

# Balinese Experimentalism and the Intercultural Project

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THIS ESSAY IS INTENDED to enrich and problematize the theorization of experimental music through an ethnographic analysis of the scene in Bali, Indonesia. Balinese characterizations of what experimentalism is, its materials and relationship to broader cultural context, allow us to move beyond some of the common assumptions that have guided prior research in experimental music; Indonesian experimental music, or *musik kontemporer*, and therefore leads to a broader thinking of the category “experimental.” In this essay I am primarily concerned with the political and intercultural conditions that make experimentalism possible in Bali.

Experimental music in Indonesia, and especially in Bali, is intimately linked to a history of complex intercultural encounters and state-sponsored efforts to preserve and “upgrade” traditions first identified as such by the colonizing Dutch. Experimentalism and tradition, while often imagined as antagonistic opposites, are, in the Indonesian case, the obverses of the same coin: development. Development is figured as an effort to achieve modernity, a state partly characterized by the engineering of art as an apparently autonomous institution. Western ethnography has typically equated contemporary Balinese with their ostensibly ritualistic, premodern history, an image of the integrated praxis dreamt of by the historical avant-garde,<sup>1</sup> but one that obscures the view of contemporary experimental expressions, such as *musik kontemporer* (contemporary music), that self-consciously proclaim their status as autonomous art.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I outline the complex role of US cultural agencies in underwriting aesthetic development in postcolonial Indonesia. During Sukarno’s procommunist government (1949–65), foreign support of experimentalism in Indonesia was based in a faith in the universality of modernity’s rational-

ity, and was often encouraged “from the bottom up” by local artists and administrators. Following the violent installation of Suharto’s pro-American New Order regime (1965–98), foreign institutions moved energetically to revive symbols of traditional cultural particularity in order to resist the appearance of rampant westernization. During the New Order and the subsequent era of reform (*reformasi*), direct intercultural encounters facilitated by increased diplomatic and economic relations between Indonesia and the West have catalyzed local aesthetic experimentation.

Recalling western characterizations of experimentalism, Indonesian composers identify its hallmark in a nebulous “freedom” (*kebebasan*). While this freedom sometimes appears as a manifestation of the artist’s independent will, it is just as often figured as a kind of commodity given, achieved, or bestowed through the intercultural encounter. Intercultural experimentalism, especially in the Indonesian scene, therefore remains a site of highly asymmetrical relations, raising questions regarding the exact nature of this freedom and of the ethics of this kind of international exchange. Many of the collaborations that serve as important catalysts for contemporary Balinese *musik kontemporer* reproduce relations of inequity through cultural relativism even as they appeal to a discourse of equitable interaction.

### Balinese *Musik Kontemporer*, a Brief Introduction

Georgina Born refers to the “now global Cageian experimental movement” as a frame through which to understand experimentalism globally.<sup>3</sup> Although many western observers have described Balinese experimentalism using Cageian keywords, most Balinese composers do not know who John Cage was. The emergence of self-consciously experimental Indonesian music, *musik kontemporer*, in the late 1970s outlines a series of fleeting encounters with and local transformations of western radical aesthetics. Balinese composers’ comparative marginality within the well-worn global circuits of modernism,<sup>4</sup> the avant-garde, and experimentalism (following the old routes of empire) suggests a frame for experimentalism wider than we have heretofore considered.

*Musik kontemporer* emerged in the 1970s primarily at state-sponsored institutions in Jakarta, Central Java, and Bali. Through a series of workshops, seminars, and courses sponsored by performers, composers, and administrators, many of whom had tangential links to western aesthetic networks, *musik kontemporer* was fostered first to represent the possibility of a truly national high art music. In practice, however, *musik kontemporer* composers more often referenced local rather than national aesthetic

concerns. Balinese *musik kontemporer* was pioneered in the late 1970s by the composers I Wayan Sadra and Pande Madé Sukerta, both working in Central Java; they were followed in Bali by I Wayan Yudane, Dewa Ketut Alit, I Madé Subandi, I Madé Arnawa, Sang Nyoman Arsawijaya, Ida Bagus Gede Widnyana, and I Wayan Sudirana, among many others. Practically all of the composers associated with *musik kontemporer* are also expert performers and composers of more “traditional” (*tradisi*) and “neotraditional” (*kreasi baru*, lit. “new creations”) forms. Balinese experimentalism is, like prior forms, a primarily oral practice. There are practically no scores to refer to, nor is there the clearly defined ontological division between the “work” and the “performance” that has characterized the analysis of western music. By 2005 *musik kontemporer* had become both a sign of official, institutional modernity, as it emerged first in the state conservatory, and a rather antagonistic expression by conservatory graduates interested in critiquing the institution’s ossified aesthetics.

