

Jeremy Wallach
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Natural and Unnatural Sounds: Indonesian Pop as Musical Cyborg

Prologue: The Dancers

The sign over the door says simply "Bar Dangdut." As one approaches the dimly lit DJ booth, one sees the two hundred or so cassettes lined up edge to edge around the perimeter. Cassettes generally do not have the same sonic presence at high volumes as compact disks and vinyl records, but the house sound system is impressively clear and punchy and quite loud. The deejays, both young women, occasionally use a microphone to sing along with the music they play as they weave a seamless web of power sounds. The male patrons on the dance floor dance in pairs, sometimes with each other, sometimes with one of the dance hall hostesses or one of the prostitutes who frequent the bar. The dancers, mostly middle-aged some obviously intoxicated, appear to be enjoying themselves immensely.

Suddenly the music changes, and a strange, pulsating electronic rhythm takes over, a genre the patrons might recognize as *house jaipong*, a syncretic genre that combines electronic dance music with the indigenous rhythms and melodies of West Java. It sounds like music from Mars. The alien sounds emanating from the club sound system drive many from the dance floor, while other pairs of dancers rush in with bold aggressive moves that resemble a cross between traditional Indonesian dance and Saturday Night Fever. Thoughts of late capitalism, hybridity, and postmodern technoscapes fill my mind, but they seem pretentious and hollow in this context, failing to capture something important in the scene before me.

This paper will discuss concrete examples of two important sites for the production of cultural meaning in the contemporary Jakarta music scene: a discotheque located in the central business district and a recording studio on the eastern fringe of the city where music like that described above is produced. I will suggest that an ethnographic inquiry into the production and reception of contemporary Indonesian dance music can reveal new configurations of nature, culture, and self that characterize everyday life in an era of cultural and economic globalization. Specifically, I would argue that this music is constitutive of a hypermodern subjectivity in which the cultural/technological is utterly enmeshed in natural/biological processes, including bodily pleasures and affective responses. I therefore turn to Donna Haraway's notion of the cyborg, as outlined in her provocative "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" (1991) to explore the myriad possible meanings of the complex, hybridized, electronically generated, seductive dance grooves that characterize the new Indonesian dance musics.

Haraway's manifesto, which contains the memorable line "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess" (1991: 181), is a long and complex document covering a wide range of subjects in prose

that is often convoluted and full of extravagant rhetorical flourishes (as befits a manifesto). For the purposes of this essay, I want to focus on three of Haraway's main points in the piece, at least what I take to be three of her main points.

1. Cyborgs confound the conventional separations between nature, technology, and culture. Haraway describes the cyborg as "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" (149). The "ironic political myth" of the cyborg thus does away with a unitary origin of the subject in a pre-technological "natural" state, and instead embraces hybridity, partiality, and the transgression of boundaries. The cyborg is "completely without innocence" and defies conventional humanist views of the autonomous, stable self which exists apart from the social technologies that give it form.

2. Cyborgs revel in the new opportunities for pleasure, politics, and identity opened up by a postmodern, globalized, mass-mediated world. Haraway writes, "The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential" (151). As the bastard children of global capitalism, a world system that makes their existence possible while simultaneously enslaving them to largescale market forces and technocratic disciplinary regimes, cyborgs exist in an intimate yet deeply ironic relationship to high-tech capitalist modernity.

3. Finally, and most importantly for the present purpose, Haraway asserts that cyborgs, like the ordinary Jakartans dancing at the Bar Dangdut, are subalterns. The figure of the cyborg offers an alternative to oppressed peoples (women, Asians, proletarians) who have historically been relegated to the realm of nature and biology, and reflects the technological mediation of everyday experience that characterizes the lives of *all* social classes and categories in modern complex societies. In Indonesia, where the tendency to romanticize "traditional culture" is strong among both national elites and Western observers, the technohybrid grooves of house music are a powerful antidote to the notion that the *rakyat kecil*, the little people, are somehow less modern than those in the dominant class. They, like "us," are "completely without innocence."

The Studio

Before I move from the disco into the recording studio, it is necessary to provide a little more background information for those not intimately familiar with technohybrid Indonesian dance musics. Dangdut is the quintessential Indonesian pop genre. Though it often causes laughter and derision among members of the cosmopolitan middle class who dismiss it as *kampung* (repellently characteristic of backward village life), it remains by far the most popular musical genre in the country, with a large and diverse audience of ordinary Indonesians young and old.

In recent years, a number of novel dangdut offshoots have been created by musicians and record producers seeking to create profitable new musical hybrids. These styles include *cha cha dhut*, *dangdut reggae*, *dangdut house*, *dangdut jaipong*, *dangdut disco*, and *rock dangdut*. Most of these "mixtures" (*campuran*) are the result of adding new rhythms and rhythm instruments like sampled drum machines. For example, cha cha dhut is exactly what one would expect from the name: dangdut with a "one two cha-cha-cha, three four cha-cha-cha" feel to it.

