surprise, my friend seemed unimpressed by my stern reprimand. I thus adopted a different tactic: "You know, I have been thinking that perhaps we could try to set up a support group with the other gamblers you hang out with . . ." My friend looked at me, unable to conceal his perplexity as I outlined a system akin to the Gamblers Anonymous treatment philosophy: a self-help group of peers who meet regularly to share their stories and engage in the joint exercise of self-reflexivity to liberate themselves from their gambling problem. As I continued my description of the gambler's support group, I realized that Papa Ma'busa was flabbergasted. His bewilderment, however, did not stem from his unwillingness to go to the meetings I was imagining for him, nor was he annoyed by my condescending approach to the matter. He did not even resist my categorization of his *hobi* as an addiction. It was the self-reflexive component he could not make sense of. Papa Ma'busa burst out laughing:

Aurora! Come on! How could you expect such a group to work! You want to gather gamblers in a room as a way to make them stop gambling?! This will never work out! If you put all these gamblers together, they will immediately start gambling!

A few years later, in March 2018, I was invited to attend a program organized by PEKKA (Pemberdayaan Perempuan Kepala Keluarga, a World Bank-funded program for the Empowerment of Women-Headed Households) that was to take place in a hard-to-reach Toraja-speaking community in West Sulawesi. The gathering had multiple purposes. On the one hand, the goal was to strengthen the voice and role of female heads of households by promoting microcredit schemes and cooperative forms of savings and microfinance. On the other hand, the organizers aimed to familiarize the participants (some 100 women who came from several neighboring hamlets and villages) with the core principles of

representative democracy. During the three-day meeting, the women were invited to discuss the ground rules of the newly established PEKKA regional chapter; define its core vision, mission, and values—all conveyed by the new English-sounding terminology of *akuntabilitas* (accountability), *pluralisme* (pluralism), *transparansi* (transparency), *antidiskriminasi* (antidiscrimination)—and vote to elect their local representatives.¹⁵ After the formal opening of the event, the participants were split into smaller groups for a series of workshops. The first step entailed performing an introspective analysis so that each participant could recognize and voice their actual dreams (I: *mimpi*). Further, to operationalize their desires, women were asked to design log charts listing their goals (I: *tujuan*) and identifying point persons (I: *penanggung jawab*) in charge of monitoring the time frame (I: *waktu*) and the activities (I: *kegiatan*) necessary to achieve such goals.

According to many social activists and NGO workers I encountered in Indonesia, improving the welfare of local communities requires restructuring the realm of individual volition so that unarticulated dreams can become conscious intentions and soundly formulated plans (for an analysis of these processes in a different context, see Ferguson 2015). “We always start with ‘What is your dream?’ and then we try to work together to make it happen,” Penny (one of the main facilitators at the PEKKA event) told me, as she described her efforts over the previous 10 years as a community organizer and women’s rights activist. Penny is the founder and chief executive officer of a social enterprise aimed at revitalizing indigenous weaving and empowering women in Toraja and elsewhere. Often working in partnership with PEKKA, Penny holds workshops (I: *lokakarya*) and training sessions (I: *latihan*), two activities that have become emblematic of the post-Suharto discursive landscape (Rudnyckij 2009).

During these meetings, weavers are not only introduced to the rudiments of financial literacy and taught how to increase their profits through thread bulk-buying schemes. They are also socialized to a new morality of individual aspirations and personal purposes and to a novel discipline of personal accountability and planning. Participants are divided into small groups, given pens and paper, and asked to assess recently completed activities. Using a feedback survey template, weavers learn how to measure their satisfaction with the performance and output of both themselves and third parties (such as program officers and other participants). Watching Penny and her team at work, I realized it was impossible for me to decide whether the feedback surveys they were enthusiastically socializing rural women into should be categorized as discursive technologies of emancipation or disciplinary practices congenial to the capitalist process of value production. What was certain was that the primary purpose of these feedback surveys and debriefing discussions was not to gather information. As I systematically noticed while following the workshop organizers’ busy daily activities, these forms are never made the object of retrospective analysis. Collected through a variety of textual artifacts derived from the corporate world (i.e., feedback surveys and user satisfaction questionnaires), these assessments are used to craft self-reflexive political subjects endowed with the ability to examine goals and outputs and to measure their satisfaction with the achieved results. For these evaluations to be effective, clear goals must be established beforehand.

