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## The Goat that Couldn't Stop the Mud Volcano: Sacrifice, Subjectivity, and Indonesia's "Lapindo Mudflow"

The little goat hangs in mid-air, legs extended. In this moment of suspension he looks back at the men in black and white ceremonial clothing, the men who threw him.<sup>1</sup> They give away his life to the spirits and to the pit. But the image keeps him present above ground, perpetually a moment from his fate, dragging his rope-leash, haloed by clouds of smoke and steam rising out of the bubbling hot mud, waiting to be swallowed.

The viewers of the image never see him land. The image denies resolution, disallowing any guarantee of the goat's expiration, of the completion of the violence done to him. The audience receives only that moment of suspension, the horror of a helpless body facing certain pain and annihilation.

Published on the front page of the Sunday edition of the *Jawa Pos*, Indonesia's most-widely circulated newspaper, on November 5, 2006, the image of the goat sacrifice — the animal flying into a pool of hot mud — accompanied a long article about local factories' financial losses caused by Indonesia's infamous mud volcano, commonly known as the "Lapindo" mudflow, after Lapindo Brantas, a gas exploration company drilling at the disaster site (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> In addition to the dramatic economic losses facing residents and factories in the area, this giant, uncontrollable geyser of mud has swallowed the homes of approximately 40,000 people in the Sidoarjo district of East Java. The four final sentences of the article, set off with a "Meanwhile. . ." to signal the transition, have no substantive connection to the factory losses and serve only to contextualize the image of the goat. By mentioning the arrival of mystics who performed several sacrifices to appeal to supernatural forces to stop the mudflow, these sentences justify the presence of the photo of the goat's spectacular death, which overwhelms this and other stories in the paper through its powers of attraction and provocation.

# Jawa Pos

Minggu



TAK MASUK AKAL: Kelompok supranatural dari Sumatra melakukan ritual membuang anak kambing ke dalam lumpur Lapindo kemarin. AP PHOTO/STRIMEDIA

[Figure 1: The image of the suspended goat on the front page of the *Jawa Pos*, 5 November 2006. Courtesy of PT. Media Virtual Indonesia and the *Jawa Pos* archive.]

The spectacular rendering of the goat's death instrumentalizes animal being for the purposes of commodity production and circulation, the making and selling of newspapers.<sup>3</sup> The weighty issues that surround the sacrifice — the frailty of bodies, the finitude of life, bodily “gifts,” structures of power, sacredness, meaning, non-meaning, and the horror of destruction — are condensed and muted in the image that sells, in the service of a media economy that contributes to the ideological production and maintenance of an array of subject positions that typically support the social and economic order.

This image of the goat is one example of various aesthetic and ideological operations in both sacrifice and representations of sacrifice that generate subjectivities. Observing that

symbolic and physical acts of violence against the animal, the scapegoat, or subhuman individual who is sacrificed articulate and arrange subjectivities into social hierarchies, this essay explores the implications of this violence — both in a specific case where individuals' rights and status are in question and in the theoretical context of expressing and resisting power. I hope to refine understandings of both a general theory of animal sacrifice and a specific, located incident by bringing them into dialogue. I will consider the staging of unequal power relations in both the execution and the representation of the sacrifice ritual by tracing the various ways sacrificial violence expresses subjectivity. In recognizing these manifestations of power, we — who have the cognitive faculties, cultural determinations, and social agencies that enable us to perform violence, to abstain from it, and to contemplate it — refine our capacity to understand violence toward other animals (including other members of our own species), and the ways it shapes us within ecological networks, so that we can become better, or at least more self-aware, actors in our ecological communities.

While this exploration of subjectivities generated through violence against the animal speaks to questions of ecological orientation that are important everywhere in the world, I frame these questions with a discussion about the recognition of victims' otherness and hardship during the Lapindo mudflow in East Java. The mudflow is an ongoing ecological disaster that resists being fixed down to any agreed-upon narrative. Disputes over causes, effects, compensation, and institutional responses unsettle understandings of the event, as various individuals and institutions represent and become represented in different politicized narratives. Each of these representations weaves, and are woven with, arrangements of power. As political and economic elites seek to protect their power and interests during the crisis, they often resort to denying the rights and status of mudflow victims, a denial that echoes the dehumanizing objectification of the other that is expressed in animal sacrifice. There is nothing extraordinary about claims that political and economic elites protect their interests at the expense of others. This paper suggests, however, that these dehumanizing procedures depend on an ontological demotion of the status of others. It becomes possible to prolong residents' exposure to physical and social hazards related to the mudflow, not because they are poor or unfortunate in terms of social hierarchies, but because their subhuman status makes this exposure to danger seem natural.

**Why Sacrifice?** The recent emergence of “biopower” as a theoretical paradigm for understanding the organization and execution of power has complicated the politics of social justice. Various theorists present distinctive versions of biopower, for instance, as

the production and regulation of life (Foucault), as the capacity to suspend laws and produce beings without political or living rights (Agamben), or as the interiorized power from “no place” that merges with being and desire to become self-replicating (Hardt and Negri). In each case power constrains the horizons of individuals’ being and behaving in the world, making individuals regular, predictable, and dispensable. This regularization threatens to intrude into the practices and goals of social justice movements, potentially warping their status as truly oppositional or distinct from the influence of power.

Although acts of sacrifice also express uneven power between beings, Georges Bataille’s writings on sacrifice emphasize the subversive potential of sacrificial violence. For Bataille, sacrifice is fraught with anguish, ecstasy, profanity, and sacredness. Sacrifice resounds with conflict and contradictions that make it profoundly irregular and unpredictable. At the same time, the sacrifice destroys and degrades life and is an act that is easily subsumed within broader and more enduring systems of biopower, as we see in Rene Girard’s writings on the “scapegoat mechanism” in sacrifice rituals. The scapegoat quells feelings of violence and discontent, serving “as a substitute for all the members of the community, [ . . . ] protecting all the members of the community from their respective violence” (101-2). Tracing the structure of sacrifice in both history and myth as it becomes superseded by judicial systems in modern societies, Girard suggests that the scapegoat mechanism is central to establishing and regulating human communities. Bataille’s version of sacrifice, by contrast, always threatens to unsettle disciplinary systems. Sacrifice provokes hermeneutic procedures that could potentially disrupt regularity and order. Through dynamic and ever-appropriable productions of meaning and subjectivity, for both the killers and the killed, sacrifice generates the possibility of developing new ways to understand and, using the terms of Peter Singer, give “consideration” to the being of “others” (163).