Jaipong, or jaipongan, was a popular dance style based on West Javanese traditional music celebrated by Western ethnomusicologists and world music buffs for its lack of obvious Western musical influences. Since its heyday in the 1980s *jaipong asli*, original jaipong, has been mostly relegated to a regional folk style, though one still occasionally hears it played in dance clubs. However, the rhythms, vocal style, and other musical characteristics of the genre continue to reappear in new fusion genres from the electronic *house jaipong* to the trendy subgenre of dangdut jaipong, which is what one would expect, dangdut songs with jaipong's distinctive drum patterns.

These self-consciously hybrid musical forms are not created by an artistic elite for a limited audience of postcolonial intellectuals. They are instead aimed at the mass audience and successful recordings can sell hundreds of thousands of legitimate copies—not bad for a national music market where the ratio of pirated to legitimate versions sold is roughly six to one. 601 Studio Lab is one site where such lucrative hybrid musical forms are created. The facility is located on the far outskirts of East Jakarta (*Jaktim*) in a brand new upscale housing development. It occupies a house that has been converted into a sophisticated recording complex—though one does have to enter the vocal booth through the kitchen. I was told that the studio was located so far from the city center to discourage musicians and their entourages from spending all their leisure time there. Such people have a tendency to *nongkrong*, hang out, in recording studios at all hours, even and especially when there's no recording to be done.

The studio offers an impressive array of recording technologies. On the first floor is a 24-track analog studio used for recording dangdut rock, and pop music, while upstairs is a 32-track digital studio (with over one hundred virtual tracks) used for electronic dance music and creating dance remixes of dangdut songs—one of 601's specialties. The division of labor between analog and digital recording techniques suggests that Indonesians have adopted the natural/synthetic and "dirty"/"clean" sonic distinctions often employed by popular music producers and consumers in the west. Dangdut, like rock and roll, has to have a warm, rough, and unpolished sound. To record it digitally would be unthinkable, "not dangdut." House remixes of dangdut songs, which rerecord the analog tracks of the origin and import them into the digital domain, are another matter, however.

All this technology is not neutral, nor is the origin of most of the equipment in the so-called developed world of no consequence. Martin, the head engineer of the second-floor digital studio, told me of his struggles to learn English so that he could understand the technical manuals for the studio's equipment. After spending countless hours with an English-Indonesian dictionary he proudly reported that he now understands about forty percent of the vocabulary in these manuals, and our conversation (in Indonesian) contained an abundance of English technical terms: "frequency response," "gain," "panpot," "distortion." Interestingly, he also used the English words for numerals.

Edy Singh, an ambitious twenty-eight year-old record producer and executive who speaks fluent English (learned in private school), frequently compared his studio unfavorably with its counterparts in America, even though the facility was actually quite well equipped by American standards. He also criticized dangdut musicians for their backwardness and reluctance to embrace new musical technologies, even while admitting that dangdut had to sound *kasar* (coarse, unrefined, rough) in order to be authentic and the dangdut audience demanded that dangdut

recordings stay faithful to the classic dangdut sounds of the 1980s. Edy maintains that if the dangdut genre was permitted to "develop" it would one day become a recognized global pop genre like reggae and rap music, and even have a market in the United States. At least this is what he hopes will happen—his “dream,” as he put it.

(Play musical examples)

Edy is quite proud of his disco, house, and rap remixes of dangdut hits. In the early nineties, he was one of the originators of a true remix technique: taking the original analog recordings, subtracting the original rhythm instruments (usually *gendang*, tambourine, and bass guitar) and adding electronic drums and samples in order to transform the rhythmic feel of a track and create a cyborg-like fusion of the machine rhythms of house with the warm organic sounds of dangdut. These days dance remixes are released three to four months after the original dangdut song is released—in other words, toward the end of the first recording's commercial shelf-life. Often the remix version does better commercially than the original, sometimes selling three times as many copies. Edy explained that one reason for this is many young cassette buyers prefer the newer styles, and purchasing the dance remixes allows them to simultaneously maintain a nostalgic attachment to the classic dangdut sound and embrace "modern," more contemporary dance grooves.

Conclusion

The powerful dance grooves created in 601 Studio Lab and consumed in discotheques like the Bar Dangdut are electronic but not disembodied. They are social agents with the power to move bodies and lead to, perhaps, new experiences of body and self which have become available to Indonesia's urban working classes as they are absorbed into Indonesia's high-tech, globalized economy. I suggest these new experiences lead to something very close to a cyborg positionality.

But while Haraway's politically subversive cyborg offers a possible utopia, the music producers of 601 Studio Lab offer a more pragmatic, temporary escape from the drudgery of daily life, where technology, freed from the bounds of the workplace, returns as an intimate companion and source of sensual pleasure.

Obviously this is all a bit tentative, and perhaps a little strange. Nonetheless I hope I have been at least been persuasive in my suggestion that a serious investigation of the politics, pleasures, and complex meanings of Indonesian popular music can help in our attempts to come to grips with Indonesian modernity, and with the way mass-produced cultural forms can be used by social agents to develop new kinds of hybrid subjectivities. I would add that such new subject positions could very well include the position of the dancing cyborg—a recent and quite complicated variety of Indonesian “ethnicity.”

Work Cited

Haraway, Donna. 1991. The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.