Penny explained to me how, at first, the Toraja weavers she has been trying to organize were not really able “to speak up and voice their dreams. But they are gradually learning. They have simple dreams,” said Penny while a shadow of disappointment rippled her otherwise enthusiastic narrative, “such as being able to put aside enough money to buy a pig for the wedding of a relative, they are simple dreams,” she repeated, “but we work together to make them happen.” Of course, these “dreams” sounded more like ritual obligations than the entrepreneurial aspirations commonly celebrated in NGOs’ narratives. In Povinelli’s (2006, 4) terms, these social constraints posed by ritual obligations on autological fantasies of self-making constitute the “genealogical society.”

Similar misunderstandings and incongruences surfaced during the PEKKA workshop I attended in 2018. The organizers’ request to prepare log charts expressing personal dreams, goals, visions, and missions generated confusion among the women who had gathered from different villages and hamlets to attend the meeting. For almost an hour, the participants remained focused on the task, drawing a grid on the sheets of paper they had been given and filling it according to the different categories of goals (I: *tujuan*), vision (I: *visi*), mission (I: *misi*), timeline (I: *waktu*), etc. Meanwhile, PEKKA facilitators walked around to supervise the process, indicating the entries that still needed to be filled: “Are you done?”

“Here you should write down your vision and mission.” “What is your dream? You still need to fill that in.”

When I discussed the task with the workshop participants, I encountered a series of unexpected comments. Several women expressed dissatisfaction with their charts, which they thought were poorly drawn. “I made a mess, the lines are not straight,” said one participant. Others echoed that comment and focused on the execution of the task, foregrounding the formal properties of the graphic artifact itself (how well they designed the grid, the cells, and the rows) over the content of their comments. Others interpreted the exercise as a way to express complaints about the lack of collaborative behavior displayed by other members in their group. For example, one woman showing me her chart explained, in a whisper, how in her “dream” section she had requested sanctions for two members of her microcredit group who “only borrow money, but never contribute.” Most of the women I talked to did not immediately understand the overarching purpose of the introspective quest aimed at unearthing their “dreams.” The term that was used by the Indonesian-speaking organizers was the Indonesian *mimpi* (dream). In Indonesian, as in English, the word for “dream” (*mimpi*) may refer both to “a cherished aspiration” and to “the images and sensations the mind experiences during sleep.” This, however, is not the case in Toraja, where “dream” (*tindo*) only refers to a sequence of visions during sleep.¹⁶ The use of the Indonesian term thus triggered some confusion among the trainees. Indeed, at first they interpreted the term not as a synonym of *kamoraian* (T: desires, requests) but rather as an equivalent of the Toraja word *tindo* (T: dream). Like my friend’s bewildered reaction to my proposal of setting up a gambler’s support group, the misunderstandings concerning the lexicon of NGO activists reveal the foreign nature of the morality of personal aspirations underlying much of contemporary public discourse in Toraja and Indonesia more broadly.

CHEERING CHANTS AND FAILED UPTAKES

In November 2016, I was invited to participate in a workshop sponsored by a non-profit organization (called Swisscontact) to promote vocational education in the highlands. Established in 1959, Swisscontact is an independent business-oriented organization and international development agency funded by the Swiss private sector with the aim of reducing poverty in developing and transitional countries. One of the organization’s main goals is the promotion of the Swiss pedagogical model of vocational education centered on the notion of “skills,” which are seen as key in enhancing both private-sector development and individual economic success.¹⁷ Emblematic of the multiscalar assemblages of local and transnational actors that operate in contemporary Indonesia, the event had been organized with the financial support of a wide array of governmental and nongovernmental institutions.