This openness to appropriations is radicalized in Bataille’s writings on sacrifice. Bataille understands sacrifice as a means of “giving” or “destroying” excess energies and resources that threaten to reduce individuals and objects to mere “things.” Bataille draws on Marcel Mauss’s anthropological work on the gift to note the links between religious and economic exchanges and to suggest that the “expenditure” of excess energy generates ongoing value for the giver (*Accursed Share* 69). Both the gift givers and receivers (the members of society) benefit: the latter from the spiritual, psychic, or disciplinary effects of the destruction, and the former from the “profit” of giving. The giver profits by “restoring the divine order” from the profanity and poverty of everyday life that is dominated by mindless work and consumption, that reduces

beings and relations in the world to “utilities” and “things” (*ibid.* 56). As gifts, “things” that can be accumulated and consumed are invested with increased social and spiritual value. Sacrifice brings the giver, the “accursed share” whose being and labor “is a surplus taken from the mass of *useful* wealth,” out of the “order of things” and into the “intimate order” (*ibid.* 59). Immediately problematic is the fact that this experience of binding the self to this intimate order is precluded by self-extinction. Quite simply, we cannot experience our death and the benefits of expenditure when we are already gone (“Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice” 27).

Any attempt at accessing the experience of the sacrifice and its benefits becomes an exercise in “fiction” (*ibid.* 20). The ritual of sacrifice enacts a performance of the impossibility of elation that comes with dying. As Dennis King Keenan notes in his reading of Bataille, sacrifice is itself mimetic, containing neither truth nor stable basis for its economy of exchanges. Whatever meanings emerge from sacrifice manifest out of layered acts of mimesis, out of the conceptual appropriations made possible in the performance of the ritual (41). Keenan also notes the resemblance between the scapegoat and the poet, in the sense that both are substitutes for self-expenditure that mimic the impossible original act (41). This similarity breaks, however, when Keenan observes that the scapegoat “is murdered as a means to an end,” the end being the performance of sacrifice, while the poet sustains death through contemplation and “interiorization” (41-2).

This fictive quality, this mimesis of a mimetic act extends into all representations of the goat’s death. Through different conventions that mediate and make possible the repeated experience of the event that is also impossible, each depiction “sacrifices sacrifice,” using Keenan’s terms in his response to Jean-Luc Nancy’s analysis of Georges Bataille’s writing on sacrifice. According to Keenan, Nancy reads Bataille’s version of sacrifice as revealing non-meaning, or, using Derrida’s phrasing, providing “access to the immediate and indeterminate identity of a non-meaning” or “the possibility of maintaining non-meaning,” while Bataille’s “obsessive” sacrifice of sacrifice “opens sacrifice to others and separates it violently from itself” (54-5). Since neither meaning nor non-meaning can be fully revealed or sustained in fixed or finalized terms, the sacrifice of sacrifice performs a moment of “dis-appropriation” that cannot foreclose the potentiality, or postponed expressions of meaning or non-meaning – the “reappropriating” and “trans-appropriating” of death (44). Art performs this sacrifice of sacrifice through mimesis, which enables individuals to “dwell” in aporia or enact the dis/re/trans-appropriation of death and meaning, but Keenan proceeds to suggest via

Bataille that the sacrifice ritual, itself, is fictive, mimicking itself and the impossible task of experiencing the effect of giving away one's own life (44).

It follows that the image of the goat's sacrifice (like all other representations of sacrifice) generates both aporia and the potential for various appropriations in meaning, which also manifest as articulations of subjectivity. Jacques Derrida observes that "carnivorous" animal sacrifice "is essential to the structure of subjectivity, which is to say to the founding of the intentional subject as well and to the founding, if not of the law, at least of right, the difference between law and right, justice and right, justice and law, here remaining open over an abyss" (*Acts of Religion* 247). Each articulation of subjectivity depends on the construction and destruction of the animal. By "construction" I mean the ideological violence that establishes who does and does not receive justice, right, or law. The violence that marks a being with animality, degradation, or subhuman-ness makes possible the symbolic or physical destruction of this being, from which the exalted subject emerges as "not-degraded." This ideological violence is a sacrifice *before* the sacrifice (or before the sacrifice of sacrifice) that installs a being into the sacrifice mechanism. We see this, perhaps uncomfortably, in Bataille, where the act of elevating beings out of the order of things through sacrifice depends on the already-objectified status of certain beings. The necessity of elevation involves a degradation that implies previous attempts at elevation either failed or were never tried.

Implied in Derrida's statement about animal sacrifice is the permeable and undecidable nature of subjectivity. Our experiences and actions in the world are not determined or organized by transcendent categories of thought or ego, but rather develop through engagements in the world. Subjectivity is always fractured and evolving, shaped by experiences, practices, and events that are internalized, performing the "function of misrecognition" that forms, "hails," or "overdetermines" the "I" (Althusser 161). As Derrida notes, the destruction of the animal enables individuals to stake their claim as subjects with specific (exalted) legal privileges and rights. Cary Wolfe also references the centrality of animals in shaping understandings of humanness:

[T]he animal possesses a specificity as the object of both discursive and institutional practices, one that gives it particular power and durability in relation to other discourses of otherness. For the figure of the "animal" in the West (unlike, say, the robot or the cyborg) is part of a cultural and literary history stretching back at least to Plato and the Old Testament, reminding us that the animal has always been especially, frightfully nearby, always lying in wait at the very heart of the constitutive disavowals and self-constructing narratives enacted by that fantasy figure called "the human." (6)

This ontological demotion of the animal, the privileged signifier of sub-humanness, which disidentifies beings' relative rights and status represents, once again, the sacrifice *before* sacrifice (or the always-sacrificable status) of the individual who is objectified as the scapegoat or "excess" that must be vanquished.