### Terminology

The Indonesian term *avant-garde* (sometimes *garde depan*) may refer to anything new or out of the ordinary, regardless of a creator’s intention. The Javanese composer Sapto Raharjo (1955–2009) used *avant-garde* and *musik kontemporer* interchangeably, suggesting that their aesthetic and ideological implications are aligned: “*Musik kontemporer* is a movement concerned with change—an expression of struggle.”<sup>5</sup> But this explicitly politicized view is not a widely held conception of *musik kontemporer* throughout Indonesia, and Raharjo’s characterization marks a philosophical and aesthetic division between various groups of *kontemporer* composers.<sup>6</sup> While the western *avant-garde* emerged to critique the institutional status of “art,” recognizing its tautological function as a space of presentation where, in the words of Jacques Rancière, “things of art are identified as such,” Balinese composers often use the term *avant-garde* to describe both projects that seek to reify art as an institution and those that question it.<sup>7</sup>

If some Balinese *musik kontemporer* composers do not explicitly proclaim a mission of questioning the first assumptions of Balinese aesthetics and cultural institutions, their iconoclasm nevertheless often reveal the highly conventionalized nature of traditional composition. Through the rapid juxtaposition of disparate elements of different cultural worlds—quotations of contemporary and ancient local musics alongside references to West African, Japanese, and Brazilian styles—*musik kontemporer* recalls the primitivisms of surrealism and Dada by encouraging audiences

to reflect on cultural norms of beauty, truth, form, balance, and reality as possibly artificial arrangements. Some composers engaged with *musik kontemporer* have sought to shock audiences through unusual, if entertaining, means, as in Sadra's use of live animals or Pande Madé Sukerta's use of musicians hidden among the audience. Many Indonesian composers have defined *musik kontemporer* as that which lay audiences find to be "weird, unusual, confused and . . . not entertaining."<sup>8</sup> However, most Balinese composers are concerned to foster their audiences and to make their works intelligible to the public, in contrast to the stereotyped image of the western avant-gardist, willing to accept posthumous appreciation.

The Sumatran *musik kontemporer* composer Ben Pasaribu (1956–2010) associated *musik kontemporer* with *musik eksperimental* (experimental music), suggesting that *experimental* describes "the style of music which combines Indonesian traditional instruments and Western musical instruments, including modification of traditional instruments to the possibility of playing the western scale . . . on *gamelan* instruments."<sup>9</sup> In Bali the term *eksperimen* (experiment, experimental) implies a particular approach within *musik kontemporer*, one evoking more direct associations with intercultural exchange. The young Balinese composer Sang Nyoman Arsawijaya (b. 1980), for example, comments, "The term has been borrowed from English because its international connotations are more appropriate [than local alternatives]; [*eksperimen*] encourages transfer between musics. It suggests [better than other terms] a new concept: the development of . . . composition."<sup>10</sup>

The composer Ida Bagus Gede Widnyana (b. 1978) holds that *eksperimen* describes, better than indigenous terms, compositions that are sometimes less determined, and certainly less conventionalized, than previous genres. Widnyana traces these compositional methods to intercultural contact: "We have a term for *experiment* in Indonesian (*percobaan*) and in Balinese (*mategar*) but in traditional contexts musicians rarely use them because they actually don't make music that is, in fact, 'experimental'! Composers generally wait until their compositions are complete [settled, fully determined] before giving them to musicians. *Eksperimen* [*sic*] first emerged among academic musicians who graduated from foreign institutions."<sup>11</sup> Widnyana further observes that experimental compositions (*komposisi ber-eksperimen*) should not be completely determined; musicians should be allowed greater improvisational license, aleatoric techniques might be involved, or, minimally, the work might involve such radical techniques that audience reaction cannot be predicted. Older, more conservative composers, including I Ketut Gede Asnawa (b. 1955), have avoided the outright adoption of the foreign-derived *eksperimen*, offering instead poetic neolo-

gisms such as *reracikan anyar* or *kekawian anyar*,<sup>12</sup> which similarly suggest intercultural mixtures and new modes of composition.

### The Development of Experimentalism and Tradition

The discourse of development (*pengembangan*) is what allows the Balinese to recognize *tradisi* and *eksperimen* expressions as such. Cultural expressions and artifacts identified as “traditional” are associated with a specific array of spatial and temporal attributes: local, rural, past. The traditional and experimental emerge as twins; the second term completes the dichotomies implied by the first. The experimental becomes global, cosmopolitan, urban, and future oriented, while *tradisi* is consistently associated with a sense of stasis, even if discourse allows it some degree of flexibility and change; *eksperimen*, then, embodies dynamism, even if cultural conservatives identify it as threatening. Prior to the teleological, historicist ideology of development, neither *tradisi* nor *eksperimen* existed as explicit, dichotomous categories of thought in Bali.

In the discourse of the colonial era *polemik kebudayaan* (cultural polemic) of the 1930s, an elite class of highly educated Indonesians described “traditional” customs in sometimes negative terms; backward practices were to be erased through the adoption of modern, rational thinking imagined as universal (but western in origin). This apparently extreme view emerged in part as a negative reaction to colonial policies of reifying and imposing a depoliticized “tradition” on native populations as a way to defang nationalist movements.<sup>13</sup> Several thinkers of the *polemik kebudayaan* argued that an emergent national musical culture should be developed through, in the words of the group’s intellectual leader, Ki Hadjar Dewantara, experimentation in the “laboratories” of national conservatories.<sup>14</sup>

The meanings of development changed significantly between the era of the *polemik kebudayaan* and the later period of economic globalization that characterized Suharto’s New Order. In the first case development was imagined to be a positive, internal means of self-betterment, even if its inspirations were sometimes drawn from a “universal” modernity. In the second it was conceived as an imposed force from without that increasingly took on negative connotations as a means of neocolonial exploitation, an attempt to raise the “third world” to the level of “first world” rates of consumption and production through the increased penetration of western capital and media. In both instances development was based on a notion of cultural evolutionism (long abandoned in anthropology) as an ideology of progress.