Two years earlier, Swisscontact had chosen Toraja as one of the destinations in which to implement its sustainable tourism development program. This program had two major objectives: to strengthen the service quality standards (I: *menaikkan standard pelayanan*) of selected local hotels and to improve vocational hospitality schools. To realize the first objective, Swisscontact staff had undertaken a preliminary phase of data collection that combined customer satisfaction surveys with self-assessment questionnaires for each hotel in the program. Drawing on the needs, shortcomings, and suggestions that emerged from the questionnaires, the program officers organized a series of encounters and training sessions to improve the performance and service quality of each hotel in the program. The second component focused on establishing partnerships with private vocational high schools (I: *sekolah menengah kejuruan*, or SMK) to improve the quality of hospitality training and strengthen the connections between the educational and business sectors.

The workshop consisted, for the most part, in the presentation of a special logbook that Swisscontact had developed to maximize the benefits of internship opportunities for all involved parties to a selected audience of roughly 50 teachers and school administrators from different regencies within the South Sulawesi province. The logbook’s main function was to provide students with a template where they could record the activities undertaken during their internship and thus achieve a better understanding of

their training process. In a similar way to the log charts for the expression of personal dreams and goals discussed in the previous section, the logbook proposed an exercise of self-reflexivity.

A self-assertive motto embellished the cover of the logbook: “Of course I can make it!” (I: *Aku pasti bisa!*) The motto epitomized the ethics of accountability and self-motivation that imbued the initiative. In his opening remarks, the Swisscontact program officer in charge of the workshop showcased a morale-boosting cheer, inviting participants to reenact it throughout the meeting as a way to revive their energy and enthusiasm (I: *membangkitkan semangat*):

It goes like this, so later on when I say, “SMK, Bisa!” [I: vocational schools can make it!], you will repeat, “SMK Bisa! Bisa!” [I: vocational schools can make it! Can make it!] So, ready? Let’s try it once. Stand up and then repeat after me: “SMK, Bisa! SMK, Bisa! Bisa!”

The motto “SMK, Bisa!” had circulated for over a decade as part of a far-reaching national campaign to strengthen the potential of vocational high schools and facilitate the introduction of SMK graduates in the national and international job markets. However, in spite of its popular circulation in media campaigns and school public gatherings, the participants in the Swisscontact workshop seemed quite uneasy when invited to perform the self-motivational drill. They did stand up, but their reenactment of the slogan lacked the required enthusiasm, and their voices were hesitant and muffled.

A key notion in John Austin’s (1962) speech act theory is that of uptake. Understood as the hearer’s recognition of the speaker’s communicative intention, the uptake is essential to the speech act’s success, and, according to some interpretations of Austin’s philosophy (Sbisà 2001), it helps constitute the illocutionary force of the utterance. In this perspective, the hearer’s function is not simply to ratify the speaker’s communicative intention but also to contribute to defining the meaning of the speech act itself. Similar to the misunderstandings discussed in the previous section, instances of failed uptake of a speech act (in this case the invitation to perform a self-motivational mantra) are meaningful indicators of the lack (whether intentional or not) of participants’ compliance with the new discursive genre.

When I asked the program organizer (a native of Bandung, West Java) to comment on the participants’ poor execution of the motivational cheer, he simply replied, “Toraja people are shy.” I objected by noting that this did not seem to be case for other local forms of morale-boosting chants. I mentioned the countless times I had witnessed the loud, uninhibited performance of the customary ululation “HihIhIhY!” whereby the highlanders punctuate moments of collective effort, such as the erection of massive megaliths (I: *simbuang batu*) meant to commemorate high-ranking individuals or the carrying of a coffin from the *rante* (I: ritual field) to the burial place (I: *liang* or *patane*). But the program officer was not familiar with Toraja ritual life and could not appreciate my point that, unlike the exuberant collective ululation commonly performed at rituals, the motivational cheer he had showcased gestured toward a self-centered type of individual achievement.