It is doubtful that this process, where mimetic articulations of subjectivity promote and demote the ontological status of beings, can be escaped. The instability and vulnerability of ideological appropriations of sacrifice also destabilizes the orders of power that articulate ontological hierarchies. As understandings of the sacrifice ritual remain perpetually open for appropriations, so do articulations of subjectivity that both express and resist power. Rather than falling into the regularizing modes of biopower, Bataille's version of sacrifice perpetually threatens to undo order, as a fervent and transgressive performance of the possibility of revelation or access to impossible meaning "because seeking distances it" ("Hegel, Death, and Sacrifice" 28). Neither power nor resistance is secured or finally made regular in the votive, volatile act of sacrifice.

**The Lapindo Mudflow.** The Lapindo mudflow is frequently cited as one of the world's largest mud volcanoes and the most expensive disaster in Indonesia's history. Since it began on May 29, 2006, it has released as much as 180,000 m<sup>3</sup> of mud per day into the Porong subdistrict of Sidoarjo in East Java and continues to flow six years later (Dewan; Mazzini et al. 1751). Beyond displacing over 40,000 area residents, the mud contains toxins and gases that have been responsible for dozens of deaths, thousands of incidents of illness, and continues to threaten people's lives in the region (Rumiati, Soedjono). In addition to the mudflow, which is currently being collected in a giant embankment and pumped into a nearby river, residents also face danger from flammable gasses and subsidence (sinking land), which has destroyed a range of structures, including homes, roads, and the portions of the mud embankment itself (Utomo 42).

Despite its unusual geological character, most observers consider the mudflow a social disaster, as controversies involving some of Indonesia's most prominent and powerful political and business figures have marred the disaster management effort (Schiller et al. 62-4). Most famous is the debate over what triggered the mudflow: human error caused by unsafe drilling in a gas exploration mine less than 150 m from the center of the mudflow or by a massive earthquake occurring two days earlier in Yogyakarta, over

200 km away. Although various scientists have published reports that support both sides in the debate, and there are reasonable explanations to justify either conclusion, the majority of published reports by independent experts (those not affiliated with the central government or Lapindo Brantas) show that drilling has had some influence in causing the mud volcano.[4]

At stake in these trigger debates is responsibility for funding and overseeing the expensive and difficult disaster management effort. Ostensibly, if drilling triggered the mudflow, Lapindo Brantas would pay; if earthquakes triggered it, the government would pay. While a properly detailed account of the complex history, politics, and competing interests that have given shape to this disaster would be difficult to fit into a book, much less an article, it is enough in this context to note that these controversies have damaged the disaster management effort, leaving contractors and aid workers with little direction, support, or supervision (Hamdi et al. 10).[5] After six years, workers have had little success controlling the mudflow and limiting the impact of subsidence, regional infrastructure remains in ruins, and victims have received only a fraction of the financial support promised to them to aid their relocation (Suparno). With the local economy and regional infrastructure in ruins, there are simply not enough ecological or local charity resources for the necessary assistance to residents who are left to live in crumbling houses on sinking land, often forced to beg for food and income.[6] Significant corporate or government intervention remains the only realistic means of restoring livelihoods and ensuring safety.

Because the recognition and classification of victims has been subject to controversy, thousands of individuals have been essentially left without support to live in safety, much less to relocate, leaving them scrambling with residents from other villages to form political coalitions to protect their rights and interests. The primary mechanism for providing aid to victims has been a sale and purchase program (*akta jual-beli*), which has delivered financial support based on land ownership and the location of damaged property.[7] Instead of a formal compensation program that would require one institution taking accountability for the funding and management of assistance to victims, this program was funded by a newly-formed subsidiary of Lapindo Brantas and managed by a government-appointed organization of public officials and engineers.[8] As Lapindo Brantas's finances dried up due to the global economic conditions, the completion of sale and purchase payments stalled, with most victims receiving less than half of the promised sums.



Despite these difficulties facing victims who qualify for the sale and purchase program, their access to supportive resources is greater than most victims who fail to qualify. Thousands of individuals living in the same neighborhoods as officially-recognized victims are ineligible for assistance because they either own no property, lack the proper formal certification of their property, or live outside the land area designated by several presidential decrees for sale and purchase payments (HSF 90-4). Neither Lapindo Brantas nor the central government has been clear about the rationale in the drawing of these specific boundaries, which in some cases literally run along neighboring property lines, and has often turned neighbors against each other (Orolo). As arbitrary as these boundaries may seem, it is hard to imagine they are being set without deliberation, considering the high financial stakes and limited supply of funds.

Whatever the financial implications, the act of differentiating those victims whose losses will be recognized – and compensated for – and victims whose losses receive no formal recognition resonates with both Bataille’s version of sacrifice and the “bare life” of Agamben’s account of *homo sacer*. In the latter, the mudflow stands as the state of exception through which sovereign power is able suspend laws and produce individuals as *homo sacer*, those who can be killed but not sacrificed. As polar extremes in relation to the legal order, *homo sacer* and the sovereign “present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns” (84). In other words, through the recognition and ascription of *homo sacer*, the people of a given society experience the ascension of their status through their participation with expressions of sovereignty: an experience of sovereignty through being *not homo sacer*. Andrew Norris notes that the stakes of this relation extend beyond claims to power and social status, to figure in the ways we recognize the metaphysical distinctiveness of the human (10). As Johanna Oksala writes in her reading of Norris, “*homo sacer* must die so that the rest of the political community may affirm the transcendence of their bodily, animal life” (31).