During the New Order both *tradisi* and *eksperimen* cultural expressions became the targets of successive, heavy-handed, five-year governmental development programs (*replita*). While the performative and material aspects of tradition were developed and “upgraded” for tourist economies and the exigencies of governmental identity politics, *eksperimen* forms were developed to be both a potentially national form of “high art” and a mode of expression intelligible and competitive within a global aesthetic and economic arena. State conservatories, national workshops, village fieldwork, and urban lecture series served as the laboratories for these projects.

While *tradisi* was proper to the lower classes during the era of the *polemik kebudayaan*, during the New Order it increasingly became viewed as a resource for experimental expressions, and certain signs of *tradisi* merged with aspects of high-class identity (ethnic chic). Experimentalism, on the other hand, could never be low-class; it was automatically the product of the effete, even if their class status was based on a capital more cultural than economic. As it intersected with class, development (and the “taste” that distinguished “low” tradition from “high” experimentalism) was not simply a unilateral imposition from the first world but a manifestation of class divisions within local cultural groups themselves. During my fieldwork, experimentation was considered a self-evident sign of the *moderen* and served as proof of composers’ solidly middle-class, upwardly mobile, and cosmopolitan status.

### Global Politics/Local Experiments

Although the intercultural character of much contemporary Indonesian experimentalism may appear novel—a manifestation of the digitally interconnected new millennium—the development of radical aesthetics in postcolonial Indonesia has long been associated with foreign interaction. For much of the twentieth century aesthetic development in Indonesia was a recurrent interest of foreign, primarily American, foundations. Prior to and following the violent instatement of the US-aligned New Order in 1965, Indonesia was a major battlefield of the cultural Cold War, one in which both US and Soviet imperia struggled for artists’ imaginations. Following World War II, the US government coordinated its foreign cultural relations through an extensive and unprecedented state-private network of official governmental agencies and private organizations, including the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Asia Society.<sup>15</sup> Asia held the attention of this network following the “loss” of China to Mao’s communists, North Korea to Stalin’s proxies, and Vietnam to Ho

Chi Minh. The Soviet Union appeared to be on the edge of snatching up Asia along with its global population majority and strategic resources. With or without the help of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Sukarno was ousted from power on September 30, 1965, in an abortive coup in which his army general Suharto took control of the capital. Suharto promptly alleged Communist Party responsibility for the murder of six top generals and inaugurated a pogrom against all communists, their trade unions, and village organizations. American-made weapons flowed freely between the army and village youths, precipitating one of the bloodiest massacres of the twentieth century. Between six hundred thousand and one million Indonesians were killed in less than five months, including up to 15 percent of the population in Bali.<sup>16</sup>

Against this backdrop, well-funded American foundations—Rockefeller prior to the 1965 regime change and Ford following it—handled many of the interactions between Indonesian and American artists and cultures. Rockefeller was centrally concerned with “updating” the Indonesian arts by advocating an experimental, abstract expressionism in opposition to the perceived influence of Soviet realism. Beginning in 1949 the Foundation sponsored the “avant-garde” artists they associated with the nationalistic *angkatan '45* (class of 1945) literary circle, as well as experimental theater groups, painters, filmmakers, composers, and choreographers aligned against Lembaga Kebudayaan Rakyat (LEKRA), the cultural wing of Indonesia’s communist party.<sup>17</sup> Rockefeller supported numerous Indonesian artists for study at top universities in Europe, Asia, and the United States, often providing generous per diems. In Indonesia the foundation stocked local university libraries, provided materials to painters, and supplied recording equipment and recordings to musicians. Unable to find abstract painting in Indonesia, Rockefeller officers investigating developments in 1957 suggested that local artists were “far behind the West in technique” but could take the “next logical step” with foundation support: “[Indonesian] painting has great vigor and there is much natural talent but the reliance on [realism] is too strong and no real emancipation can occur until these artists have completely absorbed everything the West has to offer, whereupon they can begin to develop their own styles with more sureness and independence.”<sup>18</sup> Rockefeller officers characterized the western avant-garde as “required reading” and the basis on which local experiments should occur. Similar rhetoric surrounds the foundation’s notes regarding its sponsorship of the Javanese choreographers Bagong Kussudiardjo and Wisnu Surjodiningrat, whose study in the United States and Europe in 1957 was understood by Rockefeller to “improve their leftist views” and

“set free their imaginations.”<sup>19</sup> Bagong’s own foundation would later help lay the groundwork for *kontemporer* dance and music in Java. Aesthetic valuation and guidance by US foundations continued a tradition of cultural arbitration in which the colonial power was invested with more authority than the colony to comment on its own cultural practices, an asymmetry that had been internalized by many Indonesians.