When I asked the workshop participants why they did not like the newly introduced cheer, they just shrugged their shoulders, making it difficult to determine whether their indifference stemmed from their skepticism about the program and its underlying moral implications or from unfamiliarity with the foreign self-confidence boosting drill.¹⁸ My point, however, is that it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between speech genres and their underlying moral and affective entailments. The textual artifacts and discursive protocols deployed during these novel pedagogical routines and training workshops are part of a larger project aimed at reforming both the local political economy and the highlanders’ individual subjectivities (Bialostok and Aronson 2016; Cavanaugh 2016; Sa’ar 2016; Wilce and Fenigsen 2016a). Far from being limited to gathering data and optimizing the workflow, the deployment of specific discursive technologies such as logbooks, checklists, diagrams, and customer service surveys is part of a larger moral project whereby people are invited to focus their attention on themselves, monitor their professional performance, record their work practices, and enhance their willingness for self-improvement.

These discursive genres constitute “techniques of the self” (Foucault 1985, 11) aimed at encouraging individuals to become their own projects, that is, to reflexively explore their aspirations and understand their hidden talents and true vocations (Gershon 2016, 2020; Urciuoli 2003, 2008). The goal is for

individuals to see themselves as sets of skills that must be managed and developed—through self-analysis, self-cultivation, and the exercise of judicious, responsible, and informed choices (Brown 2006, 694; Gershon 2011, 539; Martin 2000, 582; Rose 1990, 240; Urciuoli 2008, 221). In this sense, empowerment and self-improvement can be achieved through self-reflexive inquiry into one's desires and by strengthening one's willingness to fulfill them (Cruikshank 1993; Sa'ar 2016).

A number of scholars have explored the role of language in religious practices of ethical self-formation (see Keane 2007 and Robbins 2004, among others). Joel Robbins (2004), for example, examined confession and moral self-reflection as two discursive technologies of self-formation, whereby the Urapmin of New Guinea came to inhabit a "Christian self." Less attention, however, has been paid to more mundane exercises of ethical self-formation, which pertain not to the realm of religious practice but to that of the capitalist market (see Cameron 2000; Gershon 2016, 2020; Rudnyckij 2009; Wilf 2011, 2016). If neoliberalism is a "set of migratory practices" (Ong 2007, 4) of self-fashioning, to understand its *modus operandi* we need to track how its mobile discursive technologies of "subjectification" (intended, in a Foucauldian sense, both as self-formation and subjection) travel and seep into new discursive domains. A case in point concerns the metrics of desire that commonly structure service encounters and customer satisfaction surveys. In addition to circulating widely within the realm of social activism (as seen in the workshops described earlier), these protocols of discourse and conduct are now pervasive in our academic environments (Brenneis et al. 2005; Strathern 2000).

CONCLUSION

It is an early August morning when I look at my iPhone screen and discover an email message from `aform_qualityassurance@unibo.it`. I log in with my institutional credentials and skim through the evaluations I have received for my first semester of teaching at the University of Bologna, where I recently moved to from the US. I squint my eyes as I emerge from my sleep, trying to acquaint myself with the template that combines narrative comments with a multiple-choice survey format.

I am used to being assessed by students. In the New York Liberal Arts private College, where I have spent most of my academic career thus far, teaching evaluations are given the utmost consideration. They are discussed in the teaching workshops where faculty gather to talk about their pedagogical practice and are decisive in reappointment procedures, as well as in the tenure review process. This is hardly surprising, given the larger political economy in which my former institution is embedded. As is the case in all of the extremely expensive and exclusive private colleges within the hyper-commodified context of US higher education, maintaining excellent teaching standards is a *conditio sine qua non* for institutional survival. These structural conditions, however, are not in place in the Italian academic context. Unlike in the US, Italian universities are, for the most part, state-subsidized and do not rely on student fees to operate. As in Toraja, customer satisfaction surveys have only become widespread in the Italian academic context during the last 10-plus years. These discursive technologies are aimed at simplifying complex experiences and forms of intersubjective engagement by applying a market framework to domains of human activity that were not originally conceived as driven by economic transactions.