In terms of Agamben’s account of *homo sacer*, the grouping of residents who are affected by the mudflow into two groups of victims — those with legal and financial rights and those without — is made to appear as a natural expression of sovereign power. Any casual survey of residents in the neighborhoods surrounding the levees will reveal a diverse range of interests and concerns about the mudflow and the institutional handling of the disaster, including the fair administration of compensation schemes, the completion of infrastructure projects, the invigoration of the local economy and

generation of jobs, the improved monitoring of pollutants and other environmental impacts in the nearby fields and rivers, and the reconstruction of schools and mosques.[9] But the sovereign power, expressed via both national and local government institutions that tend to promote the interests of political and economic elites over developing more egalitarian policies, strips local residents of their distinctiveness, crudely categorizing these residents as either those who are entitled to the right of compensation or those who are not. Although the access to rights and resources is of crucial importance to local residents, the very fact that government officials can literally draw lines that establish these rights indicates the already-degraded status of most residents in the region. As Peter Fitzpatrick notes, in submitting to Western legal structures that simultaneously work to control both the spaces exterior and interior to sovereignty, “we are . . . bare before the law, and ‘always/already’ sacrificed in relation to it” (69). By drawing what appears to be arbitrary boundaries with regard to specific rights to compensation, the sovereign power of the government expresses its ability to revoke any and all rights from all citizens.

Earlier we considered the *sacrifice before* sacrifice as a process that makes possible the installation of the subject within the structure of sacrifice as object for the purposes of revealing or gaining access to a essential or transcendent meaning that restores the truth to the objectified subject. Fitzpatrick goes further; he identifies the *sacrifice before* a legal system where sovereignty can be expressed. From the perspective of articulating power relations that stage and naturalize the demoted status of individuals as “things,” “*homo sacer*,” or “mudflow victims,” it becomes possible to recognize the close relationship between Agamben’s and Bataille’s systems of power and violence. Bataille’s version of sacrifice, in its stubborn pursuit of meaning, in its recognition of the impossibility of meaning while also recognizing the impossibility of nonmeaning through the never-ending generation of appropriative potentials, more accurately describes the irregular and unknowable influences and effects that permeate power relations. This irregularity gestures toward the potential limits of biopower’s capacity to manage subjectivity. As we observe specific “human” subject positions that are generated through violence against the nonhuman animal in the following sections, biopower’s lack of stability becomes increasingly apparent.

**Sacrifice as Spectacle.** The *Jawa Pos* features the aforementioned image of the goat sacrifice at the top and center of its front page, which is paradigmatic of the mass media’s participation in the economy of spectacle. In its position of prominence, the image composes what Guy Debord refers to as an “unreal unity,” a commodity in the economy of images that mediates social relations and masks real conditions of

exploitation and disharmony (35). The successful production and circulation of this image depends on its appeal, on the power of the aesthetic provocation – be it shock, wonder, or contemplation – generated in the composition and framing of the image.

The image-as-spectacle, aestheticized and commodified, obscures the actual act of violence. The spectacle preempts the violence done to the goat by transforming ecological complexity into a dramatic moment, a moment designed for mass consumption. To invoke the well-known terminology of Judith Butler, the spectacular image “dematerializes” the violence being done to the goat. Butler conceptualizes the representative production of bodies through a pun on “matter”: “[T]o know the significance of something is to know how and why it matters, where ‘to matter’ means at once ‘to materialize’ and ‘to mean’” (32). The goat’s existence and death neither materialize nor matter in the context of the spectacle, of the image’s aesthetic rendering. As Timothy Morton observes, there is something “suspiciously anti-ecological” about the aesthetic – as a faculty of sense and understanding – insofar as it is a “product of distance: of human beings from nature, of subjects from objects, of mind from matter” (24).

The aesthetic staging of the violence toward the animal also structures the newspaper’s audience as human subjects removed from nature. As the image provokes the audience to experience and contemplate the destruction of the goat, the rendering of the goat’s life and death into stylized, aesthetic forms and effects intensifies the division between the human subject and the animal object. The privileged perspective for experiencing and contemplating the violence in the aestheticized image belongs to the audience, the human subjects articulated in the annihilation of the nonhuman. The aesthetic mediates the ways we recognize and understand the status and subjectivity of all beings – including people – that are subsumed within the category of the nonhuman. These subjects are converted into objects and symbols. Once conceived as object or symbol, the nonhuman is made vulnerable to violence, a violence in which the pain and horror of destruction is muted and obscured for the audience’s digestion. When considered beside Bataille’s view that sacrifice seeks to recover beings from the “order of things,” the irony is apparent. The aesthetic operations that serve the economy of spectacle transform beings into things, even when representing a ritual that attempts to preserve beings as distinct from things.

Still, just as commodity production is not inherently malignant for labor, the aesthetic is not merely a structure of estrangement and obfuscation. Morton is explicit about his

ambivalence toward the role of aesthetics in nature, noting the “crucial role” aesthetics plays in how “humans experience their place in the world,” and in framing “ways of feeling and perceiving this place” (2). The aesthetic may be anti-ecological, but, citing the work of both Marcuse and Adorno, Morton suggests that the aesthetic also offers ways of helpfully reconceiving human and nonhuman relationships. For Marcuse, “art could help ecology by modeling an environment based on love (eros) rather than death (thanatos) – as is the current technological-industrial world.” Adorno notes Kant’s notion of the “absence of interest” that characterizes the aesthetic in contrast to the practical realm: here “the aesthetic promotes nonviolence toward nature. Art is not so much a space of positive qualities (eros), but of negative ones: it stops us from destroying things, if only for a moment” (24-5). The operations of the aesthetic are thus not necessarily subsumable within the commodity structure; they can, in fact, become antagonistic to commodity production, even when the very act of depiction recontextualizes the image’s referents and renders them vulnerable to commodification.

In addition to noting the disparate potential outcomes of aesthetic rendering, it is necessary to observe the impact of cultural location in our understandings of sacrifice aesthetics. While the notion of aesthetic distance circulates within a Western critical tradition that develops out of the work of Kant, an array of ethnic, religious, traditional, and modern influences shape cultural production and reception – and by extension, the aesthetic experience – for Indonesians in diverse ways (Luvaas 265). Surely the “hybrid” nature of cultural forms in Indonesia does not preclude experiences of aesthetic distance, but it is also likely that local witnesses of the goat sacrifice, most of whom would be familiar with traditional feasts (*slametan*) and the Muslim Feast of Sacrifice (*Idul Adha*) that feature animal sacrifice, would experience it differently than Western observers.