Responding in 1957 to a request by the Balinese composer Tjokorda Agung Mas for support to study western music in the United States, Rockefeller sought advice from a former grantee, the Philippine composer José Maceda: “What would the effects of such a visit be—would it be constructive for the subsequent development of Balinese music, or might it actually detract from [Mas’s] ability to contribute further to musical development in his indigenous situation?” Maceda responded:

I feel that his formal education in Western music would enhance rather than detract from the development of Balinese music. Anyway, Balinese music has changed since the recordings of Hornbostel many years ago, and [pointing out that Mas played guitar and had a working understanding of western music theory] Western influence is bound to seep in. Perhaps, after more studies of Eastern and Western music are made by musicians from both hemispheres, a new universal musical expression may evolve from the music of Schoenberg, Debussy and other contemporaries.”<sup>20</sup>

Although Rockefeller apparently encouraged Balinese artists’ aesthetic imaginations inward—in line with their ethnographic image as a distinctly ritualistic people—the institution’s sponsorship of aesthetic experimentation in Java would later prove to have profound ramifications for the later development of Balinese *musik kontemporer*. The case of the Javanese dancer Gendhon Humardani, a Rockefeller grantee of 1961, provides the most salient example of the historicization of *musik kontemporer*. Trained in London as an anatomist, Humardani was granted Rockefeller support to study dance in New York under Martha Graham. Humardani was chosen over other candidates partly based on his interest in developing Indonesian national forms and his sponsorship of performances in Java that competed for audiences with leftist forms of theater.<sup>21</sup> On his return to Central Java in 1971, Humardani became actively involved in experimental arts at the influential Center for Javanese Arts in Solo (Pusat Kesenian Jawa Tengah, PKJT). He assumed the directorship of the state conservatory there in 1975 and shifted its focus from preservation to bold experimentation. If



Rockefeller sometimes encouraged Balinese artists to fulfill their classic ethnographic role as members of a traditional, ethnic community—as in the case of Agung Mas—its activities in supporting Javanese experimentation had the possible unintended effect of catalyzing (albeit somewhat later) the emergence of Balinese experimentalism. Humardani's most adventurous students included a class of prolific Balinese composers, among them I Wayan Sadra and I Madé Pande Sukerta, who would then inspire composers working in Bali.

If the Rockefeller Foundation, as an extension of America's Cold War cultural policy, had the effect of encouraging Indonesian artists toward American radical aesthetics, the Ford Foundation sought to rein in the cultural forces its predecessor had helped to unleash.<sup>22</sup> Many communist performing artists in Bali and Java had been slaughtered during the 1965–66 regime change.<sup>23</sup> With the cultural war won, Ford invested heavily in cultural revitalization through its Traditional Arts Project, a \$100,000 program conducted between 1973 and 1980—just as *musik kontemporer* began to emerge—in which traditional performing arts in several villages were revitalized and documented. John Bresnan, director of the Ford office in Jakarta in the early 1970s, remarks that he “hesitated to step into a field that so deeply touched Indonesians’ sense of their own identity, [instead proposing] an all-Indonesian committee to select [arts] projects we would support.”<sup>24</sup> This concern to avoid the appearance of western interference in Indonesian cultural identity is ironic considering the foundation's widely visible impact on the economic, governmental, and social organization of the nation, and it attests to the symbolic power of the performing arts in curating Indonesia's image globally. Only occasionally sponsoring experimental projects, between 1988 and 2005 the foundation provided an additional \$1.6 million for the continued “study and preservation of Indonesian performing arts,” while also subsidizing programs at the national conservatories, occasionally hiring Americans to train local faculty in ethnomusicology in order to document and analyze traditional forms.<sup>25</sup>

A peculiar catch-22 emerged during the Cold War: US institutions encouraged radical experimentation to contest perceived Soviet competition in the cultural realm while Washington simultaneously fomented violent political and cultural clashes to encourage regime change. With the fires of social strife stoked beyond control, the mass slaughter of 1965–66 endangered the very existence of symbols of cultural particularity needed to resist images of rampant westernization in Indonesia during the subsequent era of intense economic globalization.<sup>26</sup> As an extension of US cultural, economic, and military influence, Ford's preservation of traditional per-

forming arts helped to counteract the appearance of increasing westernization during the New Order, aligned with the regime's own obsessions with origins and tradition, and reflected western anxieties over cultural loss globally.<sup>27</sup>

After the fall of the Soviet Union, private organizations in the United States responded to the persistent defunding of cultural diplomacy through new granting programs. Ford continued to conduct programs primarily devoted to preserving *tradisi* in Indonesia while Rockefeller focused on exchange programs that brought Indonesian artists to the United States. Universities strove to close the gap in international communications by facilitating cultural exchanges on campus. By the 1980s increasingly inexpensive international travel assured a regular flow of primarily middle-class US avant-gardists to Indonesia, catalyzing a flurry of intercultural experimentalism.

Following September 11, 2001, the US government scrambled to account for the failings of American public diplomacy. Agencies began to invest more heavily in the struggle for “hearts and minds,” often through heavy-handed forms of propaganda. “Public (or ‘soft’) diplomacy” became a form of management for the contemporary neoliberal empire, geographically bounded not by the Cold War notion of a “free” versus “communist” world but by the nebulous distribution of “freedom” itself.<sup>28</sup> Following the attacks, freedom became increasingly abstract and deterritorialized until it was a “signifier of American imperialism, . . . a harbinger of the ‘empire *for* liberty’ which combined the reinstantiation of the national security state with the pursuit of ‘virtuous war.’”<sup>29</sup> Recalling the West’s Cold War focus on abstract expressionism against Soviet realism, a vague notion of “artistic freedom” would again become a keyword of America’s sprawling, post-9/11 “Enduring Freedom” campaign.