Ironically, while in my *private* US teaching-intensive institution—where the faculty, for decades, have questioned the so-called quality revolution and the validity of its technologies of "coercive commensurability" (Brenneis et al. 2005)—evaluations are only qualitative and intended to be exclusively read by the instructor (and, before the tenure promotion, by a selected number of supervisors), at the *public* University of Bologna, where students could hardly be seen as customers, the evaluations have a primarily quantitative bend. Narrative comments are largely overlooked, whereas the final numerical score for each of the instructor's classes is measured and competitively ranked against the average standard of the department and the results of the low-scoring instructors are publicly exposed to the entire faculty by means of an extensive PowerPoint presentation held at the beginning of the new academic year. As I gaze at my final percentages, I briefly entertain the thought that the scores I am looking at are somewhat flawed. For example, given that class attendance is not mandatory, the data were gathered from a mixed pool of

respondents, only a fraction of whom attended the entire course. Further, the performance of mandatory courses is compared to that of elective ones and the template is a rather primitive preestablished grid, even if online surveys like this one would easily support adaptive question ordering, where the order of later questions depends on responses to earlier questions. I wonder whether quantitative social scientists whose courses have been assessed through this system for years have ever tried to object to or amend some of these flaws. I recall being told when I was hired that the negative result of the evaluation may impact a faculty member's salary raises and rank advancement and may become the object of disciplinary sanctions. Hasn't a union or a faculty collective disputed the validity of this questionnaire? The problem—my still partially awake brain points out—is not so much the assessment in itself (or the perhaps negligible faultiness of the survey design); rather, it is the fact that templates designed to measure and quantify customer satisfaction are applied to complex social activities like those entailed by the transmission and production of knowledge, which prompts a brutal reduction of intellectual pleasure and pedagogical discomfort to a numerical score (Brenneis et al. 2005). Further, it is remarkable how a discursive technology that may perhaps have political economic legitimacy within the context of the US hyper-competitive higher education market can be extracted and applied to a completely different (public) system, turning students into customers. While far removed from the Toraja Highlands, this example from the Italian academic system further illustrates the universalized discursive push toward neoliberal standardization.

I look again at my ratings. Surprisingly, I scored the lowest in the class I cared most about and prepared for best. My overall scores are sadly below the department average, but I did better in one course than the other. Still not fully awake, I am momentarily tempted to embrace the competitive star rating system. Should I rejoice for having got a few points more than the average of my colleagues in some of the assessment sections? After some thinking, I conclude not: happiness is a collective achievement and so, perhaps, is freedom.

How, then, shall we make sense of this world of replicable discursive templates that travel across different contexts and scales? My argument is that we—following the insights that Hanks (1987, 2010) developed in his study of the missionary encounter—should place these genres in a theory of practice and analyze how self-assessment exercises, feedback surveys, audit protocols, checklists, customer satisfaction questionnaires, and so on work as highly standardized and portable packages of guidelines and procedures that can be applied across different contexts to ever-greater scales to create a global metalanguage for the rearticulation of individuals' conduct and experience in ways compatible with capitalism's needs. These communicative practices and textual artifacts are both infrastructures of resource management and technologies for the production of a reflexive desiring subject to be subsumed by the machine of capitalist valorization.