Most Indonesian readers of the newspaper will also be familiar with various traditions of sacrifice that occur throughout its islands. Even so, this exposure does not guarantee an aesthetic experience of the image of the goat that is firmly distinct from that of non-Indonesian and/or Western readers. Benedict Anderson famously observes the role of newspapers in circulating news and ideas that fostered a sense of common experience that joined individuals from vastly different ethnic and cultural backgrounds into “imagined communities,” which culminate in the modern nation state (33). Today’s media climate, however, where the production, circulation, and consumption of news content “flows” on a global scale, challenges the role of national categories for determining or comparing aesthetic responses (Jenkins 2). Yet, even as cultures “converge” in the global era of media to complicate the ways we distinguish aesthetic

sensibilities, some differences in aesthetic experience are likely to endure, regardless of whether they are shaped by national, cultural, religious, or economic beliefs and practices.

While an exploration of categories that determine aesthetic experience would be of interest, they are not a central concern of this essay. It is enough to note that the image is composed and circulated to sell newspapers, where its commodity function serves as one mode of appropriation of the sacrificial violence toward the animal, one that abstracts the violent event as a consumable “fetish.” As a mode of appropriation, the spectacular image-as-commodity can influence other hermeneutic or ideological appropriations. Nonetheless, no appropriation or category of appropriation can guarantee access to a more primary or authentic meaning in the idea or experience of sacrifice. Keenan’s reading of art as a mimetic sacrifice of sacrifice indicates that the only guarantee of understanding or appropriating the act is the lack of guarantees: the incessant potential for other appropriations.

All modes of appropriation, however, like the aesthetic and economic operations at work in the production of spectacle, reproduce the violent act as a “fiction” that threatens to render it distant and abstract. Similarities between the goat and those individuals adversely impacted by the mudflow once again arise, as respective hardships become recognized through abstract representations. In the image, the goat’s death is transformed into both an artwork and a commodity, while official policies that respond to the mudflow assign individuals and their hardships to categories of victimhood: those who legally are entitled to compensation and those who are not. The government and Lapindo Brantas recognize the qualitative specificity of hardship through the economy of land ownership. One’s status and experiences of suffering become identified with the classification and measurement of owned land.

The act of identification, however, is not inherently antagonistic to the rights and interests of victims. For any individual, institution, or policy aiming to deliver assistance to people in need, needs and individuals in need must be recognized and classified. The established terms of this recognition and classification inevitably erase the meaning and truth of ideas and experiences that are always already inaccessible to representation (or they sacrifice sacrifice). These representative procedures should aspire, however, to avoid demoting the represented individuals’ social and ontological status. The classification of victims based on land ownership organizes individuals’ social and political status, but the fact that individuals can be so easily organized and

classified indicates their ontological demotion. In other words, these representations raise questions not only about the denial of rights to those in the social margins, but also about the naturalization of the very denial of their rights.

**Reason Does Not Enter – Tradition vs. Modernity.** Through Bataille's version of sacrifice we come to see the emergence of a horizon of potential subject positions in both the act of sacrifice and representations of that act. Both articulate and naturalize subject positions into hierarchies of social and ontological status by contrasting the animal, or subhuman, with the human. The human, with superior faculties and claims to rights, has the capacity to kill, benefit from killing, observe the killing, represent the killing, or contemplate representations of the killing. In the context of sacrifice rituals in Indonesia, the hierarchical organization of subject positions frequently emerges in the tension between tradition and modernity played out in cultural production, politics, religion, and economic practices.

A brief look at some trends will provide a sense of the intersecting influences of tradition and modernity in Indonesia. Culturally, Indonesia is experiencing the same rapid development of digitized, mass entertainment that is transforming cultural production around the world, all while protecting and celebrating its diverse and rich traditional arts that are tied to locality and ethnicity (Heryanto and Hadiz 257). Politically, Indonesia is in the throes of massive liberalizing and democratizing reforms (*reformasi*) that began with the fall of the authoritarian Suharto government in 1998, while it also retains many of the previous patrimonial structures that secure the status of political and economic elites (Hadiz 716). Regarding religious practices, Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims of any nation in the world. Comprised of a broad and diverse collection of cultural and ethnic groups, Indonesians are widely known for practicing and promoting tolerance toward individuals from other religions and cultural systems, a tolerance perhaps influenced by the nation's well-known history of syncretism, of integrating traditional mysticism and modern religion (Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change" 35). At the same time, fundamentalist groups have recently augmented their cultural presence, influencing various laws and court cases related to social conduct (Liang). The tension between tradition and modernity is also prevalent in the national economy, where local, informal production still provides livelihoods for almost half the population, even during the economy's rapid development and emergence into the global sphere (Islam 52).

Sacrifice, too, can be deployed to confirm both traditional and modern cultural narratives. The ritual of sacrifice, for instance, expresses the significance of traditional cosmologies in the contemporary world, where geological evidence presents only a partial explanation for the existence of the mud volcano.[10] Indonesian theologian Bernard Adeney-Risakotta writes that “most Indonesians believe in invisible powers which reside all around them. . . . For some people, these local, invisible powers are to be cultivated, placated, feared, served or even worshiped” (235). While we find little success combating the mudflow with “modern” tools (e.g., pumps, tractors, and science), the sacrifice ritual appeals to forces extending beyond reason. Noting the ways that some Indonesian newspapers often accept the mystical origins of unusual events (as opposed to the Western media’s dependence on scientific explanation), Adeney-Risakotta writes that “human tragedies, including natural disasters, do not have a single, fixed ontological meaning, . . . but rather [meaning changes] in relation to human responses to the tragedy” (229). Whether these mystics believed their sacrifice would stop the mudflow, the sacrifice ritual fits within naturalized spiritual narratives that continue to shape their understanding of the world, narratives that are sustained by the destruction of the animal’s life.