In composition workshops in Indonesia following 9/11, the Balinese *musik kontemporer* composer I Wayan Sadra cited the difficulty of working with “ineffectual and corrupt” local state institutions and recommended that experimental composers appeal directly to increasingly well-funded foreign organizations interested in supporting the arts in the “world’s largest ‘Muslim nation.’”<sup>30</sup> Between 2002 and 2010 Balinese experimentalists increasingly sought sponsorship from foreign-funded nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including the Kelola Foundation and Arts Network Asia, both supported by the (Rockefeller-funded) Asian Cultural Council in New York. Following America’s return to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2004, the foundation was able to more substantially underwrite international artistic col-

laborations and activities on the island. Many Indonesian artists believed that foreign funding and intercultural collaboration allowed the creation of “freer” forms of experimentation.<sup>31</sup>

### The Intercultural Project

Intercultural experimentalism in postcolonial Indonesia emerged first during the Cold War, supported by state and educational institutions.<sup>32</sup> Funded by the State Department’s United States Information Service (USIS) in 1960, the US jazz clarinetist Tony Scott and the Carnegie Hall conductor Wheeler Becket both composed works in Indonesia combining Javanese, Balinese, and western instruments.<sup>33</sup> By 1959 Indonesian artists supported by Rockefeller began collaborating with students of gamelan at the Institute for Ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), also funded by Rockefeller. Balinese artists became regular participants in the American Society for Eastern Arts (ASEA, later the World Music Institute) summer classes on the US West Coast beginning in 1963, where later their students would include minimalist composers such as Steve Reich.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Bali residencies of a number of western theater students, including Julie Taymor, John Emigh, Kathy Foley, and Larry Reid, coincided with the establishment of local experimental theater projects, such as I Kadek Suardana’s Sanggar Putih in Bali in 1976 and the Javanese choreographer Suprpto Suryodarmo’s Wayang Buddha experiments in 1974, both of which catalyzed early musik kontemporer.<sup>34</sup> The founding in 1980 of Gamelan Sekar Jaya in San Francisco and later Gamelan Sekar Jepun in Tokyo further intensified intercultural interactions.

While such interculturalism is often touted by its western practitioners as a site of equitable exchange,<sup>35</sup> and recent Deleuzian-Bourriaudian interpretations have foregrounded the nonhierarchic, rhizomatic play of “radicants” in intercultural aesthetics,<sup>36</sup> we cannot yet completely dispose of a center-periphery model in the case of most intercultural projects involving Indonesians. Recent projects engaging Balinese performers have included Evan Ziporyn’s *A House in Bali* (2009–11), Cudamani’s *Odalan Bali* (2006–9), Paul Grabowsky and I Wayan Yudane’s *Theft of Sita* (1999–2003), I Madé Sidia’s *Bali Agung* (2010), and Robert Wilson’s colossal *I La Galigo* (2002–6) among a number of other, smaller collaborations performed in Bali and abroad. A short analysis of *A House in Bali*, the smartest and most ethically self-reflexive among these projects, reveals the ambivalence of the aesthetic freedoms available in intercultural experimentalism and demon-

strates the complexities of representation and asymmetrical power relations that catch up so many intercultural experimentalists.

*A House in Bali* combined the New York–based Bang on a Can All-Stars chamber ensemble, western opera singers, four Balinese actors, and a fifteen-member Balinese gamelan ensemble directed by the *musik kontemporer* composer Dewa Ketut Alit for performances in Indonesia and the United States between 2008 and 2010. The experimental opera was conceived and managed by the US composer Evan Ziporyn in collaboration with the director Jay Scheib and librettist Paul Schick. The production took its name from a 1944 memoir by the Canadian composer and ethnomusicologist of Bali Colin McPhee, who becomes the production's protagonist.

*Musik kontemporer* composers and performers closely followed the work's rehearsals and premiere performance in Bali, seeking in it inspiration for their own experiments. Although it was composed by Ziporyn, authored by Schick, and directed by Scheib, many Balinese understood it to be an equitable collaboration (*kolaborasi*) between Alit and Ziporyn. The image of collaboration appeared widespread as well among audiences during later performances in the United States, despite detailed explanations in the program. While roughly half of the performers were Balinese, they contributed minimally to the shape of the production and served primarily as a labor force. The inequity of the intercultural encounter was exposed within the narrative of the opera itself but also, significantly, in the processes of its own production. Although its creators critically ruminated on the complexities, paradoxes, and inequities that determined McPhee's earlier encounter with the Balinese, *A House in Bali* recalled the anti-imperialist ironies of Joseph Conrad by reproducing the ideologies and conditions it appeared to critique.

In the opera McPhee appears as a deeply troubled and problematic character. He was only able to fund his trips and lifestyle on the island with the help of his wealthy wife, Jane Belo, who is absent in the opera (and in McPhee's memoir), allowing the creators to focus more squarely on McPhee's interest in Balinese boys: the rumored relationship between McPhee and the child dancer Sampih dominates the opera, and pederasty is paradoxically mobilized to gestate the narrative's formative growth. Their gender suggests that it will all end badly, or is at least incapable of producing cultural fruit. McPhee hopes communication has taken place between his music and that of the Balinese, between himself and Sampih. But Ziporyn's *A House in Bali* answers that it was all miscommunication. McPhee's representations of the Balinese were only a self-projection of

his own deepest fantasies; he revealed the interpreter rather than the interpreted.