An important and underanalyzed feature of the Indonesian cultural and political landscape after the demise of Suharto's authoritarian rule is constituted by the growing social legitimacy of personal desires and individual choices. This is hardly surprising. The celebration of private choices and individual freedoms has been a pervasive feature of the dismantling of welfare forms of government that have globally characterized the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first (Brown 2003; Harvey 2005; Rose 1999). Thus, rather than being constituted by citizens endowed with rights and obligations, society is inhabited by political actors driven by the free exercise of their informed choice among a variety of possible options. In this new scenario, individual empowerment, flexibility, and risk-taking abilities have become privileged tropes of neoliberal citizenship (Brown 2006; Rose 1999). Similarly, the capacity to parse, develop, and manage skills has become essential to the elaboration of new metrics for measuring, tracking, and assessing the highly flexible abilities that define individuals (Butler 2014; Gershon 2016, 2020; Urciuoli 2003, 2008). These transformations provide an empirical illustration to the entanglements evoked in the title of this article and masterfully captured by Michel Foucault's (1982, 781) original insight:


There are two meanings of the word subject: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.

In Toraja and beyond, the collapse of President Suharto's authoritarian rule prompted the spread of democratic hopes and inaugurated a new mode of political governance exerted through multiscalar clusters of transnational financial agencies and local governmental and nongovernmental organizations. A prominent feature of this new political landscape has been the emergence of novel practices, speech genres, and moral ideologies largely drawn from a discursive space created by the intersection between NGOs and transnational neoliberal agencies such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank. Mediated by these novel genres, a new emphasis on individual choices and personal aspirations is gradually transforming how people desire and voice their expectations, intentions, and entitlements, colliding with preexisting forms of sociality centered on reciprocal obligations and collective longing.

The local appeal of these new discursive genres is undeniable. Not only they are associated with prestigious metropolitan centers, but they also pivot on values that—as Marilyn Strathern (2000) pointed out in her influential edited volume on audit cultures—are almost impossible to criticize in principle: a novel emphasis on self-cultivation and proactive entrepreneurialism, an emancipatory narrative of personal aspirations and individual desires, and a new morality of accountability, transparency, and responsibility. They promise to replace local structures of exploitative agrarian power with a narrative of individual freedom, a political regime of entrenched corruption with justice and transparency, an economy prone to food scarcity with material prosperity and emotional fulfillment. So how can these new discursive technologies of freedom be criticized?

They probably cannot. But they can be ethnographically scrutinized to further our understanding of the entanglements of “subjectification,” intended both as the process of political subjection whereby power is exercised over a legal subject and as the emancipatory ideal underlying the (modern) philosophical tradition in which the subject is seen both as the center of experience and as the goal of intellectual endeavors (Foucault 1982). If, as Aihwa Ong (2007) proposes, the complex assemblages of practices that compose neoliberalism migrate across the globe and across different sectors, ethnographic tools may help us understand how such bundles are assembled and how they operate; how they are implemented; and, concurrently, how their implementation can be sabotaged through often subtle and inconspicuous microlinguistic gestures of noncompliance.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Suharto's regime ousted Sukarno, who had been Indonesia's first president and the leader of the early post-independence political phase, after the defeat of Dutch colonialism. Although Sukarno proclaimed Indonesia's independence on August 17, 1945, the Dutch attempted to reclaim their former colony, causing a period of war and instability that only came to a close at the end of 1949.

² Povinelli (2006, 4) understands the autological subject in reference to “discourses, practices, and fantasies about self-making, self-sovereignty, and the value of individual freedom associated with the Enlightenment project of contractual constitutional democracy and capitalism.”

³ For a discussion of similar phenomena within corporate contexts and capitalist institutions, see Gershon (2016); Gershon and Prentice (2021); Prentice (2019); Wilf (2016).

⁴ Note that in the Toraja Highlands (and in Indonesia at large) the vernacular code coexists with the national language. To distinguish between Toraja and Indonesian words, I use the abbreviations “T” and “I.” The new idiom of desire is generally mediated by Indonesian lexicon.