In his well-known studies of Javanese spirituality and rituals, Clifford Geertz observes that the maintenance of cosmological equanimity – between mankind, nature, and the spirits – is central to most traditional belief systems in Java. Within Javanese tradition, Geertz suggests, “to ‘be human’ is to be Javanese,” where “man, his society, and his natural environment strike a harmony almost mathematical,” a harmony maintained by strict conformity to social practices and values that “religious ritual and belief dramatize” (“Religious Belief” 138). Geertz notes the cultivation of harmony in his description of the *slametan* feast, which is still common in Java today. The *slametan* is a large communal meal that is held in conjunction with significant events (e.g., births, deaths, and marriages) and features offerings to ancestors and local spirits to ensure the procession of events without incident (*ibid.* 139; Hefner 538).

When something is out of balance in the cosmos, when corruption proliferates and spirits become angry, people frequently see signs. In his personal account of life as a mudflow refugee, religious teacher H.M. Maksum Zuber observes the mudflow surging every time an official from the central government visited the disaster site: “The higher the position of officials at the site, the higher the explosions of mud,” finally growing “fierce with a blind rage, causing mud to gush and swallow anything that got in its way” after a visit from the president (7). In this context of social and environmental

disorder, it is possible to see the goat sacrifice as an attempt to respond to and pacify agitated spirits or unseen forces.

The goat sacrifice captured in the *Jawa Pos* photograph has been one of many rituals performed at the disaster site as attempts to stop the mudflow. In addition to the goat in the photo, that day's sacrifices included another goat, along with several chickens. There was even a contest held a month earlier by a local businessman who offered a house to anyone who could stop the mudflow with mystical powers (Schiller et al. 55). The event included offerings of goats, cows, chickens, a bull's head, and a magical bandana ("Mystics Can't Stop Mud").

While these offerings and mystical powers draw on traditional beliefs and practices, when performed in the national media before the mudflow — which, due to its associations with gas exploration drilling, is generally considered a very modern disaster[11] — there is a danger that something is lost — in addition to the goat — when the sacrifice is taken out of context. Having already noted the ways the aesthetic and commodity functions of the newspaper image appropriate the context of the physical killing of the goat, it is also worth noting that these functions appropriate the historical and cultural backdrop of sacrifice rituals. By framing the various mystical and traditional rituals in the carnival-like setting of the mudflow, the news media rearticulates these practices as spectacle.

It is likely that some of the mystical "contestants" can be dismissed as mere exhibitionists. The links between mysticism and the mudflow are nonetheless real enough to resonate across Indonesia. In Java, for instance, earthquakes and volcanoes are often understood through myths about deities; most mountains have human guardians who mediate the spiritual and material worlds through rituals (Adeney-Risakotta 236). It is also notable that it was mystics from Sumatra who performed the sacrifice of the goat in the *Jawa Pos* photograph. In what was perhaps the most striking case of mysticism and magic related to the mudflow, anthropologist Gregory Forth notes that the well-publicized effort to stop the mudflow triggered a resurgence in "construction sacrifice" rumors in the eastern Indonesian islands of Flores and Sumba in 2007-2008. According to legend, human heads endow man-made structures with strength, durability, and spiritual guardianship to prevent natural threats, and children's heads are typically seen as the most powerful (4). In the past, suspicious-looking outsiders have been attacked, even killed due to kidnapping fears. As the Lapindo mudflow drew national attention, construction sacrifice rumors spread, complete with stories of attempted kidnappings, discovered headless bodies,



disappearing children, and arrivals of suspicious strangers. In some cases the fear was great enough that parents kept their children from school (5).

Forth cites other researchers who suggest that the development of notions of construction sacrifice and head-stealing emerges out of a history of colonial contact, where powerful outsiders arrive and impose laws and practices while extracting wealth.[12] In this colonial context, the rumors articulate and solidify the divide between subjects as local residents and subjects as outsiders. There occurs a similar process with the sacrifice of the goat at the mudflow, where killing the goat expresses not only traditional cosmologies but also a defiance of contemporary cultural, intellectual, and spiritual movements. In other words, some may interpret killing the goat through sacrifice as a way for these men to express their identities in opposition to modernity and the cultural narratives and ideologies often associated with modernity (e.g., globalization, liberalism, and secularism).

On the other hand, once the sacrifice is framed and circulated as a mass-media image, the killing of the goat articulates the modernity and rationality of readers and producers of the newspaper by provincializing the ritual of sacrifice and those who partake in it. We see this provincializing effect against those involved in the sacrifice quite literally in the caption of the image: “It does not make sense: a supernatural group performs a ritual of throwing a young goat [a kid] into the Lapindo mud in Porong, Sidoarjo, yesterday” (*Tak masuk akal: kelompok supernatural melakukan ritual membuang anak kambing ke lumpur Lapindo di Porong, Sidoarjo, kemarin*). Although generally used interchangeably with the English expression, “it does not make sense,” the expression “*tak masuk akal*” literally translates as “reason does not enter,” which seems more appropriate to an interpretation of a sacrifice ritual that articulates distinctions between subjects operating inside and outside the realm of modern reason.

From the perspective of most readers and producers of the newspaper who inhabit a modern, globally connected “imagined community,” reason does not enter into myths, mysticism, and barbaric rituals. Reason sustains modernity, as Horkheimer and Adorno’s renowned analysis of enlightenment culture highlights: “The principle according to which reason is simply opposed to everything unreasonable underlies the true opposition between enlightenment and mythology” (70). Reason dictates that animal sacrifices will not stop a mudflow, that such killing of animals serves no rational purpose. Horkheimer and Adorno note, in fact, the role of reason in the recognition of humanity: “Throughout European history the idea of the human being has been

expressed in contradistinction to the animal. The latter's lack of reason is the proof of human dignity" (203). Once again we see the animal playing a prominent role in the construction of what Wolfe calls the "fantasy" of the human, where – like earlier notions of aesthetic contemplation, media consumption, and possession of property – reason provides the ideological prop upon which mankind elevates itself. The unreasonable, the ostensibly mindless iterators of outdated superstitious practices, are made to resemble something less-than-human. In this sense, the killing of the goat establishes a chauvinistic perspective of reason, from which the killing of the animal turns the killers, also, into animals.