*A House in Bali* is thus a metarepresentation, a problematization of McPhee's representation of and encounters with Bali and the Balinese. In the opera McPhee ogles the boy sexually as western culture ogles the Balinese from within the teleological ideology of modernity. To the McPhee character, the Balinese are like cherubs in a state of innocent premodernity—as liberated as the western infant before society intervenes. Sampih stands for Bali, McPhee for the West, and their age differential serves as a metaphor for the then persistent theory of cultural evolutionism: Bali is “younger” than the West. But to the audience of *A House in Bali* this flattening is counteracted by the appearance of adult characters (Sampih's parents) and by villagers protesting the exploitation of their land and labor at the hands of McPhee and his western coterie, an apparently self-conscious reference to the very conditions that allow the production itself to emerge.

Through his deep engagement with gamelan, Ziporyn, like McPhee, has earned the distinction of fluency in the cultural capital of others whose expressions retain auratic qualities. But the path of possibility offered to the western artist through intercultural experimentalism is laid with booby traps: temptations of appropriation, accusations of exploitation, dangers of rejection, and crises of identity. *A House in Bali* channels the unsettling anxiety of Conrad, E. M. Forster, and T. H. Lawrence, in which “the triumphalist experience of imperialism [is fragmented] into the extremes of self-consciousness, discontinuity, self-referentiality, and corrosive irony.”<sup>37</sup> The project appears to be Ziporyn's autobiographical, cautionary tale of overcoming the black hole of aesthetic identity to which his predecessor fell victim. The work appears to claim that real connection and identification with the other is impossible; intercultural experimentalism attests to the immemorial alienation that pulverizes each utopian possibility of full understanding. To the question of our ability to truly know the other, the production appears to proclaim, “No, not yet. . . . No, not there,” reinforcing the gulf of difference suggested by the philosophy of cultural relativism that emerged in the ethnography of McPhee's era. Gusti Komin Darta, a Balinese musician involved in the production, appears to echo the same sentiment in his description of musical interaction between Bang on a Can and the gamelan.

When one [musical ensemble] emerged (*hidup*, lit. “lived”) the other fell back (*mati*, lit. “died”). Because we are different, we didn't become one. For example, even in sections in which we were

supposed to play together, they [Bang on a Can] would perform with a stable tempo, but we would naturally raise and lower our tempo. But if we wanted to play with them, we needed to play with a stable tempo, to follow them, but this makes us feel as if our music has died. I felt that way.

*McGraw: Certainly this was on purpose? A metaphor, perhaps?*

No, I don't think so. This would be a real collaboration: If we made an attempt to understand them, and to follow them *and* they made an attempt to understand us, to follow us. Maybe we were trying to make this happen, but it didn't work, or maybe we weren't trying to make this happen. I don't know.<sup>38</sup>

Darta's comments point to the different meanings interculturalists take from their representations. Emerging through collaboration, such signs are nevertheless often "enunciatively different," sometimes producing radically different meanings for different performers and audiences.<sup>39</sup>

Although the western producers clearly anticipated the complex reactions the opera would elicit, they also knew that the audience might interpret the opera in ways that they did not intend and could never control.<sup>40</sup> The wide interpretive gap opened through narrative ambiguity and combined with an orientalist visual feast—the Balinese appear in premodern dress—allows uncritical viewers to fall into the old grooves of imperialist nostalgia. Each observer must answer a series of questions. By mobilizing asymmetrical intercultural expressions to parody the modernism that conditioned McPhee's encounter, does *A House in Bali* not inevitably reinscribe the images it apparently seeks to subvert? Can we hold producers responsible if audiences take their representation at face value rather than as a metarepresentation? Should they be blamed if the performance works to reinforce relations of inequity?

### Exploitation?

Until now I have neglected the material base that underwrites many contemporary intercultural experiments and partly determines their processes. Intercultural projects often insulate themselves against accusations of exploitation by defending asymmetrical wages as a kind of charity, one that is no doubt useful to otherwise unemployed "third-world" musicians but remains a dubious substitute for social justice. A complex system of geopolitical relations works against groups such as the Balinese and gives western interculturalists credit for, as Ziporyn rightly says, "simply . . . showing

up.”<sup>41</sup> Western interculturalists can enter Indonesia with a \$25 tourist visa, need not register with any government agencies, and can easily round up a large group of musicians and pay them third-world wages. In contrast, Indonesian musicians must undertake a lengthy visa application process (often as single, young men from a majority Muslim nation), pay to travel far from home for a visa interview on another island, pay the \$320 fee for a P3 visa, and pay another \$250 fee (*fiskal*) simply to leave the country. Of course Indonesian performers rarely have the means, and so these fees, and their substantial airfare, are covered by the western partner, engendering a structure of indebtedness and sentiment of subservience.<sup>42</sup>