⁵ I use the term *affective ethos* to refer to a form of social imagination that both shapes individual subjectivities and organizes intersubjective relations. The notion is informed by the work of affect theorists (Rutherford 2016) but also by Montesquieu's ([1748] 1949) reflections on the spirit or ethos that shapes political regimes through specific forms of affection operating as ethical imperatives. As Montesquieu argues in the *Spirit of the Laws*, any type of a government is characterized by a specific passion (i.e., a spirit or ethos) that differently structures political action and collective belonging (Birmingham 2003).

⁶ For detailed analyses of political rallies in contemporary Toraja, see Donzelli (2019).

⁷ The post-Suharto history in Indonesia should not be conceived as a unitary period. After a first phase of great optimism for potential change, particularly during the short-lived presidency of Islamic leader and democracy activist Abdurrahman Wahid (aka Gus Dur) (1999–2001) and during Megawati Sukarnopurti's rule (2001–2004), a less hopeful phase begun with the 2004 election

of General Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. Yudhoyono's presidency inaugurated the beginning of a "post-Reformasi" period, which has been marked by increased efforts to control the media and regulate freedom of press and public expression (Strasser 2020).

⁸For historical accounts of these events, see John Roosa's now classic *Pretext for Mass Murder* (2006). More recent accounts include those by Jess Melvin (2018) and Geoffrey Robinson (2018). On this complex historical period and its consequences, see also the two documentaries by Joshua Oppenheimer: *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), and Garin Nugroho's 2000 award-winning Indonesian documentary/drama *Puisi Tak Terkuburkan* (literally, "unburied poetry," released in English as *A Poet: Unconcealed Poetry*).

⁹Drawing on Foucault, James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2002) refer to this new mode of power as "transnational neoliberal governmentality."

¹⁰As Bakhtin (1986, 78) points out, "we speak in diverse genres without suspecting that they exist."

¹¹"We learn to cast our speech in generic forms and, when hearing others' speech, we guess its genre from the very first words. . . . If speech genres did not exist and we had not mastered them. . . . speech communication would be impossible" (Bakhtin 1986, 79).

¹²As I have argued elsewhere (Donzelli 2019, 111–12), neoliberal discursive genres are marked by a tendency to treat spoken interaction as if it were a written document. In a way, neoliberal genres entail radical forms of "entextualization," which refers to the semiotic process whereby speech can be extracted from its original context of production and made portable and text-like (Briggs and Bauman 1992; Park and Bucholtz 2009).

¹³These are pseudonyms, modeled on the typical Toraja toponym system. Likewise, the name of the local *waring* is fictional.

¹⁴Interestingly, gambling has long been a source of great concern in the highlands. First, the Calvinist missionaries who evangelized the region at the beginning of the XX century and then the colonial and postcolonial governmental authorities strove to uproot the practice of cockfighting (T: *ma' saung*), which, like elsewhere in Indonesia, is interwoven with various ritual and social practices (Waterson 2009). This is hardly surprising, since cockfighting is embedded in an economy of fortune and chance that is clearly at odds with the principles of reflexive goal-orientedness and parsimonious accountability endorsed by both Calvinist and neoliberal discourses.

¹⁵As is usually the case for workshops held by nationwide NGOs, the medium of communication was Indonesian. While the participants were mostly fluent in both Toraja and Indonesian, the organizers (all coming from the organization headquarters) did not speak the local language.

¹⁶As Douglas Hollan and Jane Wellenkamp (1994) point out, Toraja vernacular notions of dreams tend to interpret nocturnal visions and mental activities occurring during sleep as presages or messages from the deceased. On Toraja conceptions and uses of dreams, see Hollan (1989, 1995).

¹⁷For an insightful analysis of how the notion of "skill" is essential to the development of a neoliberal self, see Bonnie Urciuoli (2008) and James Wilce and Janina Fenigsen (2016a, 2016b).

¹⁸The only exception was represented by one of the participants (a woman who was the head of a local school), who openly criticized the internship program for being poorly designed by making fun of the motivational cheer: "Your motto should not be 'I can make it,' but 'I am obliged to make it!'"

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