However unreasonable one thinks the practices and beliefs of those who sacrifice the animal, it is important to note that to many residents and interested observers, reason does not always enter into a range of other events related to the mudflow, including activities performed within modern, scientific paradigms of reason. Reason also does not always seem to enter into, or at least to guide, the disaster management effort, which has been more alienating than helpful to most local residents (Hamdi et al. 10). Reason does not enter in the way elite politics have hijacked discourses about causality, transparency, and accountability, drowning the voices and interests of victims within an exclusive and opaque apparatus of power (Utomo 28-9).

Perhaps the most prominent moment of unreason in the disaster management effort was the decision in 2007 to drop hundreds of high-density concrete balls into the mudflow's main crater. Scientists and engineers from the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) developed a plan to plug the main spring with concrete balls using what they called the "high density chained balls method" (Istadi 1727): "The idea is to jam the gullet of the geyser with 1,000 or more balls linked together like charm bracelets, in bunches of four, the biggest of them weighing about 175 pounds" (Mydans). Certainly, reason plays an important role in the planning and execution of the concrete ball drop, even if the ITB experts were acting on questionable evidence and predictions about the plan's outcome, and even if other geologists doubted the plan (*ibid.*). But to other interested parties, especially local residents waiting for financial assistance, the plan represented the flagrant misuse of scarce funds that could have many more "reasonable" uses (Zuber 98).

Even in a publication summarizing social and technical operations by management officials and researchers at the mudflow, a collection of experts at the Surabaya Institute of Technology (ITS) notes that disaster management officials have devoted too many resources to seeking technological solutions to the mudflow. Considering the size and

complexity of the mudflow, the ITS report suggests that long-term projects that emphasize social and geographical welfare would be far more beneficial to the social and economic conditions around the mudflow. They would also be cheaper to administer (Wiguna et al. 54). Although the balls actually managed to stop the mudflow for a few hours, the mudflow quickly returned to its normal output, and the project was cut short in the face of growing expenses and public ridicule.

The ITB plan is paradigmatic of technocrats' crude faith in solutions stemming from advancement of technologies and expertise, a faith that problematizes the centrality of reason in ideologies of modernity and has been a target of much critique (Mayer). Horkheimer and Adorno note, for instance, that reason takes on a mythic quality as modern science employs it to secure human control over nature and the world (19-20). Indeed, there is a simple and naïve quality to the plan, as if a child could have designed it, yet it also demonstrates humanity's gross overconfidence the capacity to control nature. This combination of simplicity and arrogance in the conception and operation of the plan undermines its integrity as a product of scientifically-rigorous reason.

Aesthetic similarities between the goat sacrifice and the dropping of the concrete balls also challenge reason as an epistemic category that secures the distinctiveness of tradition and modernity. Both acts, the sacrifice and the ball drop, demonstrate antagonism and arrogance toward nature (or nonhuman beings or forces) by denying the being of the goat and the power and complexity of geological forces. Together, the acts articulate subjectivities associated both with modernity (e.g., as humans, consumers, practitioners of technology, etc.) and with tradition (e.g., as animals, the faithful, practitioners of ritual, etc.). Forth even suggests some connection between the concrete balls and the spread of head-stealing rumors, noting that the balls were shaped "not unlike human heads" (6).

As these acts blur the boundaries that typically articulate the distinctiveness of tradition and modernity, we become better accustomed to recognizing the ways these subjectivities are produced and circulated. Far from arbitrary categories that should be abandoned, modern and traditional subjectivities are structured and habituated through beliefs and practices that are overdetermined by a host of social forces and by nonhumans. It is not just cultural, economic, and political phenomena that shape subjectivity; mudflows and animals have an impact as well. The ways individuals enter into dialogue with the nonhuman world of animals and natural forces goes far into

determining one's subjectivity, whether it means articulating a person as distinctly human, modern, traditional, animal, or something else.

Tensions between tradition and modernity are even prevalent in contemporary religious movements and institutions in Indonesia. Islam's prominence and influence manifests through an expansive range of modern institutions and social structures. In contrast to localized and informal spiritual traditions, Islam is highly organized and widely visible throughout Indonesia, influencing politics, education, business, and everyday public life (Hefner 548). Yet ambiguities arise during events like the annual Feast of Sacrifice (*Idul Adha*), which commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Ishmael at God's command. Most households perform an animal sacrifice, and dense urban neighborhoods streets will literally run red with animal blood. Despite the institutionalization of the Feast of Sacrifice, which is a national holiday, when one witnesses or even participates in the actual taking of animal life, the gruesomeness of the act – the screams, twitching, and gore – momentarily disrupts the ostensibly clean distinction between the modernity of organized religion and the barbaric violence often associated with traditional mysticism.

More important than upsetting attempts to plot coordinates of modernity, a project precluded by the range of cultural and historical influences that shape beliefs and practices, the Feast of Sacrifice exemplifies the naturalization of both the sacrifice ritual and the instrumental usage of animal life. This naturalization of animal sacrifice also naturalizes the range of human and subhuman subjectivities articulated in the sacrifice ritual. As Wolfe observes in considering speciesist ideologies that privilege the human, these can evolve to justify incredible violence against beings who do not qualify as "properly human" (8).

**Conclusion .** Keenan emphasizes that the power of sacrifice and representations of sacrifice lies in the endless generation of potential for appropriations, which we see expressing a range of ideological narratives and subject positions. In the violent act of sacrifice, an expression of control that establishes an ostensible ontological order within the ecological community, individuals betray the variability and contingency of subjectivity. This variability in subjectivity is also present in systems of biopower, where expressions of control, on both biological and social registers, must constantly evolve and be reconfigured to account for the ways biopower transforms both subjects and the conditions of power (Hardt and Negri 392). While Bataille's version of sacrifice does not offer an exit from this everlasting dance between control and subjectivity, it at least forbids the foreclosure of a possibility of exit. In other words, the sacrifice ritual

may not reveal any meaning or essence that we can use to secure certain subject positions, but it also cannot secure the impossibility or absence of meaning or essence (Keenan 43-4). The act of sacrifice, like the act of artistic production, submits ideas and identities to be appropriated by others through their experiences and interpretations of the sacrifice or artwork. Even if neither meaning nor non-meaning can be guaranteed, we kill and create as if the potential to generate new meanings still exists.