When Balinese musicians’ notes are determined by a western score, when Balinese dancers’ bodies are set in motion by western directors, we are reminded of Said’s point that the orientalist works like a ventriloquist to *make* the Orient speak. In such contexts, the Balinese appear too transparently as the “self’s shadow.”<sup>43</sup> By not engaging the Balinese as the producers of fully articulated texts in the intercultural encounter, such projects fail Gayatri Spivak’s requirement of “ethical responding,” by which the western interculturalist would engage agency in others to move beyond a simple recognition of their otherness. In an ethical response the other is not a mere voice, or “object of investigation,” but an equitable, creative agent.<sup>44</sup> Through their appearance on the western stage under the direction of western managers, lay audiences may be led to believe that Balinese experimentalists cannot yet make “readable” contemporary art inside global aesthetic networks without foreign direction. Is it outside of musicology’s mandate to ask of intercultural experimentalists whether theirs’ is a culturally responsible art? Can we hope for anything more than that such projects be honestly self-diagnostic, the unusual achievement of *A House in Bali*? What are the responsibilities of the intercultural experimentalist?

How is it that conscientious intercultural artists often allow relations of inequity to persist in their projects? I contend that interculturalists have bought too fully into the notion of their interlocutors’ otherness. Reacting against the racism of cultural evolutionism, anthropologists following Franz Boas proposed a relativistic universe. The problematic effect of this model, however, was to impose a cognitive apartheid between cultural groups, as if to say, “If we cannot be superior in the same world, let each people live in its own.”<sup>45</sup> Relativism amplifies difference. At its most mundane, cultural relativism functions to deny coevalness by making others’ way of doing things merely pretty. At its most extreme, the thought produces the same effects as cultural evolutionism; if we allow that others are different from ourselves in profound cultural ways, then it becomes difficult to imagine

them as residing in the same moral universe. The difference implied by cultural relativism makes easier the practice of offering differential wages, creative rights, and authorial and managerial control, circumscribing the freedoms necessary for truly experimental practice.<sup>46</sup> Richard Rorty rejects notions of justice, human rights, and freedom as particular, historical, (western) cultural notions that cannot serve as a basis of a universal ethics.<sup>47</sup> He replaces these with an expanded notion of loyalty: “There has to be *some* sense that he or she is ‘one of us’ before we start being tormented by the question of whether we did the right thing.”<sup>48</sup> Ironically, the cultural relativism that has guided modern ethnography—for which “the Balinese” have long served as a favored trope—has partly conditioned the persistently inequitable relations of intercultural performance by suggesting that our interlocutor is not truly one of us.

## NOTES

1. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

2. The literature on experimental and popular music in Bali is dwarfed by the overwhelming ethnographic focus on traditional performing arts. On prior treatments of *musik kontemporer* see Andrew McGraw, “Radical Tradition: Balinese Music Kontemporer,” *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 1 (2008): 115–41. On popular music in Bali, see Emma Baulch, *Making Scenes: Reggae, Punk, and Death Metal in 1990s Bali* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

3. Georgina Born, “Musical Modernism, Postmodernism, and Others,” in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation, and Appropriation in Music*, ed. Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 20.

4. Indonesia, and especially Bali, never experienced the kind of exhaustive domestication of Euro-American musical modernism that occurred in other areas of Asia such as Japan, South Korea, and China. Balinese composers’ practice is primarily oral and for local gamelan instruments, and so their presence in such organizations as the Asian Composers League has been decidedly marginal.

5. Personal communication with the author, July 12, 2003.

6. Raharjo is referring to the experimental, shocking, or absurd works of young performance artists in Yogyakarta, including Marzuki, who composed a work for screams, as it were, by having his body shocked by hundred-volt electric cables. In his dissertation on *musik kontemporer* in Jakarta, Franki Suryadarma Notosudirdjo-Raden theorizes it as a form of national music; see Franki Suryadarma Notosudirdjo-Raden, “Music, Politics, and the Problems of National Identity in Indonesia” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2001). The Sumatran composer Ben Pasaribu similarly aligned *musik kontemporer* with “experimental music in the USA or avant-garde music in Europe”; see Ben Pasaribu, “Between East and West: A Collection of Compositions” (MA thesis, Wesleyan University, 1990), 13.



7. Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 23.

8. Pasaribu, "Between East and West," 12.

9. *Ibid.*, 13.

10. Sang Nyoman Arsawijaya, e-mail message to the author, August 3, 2010, my translation.

11. Ida Bagus Gede Widnyana, e-mail message to the author, August 3, 2010, my translation.

12. Personal communication with the author, July 15, 2011. *Anyar* is Balinese for *new*. *Racik* suggests mixture; *kawi* suggests creativity.

13. See, for instance, the Balinese author Wirjasutha's 1939 critique of caste in Henk Schulte Nordholt, "Localizing Modernity in Colonial Bali during the 1930s," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 31, no. 1 (2000): 101–14. See also Pasaribu's revolutionary era calls for the adoption of western rather than indigenous forms as a model for Indonesian national music in Amir Pasaribu, *Analisis Musik Indonesia* (Jakarta: Pantja Simpati, 1986).

14. Sumarsam, *Gamelan: Cultural Interaction and Musical Development in Central Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

15. Liam Kennedy and Scott Lucas, "Enduring Freedom: Public Diplomacy and U.S. Foreign Policy," *American Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2005): 309–33.

16. John Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'État in Indonesia*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006.

17. Indonesian artists often played the Soviets off of the Americans to consolidate their financial base. According to a Rockefeller interview with Carl Anton Wirth, a composer supported by the American State Department who worked with the Indonesian State Radio Station in 1961, "Despite vigorous opposition and sniping by the Communists in the radio station and orchestra, I was able to weld the musicians into an effective group which gave a series of well received concerts in Djakarta, the final one being in the [Senayan] Sports Pavilion constructed by the Russians for the Asian Games. The [Rockefeller] instruments have arrived and are being well used except for the harp which was seized by [LEKRA] as a symbol of Capitalism. No one would learn to play it." Boyd Compton, interview with Carl Anton Wirth, September 27, 1963, folder 54, box 4, Record Group (RG) 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives, Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York.

18. Robert W. July, diary excerpt, May 24, 1957, folder 453, box 68, series 600, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives.

19. Boyd Compton, diary excerpts, June 26 and October 3, 1958, folder 62, box 5, series 652, RG 1.2 Rockefeller Foundation Archives.

20. José Maceda to Fahs, August 25, 1957, folder 449, box 88, series 600, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives.

21. Multiple documents, 1961, folder 48, box 4, series 652, RG 1.2, Rockefeller Foundation Archives.

22. Ford had been providing grants in Indonesia since 1953, primarily financing technical assistance, instituting (western capitalist) economic theory, and supporting agricultural research and family planning. Only in the early 1970s did Ford begin to support local social science research and projects in the humanities.

23. Considering that many large performance troupes in Bali were politically

polarized and often performed at propagandistic events, it is likely that performing artists represented a disproportionate number of the victims.

24. John Bresnan, *At Home Abroad: A Memoir of the Ford Foundation in Indonesia, 1953–1973* (Jakarta: Equinox, 2006), 175.

25. Nonetheless, Ford underwrote costs for Sardono Kusumo's 1979 experimental choreography *Meta-ekologi* (\$1,213.88) as well as the seventh annual composers' week in Jakarta in 1987 (\$3,500).

26. Ford sponsored the training in America of a "modernizing elite" of Indonesians that managed the New Order's development programs and opened the nation to increased American investment.

27. For more on the New Order government's obsession with origins, see John Pemberton, *On the Subject of Java* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

28. Kennedy and Lucas, "Enduring Freedom," 325. The Global War on Terrorism was described as a "war of ideas" in a report entitled *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, the White House, Washington, DC, September 17, 2002.

29. Kennedy and Lucas, "Enduring Freedom," 325.

30. Comments made at a July 2003 workshop in Yogyakarta. Being nominally Hindu, and working with mostly nominally Muslim Javanese musicians, Sadra winked as he uttered the phrase "Muslim nation" (*negara Muslim*), to which the young audience chuckled.

31. Joko S. Gombloh, "I Wayan Sadra, Kita Tidak Memikirkan Kebudayaan Batin," *Gong* 17 (2001): 8–9.

32. This movement was prefigured by Artaud's conception of "Oriental Theater" and his development of the "Theater of Cruelty" following his experience of Balinese performance at the 1931 World Exposition in Paris. During the same era a cadre of American and European dancers with little or no training in Indonesian traditions performed imagined versions of Javanese and Balinese dance for audiences willing to accept dubious claims of authenticity. See Matthew Isaac Cohen, "Dancing the Subject of 'Java': International Modernism and Traditional Performance, 1899–1952," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 35, no. 101 (2007): 9–29.

33. The USIS, the foreign branch of the United States Information Agency, closed in 1999.

34. On Western theater students in Bali, see Stephen Snow, "Intercultural Performance: The Balinese-American Model," *Asian Theater Journal* 3, no. 2 (1986): 204–32; and Matthew Isaac Cohen, "Contemporary Wayang in Global Contexts," *Asian Theatre Journal* 24, no. 2 (2007): 338–69. On Balinese experimental theater, see Mari Nabeshima and Laura Noszlopy, "Kadek Suardana: An Independent Artist in Urban Bali," *Seleb Notes* 13, no. 2 (2006): 14–16.

35. See Judy Mitoma, *Narrative/Performance: Cross-Cultural Encounters at AP-PEX* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Intercultural Performance, 2004).

36. See Rossella Ferrari, "Journey(s) to the East: Travels, Trajectories, and Transnational Chinese Theatre(s)," *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 4 (2010): 351–66.

37. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 188.

38. Gusti Komin Darta, personal communication with the author, March 24, 2012, my translation.

39. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 143.
40. Evan Ziporyn, personal communication with the author, September 20, 2011.
41. Evan Ziporyn, "Essays after an Opera," September 30, 2009, accessed August 2012, [www.nothing2saybutitsok.com](http://www.nothing2saybutitsok.com).
42. The P3 visa, unlike educational visas, is not bound by any labor law; it enforces no minimum wage.
43. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 35.
44. Sally A. Ness, "Originality in the Postcolony: Choreographing the Neoethnic Body of Philippine Ballet," *Cultural Anthropology* 12, no. 1 (1997): 69.
45. Dan Sperber, "Apparently Irrational Beliefs," in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 179.
46. I do not intend to fall back into a Platonic notion of freedom here but to suggest that the particular freedoms that must underpin any intercultural experimentalism must be arrived at through interactions on as equitable a ground as possible.
47. Richard Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 45.
48. *Ibid.*

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