Thus, at every rendering of sacrifice – the sacrifice before sacrifice that installs the individual within systems of power that establish who qualifies as a candidate to be sacrificed, the actual sacrifice where death occurs, and then the representation of the sacrifice – there is the potential for the scapegoat to exceed the ways he or she is represented, in spite of the social and ontological demotions ascribed to him or her. This potential has important implications for social justice movements around the world that strive to deliver certain rights and dignities to individuals marginalized by power.

In the context of the Lapindo mudflow, where victims face the threat of social and ontological demotion through their subjection to the legal discourses and instruments that identify and classify the status of different forms of hardship, the instrumentalization of the goat in sacrifice prompts us – victims, officials, and researchers alike – to explore more deeply the processes through which we recognize and put to use individuals' bodies, rights, and capacities to suffer. Crucially, the privileged “human” emerges through ritualized, instrumentalized, and destructive interactions with the goat: the goat who holds in place an array of subjects and relationships to generate and sustain an “imagined community” of humans. While this essay touches on some of the cultural, political, religious, and environmental factors that shape these understandings of human and nonhuman being in the context of social justice in the aftermath of the Lapindo mudflow, further research must be done to more accurately and exhaustively account for the social and ontological conditions through which power is expressed and naturalized in ecological communities through literal and symbolic violence.

This work demands much of researchers, both in methods and training. Methodologically, it requires inquiry into causal relationships in complex social and natural systems to identify determining agents and to analyze relationships between actors, events, and systems that always threaten to give or take away the meaning of sacrifice. It follows that researchers adopting such an interdisciplinary, ecological approach require training, access to knowledge, and the capacity to synthesize diverse

and often discordant information. Perhaps more daunting to researchers, however, is the realization that they, too, represent sacrifice through their work. They, too, appropriate, and submit to appropriation, the deaths of others. They, too, must come to realize in their own work the impossibility of pinning sacrifice to determinations or meaning, as well as the inability to guarantee or reveal this impossibility as necessary. It is a project that will miss its target, possibly but not necessarily because of researchers' shortcomings, but also because sacrifice undermines researchers' capacity to even question whether or not that target ever existed.

### Notes

I would like to thank John Rieder, John Zuern, and the anonymous reviewers from *Humanimalia* for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. Although I am unable to verify the biological sex of the goat, based on personal experience – both witnessing goat sacrifices and conversing informally with participants – male goats are more frequently sacrificed in Indonesia than female goats. For the purposes of this essay, I find it more palatable to possibly mischaracterize the goat's sex than to ascribe him with the objectifying pronoun "it."

2. The naming of the mudflow has been subject to contention, with many suspecting behind-the-scenes manipulation by media executives and politicians. Studies have shown that through the first three years of the mudflow, the national media most often referred to the disaster as the "Lapindo mudflow." In the last two years, "Sidoarjo mudflow" has become more common (Ilmie).

3. In her book, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times*, Nicole Shukin employs the double meanings that the word "rendering" indicates:

*Rendering* signifies both the mimetic act of making a copy, that is, reproducing or interpreting an object in linguistic, painterly, musical, filmic, or other media (new technologies of 3-D digital animation are, for instance, called "renderers") and the industrial boiling down and recycling of animal remains. . . . The double entendre of *rendering* is deeply suggestive of the complicity of "the arts" and "industry" in the conditions of possibility of capitalism. (20, emphasis in original)

We see a similar complicity between aesthetic and commodity functions in the rendering of the goat's body and death through the image.

4. For an extensive summary of the two competing positions regarding the disputed trigger of the mudflow, see both Davies et al. and Kadurin et al.

5. Schiller et al.'s "Learning From the East Java Mudflow" provides an excellent account of events through the first two years; Bosman Batubara's "Resistance Through Memory" presents a useful depiction of victims' struggles; Anton Novenanto's "The Lapindo Case" covers matters related to the national media, particularly questions about representation and the circulation of information and misinformation; most recently the non-profit, Humanitus Sidoarjo Fund (HSF) has published a report on the social impact of the mudflow, including a detailed timeline.

6. There are even reports of increased crime in the area and some victims entering into prostitution (Muradi, Zuber 90).

7. Lapindo Brantas and the Sidoarjo Mudflow Mitigation Agency (*Badan Penanggulangan Lumpur Sidoarjo* – the BPLS) have provided other forms of assistance, including temporary food, water, health, rent, and work assistance; however, this assistance has come in neither the quantity or regularity to significantly improve victims conditions (HSF 66).

8. Lapindo Brantas formed Minarak Lapindo Jaya to handle the "sale and purchase" process, while the government established the BPLS to oversee all geological, infrastructural, and social projects.

9. My findings are based on compiled conversations and formal interviews with Porong-area residents between 2008-2011. The formal interviews occurred in 2010-2011, during a year of focused research on residents' experiences and political practices in response to the mudflow with assistance from the Surabaya Institute of Technology (ITS) in East Java. These interviews focused on several dozen residents in the villages of Besuki, Mindi, Renokenongo, and Kedungbendo, areas most vulnerable to flooding due to levee failures.

10. Incidentally, in personal interviews with victims of the mudflow, while some have expressed religious explanations for their hardship – e.g. a test or punishment – each has stated that the mudflow was caused by drilling.
11. Again, in every conversation or interview, residents of the villages around the levees invariably mention drilling as the cause of the mudflow.
12. Citing R. A. Drake's analysis of the head-stealing rumors, Forth writes, "the notional head-stealing has been construed as a transformation of indigenous head-hunting and traditional construction sacrifice, attributed ironically to powerful outsiders who have denied these practices to indigenous peoples by outlawing local warfare" (6).

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